

That Glorious Song: An Esoteric Christmas

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The cultural, commercial, charitable, musical, theatrical, literary, gustatory, generally familial, nominally religious, and potentially really quite sacred time of year known as Christmas is full upon us. As I write this, in early September, it's already in the air, and

in no way do I mean the local weather, but sometime over last weekend, the nearby crafts store did morph from back-to-school items to discount ornaments. Retail business relies on most of us dashing through the snow to snag that perfect gift, and count down the days like no one saw this coming, while the whole economy breathlessly tracks the retail trends that will affect interest rates into next summer. Christian churches, meanwhile, depend on full seats to make up for lesser attended summer Sundays, when there were no live camels on hand to wow their congregants. All around us now, performers are rehearsing, bakers baking, ladies dancing, lords a-leaping. Everyone seems to be priming and preening for some grand occasion. Little children — for whom, it is said, all this hoopla is ultimately intended — wait for their just due on Christmas morning, or little bits of it, a door at a time, on an Advent calendar. Then the last package is opened, the final fruitcake consumed (if ever anyone actually eats fruitcake), and it winds down for another year, perhaps around New Year's or the Feast of the Epiphany, also known as Twelfth Night. Then the Clauses take a week in the Bahamas with select senior elves, and return to start planning for the next, best Christmas ever.

Amid all this, up for discussion is what Christmas means to whom, and more pointedly, what it ought to mean to everybody. Over-commercialism is an easy target, and sometimes folks will decide on a simplified Christmas with cranberry and popcorn garlands instead of the shiny stuff that clogs landfills and handmade gifts — or none at all: tricky to enforce, because someone is apt to not get the memo and show up with a plasma TV for mom and dad, alienating siblings in a big way. Competition for approval doesn't begin and end at the holidays, it's just more obvious when there's a card attached.

If we may cross off the true-meaning-of-Christmas list the mere vending of goods, the working

out of family dynamics, and the downing of eggnog, a holiday substance best described as “gross,” with what are we left? Very, very much.

A few days after I turned 10, two-thirds of America saw for the first time what would come to be called the most celebrated minute in TV animation history. Certain it wasn't Lucy's greed, Snoopy's hideously done-up doghouse, or all his peers incessantly calling him a blockhead for just being who he was, Charlie Brown asserted his seasonal angst by wailing,

“Isn't there *anyone* out there who can tell me what Christmas is all about?”

“Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you,” replied Linus, as he calmly stepped onstage.

“Lights, please.”

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria)...”

Linus recited the entirety of the New Testament birth narrative, Luke 2:1-14, and concluded, “That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.” And suddenly there was with all the cartoon characters a complete change of heart. Charlie Brown bucked up, Lucy toned down, while Snoopy donated his lights and baubles to a decrepit little tree, around which all the Peanuts gang gathered to coo carols. So the message was gently, sweetly, and very tidily delivered, that the meaning of Christmas may be found in the word itself, as the mass or religious ceremony honoring the birth of the Christ, and that as one remembers this, the profane yields to the sacred, and all is well. Point made, “A Charlie Brown Christmas” ended there, but the next time TV looked in on everybody, old behaviors had resurfaced and Charlie Brown was again a blockhead, this time for striking out with the bases loaded.

It was in Charles Schulz's daily comic strips that life's theological and philosophical implications could be expanded upon, often between Charlie Brown and Linus as they leant on a wall. Let us lean with them for awhile.

Obviously Christmas is about the Nativity of Jesus, Son of Mary, adoptee of Joseph, whom Christians know as Jesus Christ. Those who observe the holiday trim trees and give gifts in celebration of this Nativity because it is and was felt to be a very good thing, not only for them personally, but for the world at large. Persons trimming and gifting may completely ignore the

“For at an unexpected time, with one word alone or a chance happening, God so quickly calms the soul that it seems that there had not been even as much as a cloud...”
—TERESA OF AVILA (1515-1582),
“Waiting for a New Birth”

religious origin of their practice, never set foot in a church, but they are acting out a traditional veneration nonetheless. The Birth of Jesus Christ as savior and redeemer is accompanied by a secondary theme (Luke 2:14), when, swooping angels having terrified hapless shepherds into falling on their faces, the angels are joined by multitudes more, all saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." Peace and goodwill have thus become inextricably linked to Christmas. For several weeks anyway, people are nicer to each other, or at least want to be. Humbugs relent. The self-absorbed begin to take notice of others. The skeptic doubts this will all last, but cannot deny that it's there.

Charlie Brown and his friends existed in a subtly Christian milieu, as was Schulz's intention. His work was nowhere near being a set of conversion tracts, but neither was its content diverse, ecumenical, or metaphysically inclined. Charlie Brown doesn't ever ask Linus, "Good grief, where are the people who aren't just like us?" and in all Charlie Brown's troubles real and imagined, Linus never offers, "There is a Power for good in the universe greater than you are, Charlie Brown, and you can use it!"

