

# Homily: The Real Meanings of Christmas

Jeffrey L. Tate

Delivered to UUBC 19 Dec 2010

We UU-type people can have issues with Christmastime. By “UU-types” I mean those who don’t believe in the literal truth of the Christmas story: non-theists, secularists, postmodernists, those who check the survey box that reads “none,” or “spiritual but not religious,” and so on. During Christmastime, especially, we can easily feel that we are being bombarded by superstitious church dogma: the front-yard nativity scenes we drive by; the images of religious symbols presented everywhere from banners hanging on churches to pictures on candles in department stores; and, of course, the omnipresent Christmas carols telling over and over again about the supernatural birth in Bethlehem. I know some UUs who leave the country during Christmastime. “Christianity is not my religion, so Christmas is not my holiday,” one such told me; and they don’t want to be immersed for a month in an inescapable stew of religious fervor.

For many of us, Christmas brings connotations of the coercive power of the church that for over 1000 years could destroy you for doubting their mythology. Christmas seems associated with the suppression of science and of reason; associated with the exaltation of fantasy over reality. Finally, the Christmas story is told from a male-chauvinistic perspective: a male god impregnates a woman without her consent or knowledge; this male god causes her to conceive another male, who will heroically save the world. All of this—church dogma, magic and fantasy, male chauvinism—can feel like a regression to a more primitive time in human history; a medieval time before the Renaissance, before the Age of Reason, before the Enlightenment, before the overthrow of the power of the divine right of tyrants to rule us. Why would any of us who have developed beyond the medieval worldview want to celebrate the myths of Christmas? Well—let’s see.

In a way, Christmas came before Christianity. Of course, it went by other names: Amaterasu in Japan, Beiwe in Scandinavia, Brumalia in ancient Rome, Choimus in tribal Pakistan, Maidyarem

in Zoroastrianism, Dongzhi in east Asia, Goru in Mali, Hogmanay of the ancient Norse people, Inti Raymi of the Incas, Junkanoo derived from west Africa, Karachun of the ancient western Slavic people, Kalada of the ancient eastern Slavic people, Wren Day of the Druids, Lenaia of the ancient Greeks, Lorhi in India, Makara Sankranti in northern India and Nepal, Saturnalia in ancient Greece and Rome—and, around the world, at least another dozen names. These festivals are all winter solstice festivals, and Christmas was built upon them. They all mark the shortest day of the year, when the sun is lowest in the sky and least warming, providing the least energy to one’s land and people.

Winter solstice observances come from prehistoric time. Stonehenge, for example, is built to mark the sunset on the day of the winter solstice. In many areas, the winter solstice marked the beginning of the season of famine. Starvation was common in the winter. One had to hope that the winter would not be too killing; that one’s provisions would last; that winter illnesses would not be too deadly; that whatever unknown powers controlled the sun’s movement would allow it to ascend once again—but with no knowledge of Newtonian physics or Copernican astronomy, one could only have faith and hope that the sun would indeed again ascend and provide for life. Such faith in the sun’s return was like one’s faith that father will again return home from work—a faith based on his care, love, and sense of duty; but not on scientific certainty.

In the wintertime a people needed each other more than any other time of the year. Only mutual warming, mutual generosity with provisions, only a strong communal feeling could keep everyone, including the children, alive until spring.

At the same time, the end of fall was when most livestock were slaughtered so not to require feeding through the winter; therefore the end of fall was a time for feasting like no other time of the year. It was also when the wine and beer was now fully fermented and so most intoxicating. Dionysian festivals with a full belly and an drunk brain made for emotional release from rational calculation about survival; a time then, as now, for telling and sympathetically hearing larger-than-life stories. A time in some cultures, like ancient Greece and Rome, for throwing off the strictures of society. Saturnalia, the Roman celebration of the end of fall, was a time when slaves were allowed to be masters for a week, and masters served their slaves, turning topsy-turvy the burden of society's rules and rationality.