Christmas marks the birth of Jesus the Way-shower, Son of God, yet the way, the showing of it, the sonship, and the godhood, can all be parsed for their shades of meaning, latent applications, and relevance to all of us, not just the Christian. Meister Eckhart was a 13th century Christian mystic who asked, "What good is to me if the Son of God was born to Mary 1400 years ago but is not born in my person and in my culture and in my time?" Modern Christian Matthew Fox, who translated and popularized much of Eckhart's work, adds that in Eckhart's view each of us is a "sun" of God, as well as a son or daughter. We are not simply offspring of the One, but individualized manifestations of It as well as co-creators with It, accessing in a local and personal manner the same creative agency by which, in Ernest Holmes's words, "God makes worlds and peoples them with living things."

Christmas is, or can be, about everyone, and here's why. There are various ways to read the stories found in sacred writings. They can be seen as historical and sociopolitical briefs, moral admonitions, and so forth. They can be taken as literal, accurate depictions of the events that occurred. They can also be read as metaphorical and universal, where the interpreting self is as important to the process as the material under investigation. Some object to this last, as is their right, but in Religious Science, this is what we do.

So, here's one metaphorical interpretation of the Christmas saga as found in Luke, bracketed by some earlier and subsequent lore. My hope is that you will not seize onto this as the True Meaning and leave it

that, but instead go the extra mile and work your own wisdom into the mix, letting what follows stimulate your imagination, and maybe your heart. You will find things no one else ever has.

Luke, or whoever assembled the Gospel attributed to him, writes in the third-person omniscient, meaning he wasn't there to record what happened but writes as though he knew everyone's thoughts as well as observable events. Most novelists adopt this viewpoint so they can form characters with consistent personalities and build a coherent story. Let us consider shifting the viewpoint, to where every character in the story represents not a him or her or them, but an aspect of *your self*. Now, to the story, which I have summarized.

From the angel Gabriel, the priest Zechariah is amazed to hear – and rendered temporarily mute for doubting – that his wife Elizabeth will give birth to their son, as they are both advanced in age. Elizabeth is a kinswoman of Mary. The son will turn out to be John the Baptist. Six

months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel pays another visit, to a virgin named Mary, who lives in Nazareth and is betrothed to Joseph.

The new birth comes not by observation nor by loud proclamation, but through an inner sense of reality. We cannot tell where this comes from if we look to outward things, as it proceeds from the innermost parts of our own being."

—ERNEST HOLMES,
The Hidden Power of the Bible

Gabriel announces she will give birth to a boy to be called Jesus, the Son of God, who will inherit the throne of David. Later Mary visits Elizabeth, in whose womb John leaps for joy (from Luke 1:5-45)

Surprising conceptions and births, including emergences such as that of Eve from Adam, appear frequently in Bible tales. Male participation is often minimal. What C. G. Jung termed the anima, the feminine life-principle or subconscious aspect of self, contains the potential for transmutation which often can be better realized without the interference of the *animus*, male life-principle or intellect. Profound awarenesses come up from our emotional realm to sweep over us; what the intellect thinks up tends to be more a rearrangement of existing information. Mary is the Greek form of Miriam, which in Hebrew has one meaning, "rebelliousness," from the Miriam who sided with her brother Aaron against her other brother Moses. The subconscious, feeling nature rebels against the status quo which the intellect defends.

Mary then proclaims the "Magnificat": "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God

my saviour...” She remains with Elizabeth until around the time John is born, then returns to Nazareth. At John’s arrival, Zechariah’s speech is restored as he writes on a tablet what the child should be named (John = “God is gracious”). Zechariah then announces in the “Benedictus” that John will be a great prophet who will go before the Lord, preparing a way for him. John grows up and moves to the desert, to reenter the story some years later as a herald to Jesus’ ministry. (from Luke 1:46-80)

Metaphysically, who was John? He and Jesus were second cousins. Scholars ponder over dynastic lines, and which of these two was actually being groomed to take on what sort of leadership, but for our purposes, we might say John represents the first hunch the conscious awareness receives that enormous change is coming. This idea then recedes until the change is at hand. Desert or wilderness may stand for the quiet or inactive mind, as contrasted to the populous city or town, where many thoughts crowd in and clamor for attention.

The Roman Emperor now decides to compile a census of all people under his rule, and everyone has to return to their ancestral homes to be registered. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem, are accommodated in a stable, and here she gives birth to Jesus. (from Luke 2:1-7)

The self gathers its thoughts, as into towns. In the mind’s prioritizing of thoughts, the “lowly” infant-idea comes close to last. Much has been made of the full inn metaphor. We are crowded with facts, opinions, observations, and so on. A radically simple idea such as “All is one” is born on the periphery of consciousness, the uncluttered area of the mind.