From these thousands of years of lived experience—experiences of fear, hope, faith, abundance, famine, intoxication and emotional release from rationality—from all this, was born Christmas, which includes to this day many elements from other traditions: the fat elf bringing presents, the holy tree, green and red colors, the Yule log, feasting, drinking and having fun, mistletoe, holly, stockings, and candy canes, exchanging gifts. Even the concept of the virgin birth was taken from ancient Egyptian, Hindu, and Persian myths.

When the followers of the dead Jesus, gradually losing hope of an immediate coming of Christ's new world, needed impressive stories about him to uphold their faith, stories to help them survive the winter of their hopelessness, then the existing winter solstice festivals and myths were a ready template with which to create their own, Christian, story of a new heavenly son who would ascend and then turn topsy-turvy the repressive social order and remove the ever-present fear of death. So Christmas was grafted onto the Roman holiday of Saturnalia sometime in the 300s AD.

The Christmas story incorporated elements from many winter festivals: faith in rebirth of life after the dead of winter; celebration of communal feeling over individual striving; celebration of generosity over selfishness; exaltation of emotion over reason; a celebration of our Basic Trust, as Erik Erikson termed it—our Basic Trust that people and the world are fundamentally nurturing; an expression that the world is a good "holding environment," as child psychologists term it, and will provide for our needs.

Shifting a bit now: the worldview of goodness and compassion reining over all other human impulses is a worldview that had been developing for 500 years before Jesus' birth, a period of time now known as the Axial Age—a time when human societies were beginning to emerge out of the old mentality of the Warrior King, which was the mentality, for instance, of Homer's heroes Achilles, Odysseus, and others. This old Warrior King mentality held bravery, power, cunning, and the ability to kill skillfully as being the human traits of highest worth.

Beginning about 500 BCE the morality of the Axial age evolved beyond this Warrior mentality: in the form of Zoroaster with his message of devotion to truth; of Confucius, with his message of devotion to family and, to treating one's society as one's family; of Lao Tzu the founder of Taoism, with his message of living with simplicity and humility; of Buddha, with his message of living in the "right" way—leading to wisdom, ethical conduct, and awareness of the true nature of one's consciousness; in the form of Plato, with his message that love is the guide toward the highest good. All of these moral prophets—moral geniuses for their day— were an advance beyond the mentality of the previous age, the Warrior King age, in which morality included loyalty to friends, but was primarily the morality in which might makes right and justice is based on the concept of eye-for-an-eye vengeance.

And then—after Zoroaster, after Confucius, after Lao Tzu, after Buddha, after Plato—society took another, biggest, moral leap: the teachings attributed to Jesus, building on his Axial Age predecessors, say something that no one else had ever taught. Jesus said that he brought a new, higher, overriding, 11th Commandment: he said that we should love others just as we do ourselves, and that our actions toward others in all circumstances should be based on compassion and forgiveness, not retribution. Though Jesus was

Jewish, his message was not that of Moses; it was not a command to blindly obey a powerful, ambitious, and vengeful warrior-god. Jesus' message was a step even beyond Plato's message: Jesus' command to be, in all actions, guided by universal Love as the way to the highest Good and the way to the best life. Jesus taught that everyone, regardless of tribe, or of sin, or of station in life, is equally worthy of respect and care: this message was a brand new idea in the world—every bit as revolutionary, and as historically impacting—as the ideas of Newton or of Einstein.

Jesus' message included something else that was new: the notion of fundamental progress in the quality of human nature.

Pre-Christian worldviews were mostly cyclical: human history was a ever-looping replay of the past. The way your great-great-grandfather was, is how your great-great-grandchildren would be—on average, the future would be no better than the past. The Christian message was not this; rather, the Christian message was that people could learn to improve themselves, could learn to become better people: more loving, more compassionate, more generous, and less fearful. Indeed, the charge to Christians was to go out and teach people how to progress morally: how to love their all their neighbors as they love themselves.

Some scholars believe that without the Christian notion of the moral equality of all persons, without the Christian notion that we can learn to become better people, that without these Christian ideas of progress in humanity then western civilization would never have created equal justice under the law, would never have created democracy in which everyone's vote counts equally; that without 1700 years of Christianity, in 1776 it would not have been a "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equally"—before Jesus, no one ever said that—and that without Christianity we would never have become convinced that never-ending progress is the attainable result of human striving for a better life.

Of course, everything about the nativity story itself is conjecture and myth; none of it is literally true; it is as fictional as any other ancient myth. So how are we of the post-mythological age, of the rational age, of the modern and post-modern ages; how are we to view this annual Christmas celebration of unreason? First, realize that the truth of myth has little to do with reason. Hear these words from one of the most caustic critics of Christianity ever, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who wrote in the late 1800s, and who first announced that "God is dead." Nietzsche says of all myths, the myth really does not find its adequate objectification in the spoken word. The structure of the scenes and the vivid images reveal a deeper wisdom than [even] the poet himself can grasp in words and ideas (91) [Myth is ] That struggle of [the spirit of life] for pictorial and [narrative expression] (91) [Sadly,] it is the lot of every myth gradually to creep into the crevice of an assumed historical reality and to become analyzed as a . . . fact in answer to the . . . demands of some later time . . . this is the way religions tend to die out, namely, when the mythical, [truly spiritual] pre-conditions of a religion, under the strict, rational eyes of an orthodox dogmatism, become systematized as . . . historical events and people begin anxiously defending the [rational] credibility of their myths but resisting every naturally continuing life and further growth of those same myths and when the feeling for the myth dies out and in its place the claim to put religion on a historical footing steps forward. [Nietzsche Birth of Tragedy ]

So what's being said here is that a story expresses more than can a rational essay. A story expresses more than the storyteller knows she is telling. A story is forever open to new developments of interpretation over time, yet it always expresses some fundamental pre-verbal truth about human life. A story is to culture what a dream is to the individual: the inner truth forcing expression of itself, organized into the minimum of reasonable narrative for the purposes of comprehension and recollection.

When either believers or nonbelievers get hung-up on the literal truth of a myth, they miss the point. The literal believer fears that any re-interpretation of the myth will invalidate his sense of certainty about being saved from evil and saved from the fear of non-existence. The literal disbeliever fears that non-critical immersion in the myth will set back 600

years of the had-won gains of reason over superstition. Both the literal believer and the literal disbeliever are mistaken. The truth of myth, its expression of the human condition, and of human potential, such truth has nothing to do with the literal, historical truth of its story.

So if you go to a traditional Christmas event this week, at a church or at a family gathering, check your reason at the door—it will still be there later for you to retrieve. Immerse yourself in an emotional experience of the myth: let yourself feel the words, the story, the celebration, and the hope. And you—and your rationality—will be enriched for the aesthetic truths you will have soaked into your mind.

What truths are there to experience in the Christmas story?

- The truth of the devotion of people to one another: mothers to children, husbands to wives and children, even of royalty to humble goodness
- The truth that great people can come from small beginnings
- The truth of the creative power of the universe bringing into being consciousness, love, and morality
- The truth that hope is realistic; we will learn to be better than we were in the past
- The truth that compassion and care are the highest values, the highest morality we know
- The truth that eventually, the Good will rein over every other power and value on earth

While the biblical narratives are fine fiction, the hopes, disappointments, dreams and disillusionments that they speak about are very true. They speak to the hearts and spirit of all people. This is why they are so appealing—they strike chords that resonate throughout the ages, beyond time, ethnicity, gender, or culture.

However, of all the winter solstice celebrations throughout history, what is unique to Christmas is the celebration of the birth of what is currently humans' highest stage of moral development, of our highest concept of the nature of the Good: Universal, Unwavering Compassion. Christmas is about the hope that with each New Year, and with each new generation, we will be better able to enact Jesus' 11th—and overriding—commandment of universal love.

Don't let others define for you your experience of Christmas— don't let others constrain you in your experience of Christmas. Don't allow the literal believer to constrain you; don't allow the literal disbeliever to constrain you. Rather, let Christmas be a time to remember and uncritically celebrate the aesthetic truths of the myths of the winter solstice and of the nativity story. What better way to celebrate Jesus' birth and life than to continue to reenact his moral message for our own times? Amen.