It’s time now to distinguish Jesus from the Christ — not unfasten one from the other, mind you, but just see the former as a person, the latter as a state of being. Esoteric scholar Manly P. Hall drew a distinction between Adamic Man and Christic Man by noting, “Philo Judæus considered Adam to represent the human mind, which could understand (and hence give names to) the creatures about it, but could not comprehend (and hence left nameless) the mystery of its own nature.” The Christ is the comprehension of the mystery of one’s own nature, its timelessness and infinity. With this comes the capacity for the working of what appear to the unaware to be miracles, the restoration of health through what is assumed to be some supernatural avenue, and even the overcoming of the evident finality of death.

Recalling Meister Eckhart’s words, then, after due preparation, some announcement, and the gathering and re-education of our faculties, the Christ is born in you and in me. The fact that this happened to Jesus is symbolic of the Christ’s universality rather than its exclusivity. “Christ” is simple a Greek term.

Nearby there were shepherds in the hills who, as noted above, looked up suddenly to face angels. When the angels had gone back to heaven, the shepherds made their way to their stable and reported what they angels had sung. Then they resumed tending sheep. (from Luke 2:8-20)

Consider shepherds to be everyday, task-oriented thought, the “doing” aspect of the ego. No part of us is more startled by an incoming spiritual epiphany than that part which is thoroughly invested in normalcy and in getting things done. Another literary figure in a similar dilemma is Bilbo Baggins, whose complacent life “under hill” is one day disturbed by a host of strange beings commanding him to undertake a quest that changes everything, not alone for him, but which in the long run rescues all creation. Yet Bilbo, like the shepherds, does get to return to the environment in which we first met him: a quiet, well-kept room, where he writes his memoirs. The aphorism, “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water,” alludes to a return to the world and its responsibilities.

Next, some persons of uncertain number, though by tradition three, and variously styled as kings or magicians or both, arrive in Jerusalem after a long journey from the East, to inquire of King Herod where the infant King of the Jews might be found, as they have been following a star that foretells his birth. Sensing that if this were true, his own star could well sink into oblivion, Herod chats them up and sends them off to unwittingly spy for him. (from Matthew 2:1-8)

Tradition says three Magi because of specifically three gifts they carried, and three works esoterically as thought, desire and action; or cause, medium and effect; or spirit, soul and body; or any of the trinities found throughout nature as well in philosophy and religion. The exact number is less meaningful than the scriptural emphasis on their being wise and at the same time following a star, which may have made them astrologers, but metaphysically means they were seekers of light who followed not the trail beneath their feet (the tangible world of pre-existing information) but something above their heads (such as intuition). The Magi are our higher faculties. Historically, why would they care if there were a new King of the Jews? They came from elsewhere, and for all they knew, Herod was a serviceable king and would remain so. Then they told Herod they followed a prophecy “of old.” Would not Herod have known of this prophecy also?

Our higher self is aware of the potential of the Christ-idea and begins to migrate toward it once it has been established, or born. Herod is at the opposite end of the consciousness spectrum from this. Herod tries to silence the Christ idea that the Magi seek to adore and perpetuate. Herod is our baser instincts, consumed with fear and with the need to maintain authority over

the whole self — basically, the ego run amok. Herod and Magi exist in us each. The taming of the ego is usually depicted as a dragon-slaying of some sort. The esoteric, or veiled, truth is that all that energy previously dedicated to the suppression of the feeling-nature is itself unacknowledged, unhealed pain. All our anger is at root fear, and as it is addressed with love instead of more heavy-handed authority (even if it's now "righteous"), its energy will yield itself up to support the new Christ-awareness.

Their star having moved to shine down on Bethlehem, the Magi there find the infant Jesus and present him with gifts. Warned via individual dreams not to return to Herod, they head home a different route. An angel appears to Joseph and Mary informing them of Herod's intentions to find their child and eliminate the threat he poses, and the family departs for safety in Egypt, remaining there till Herod's death. (Mt. 2:9-15)

Frankincense, as an incense, is a breath of the mystical. Myrrh, an oil drawn from the same species of plant, was used in embalming, so portends death. The gift of gold, most practical, alludes to the building and maintenance of a kingdom. The Magi receive individual dreams — if one had had it, he probably could have convinced the other two to go along with the alternate route — so the meaning here is the importance of the message, that it not be misunderstood or unheeded, as well as that those three (or however many) facets of the self's highest knowing each receive direct psychic inspiration to do the next right thing, in service to the overall intuitive knowing (the star again) of the presence of the Christ-idea.

Biblically, dreams tend to alarm and angels tend to extol, but both carry important messages, and sometimes overlap, as when Jacob had his dream in which angels went up and down a ladder. By this time, both Mary and Joseph would have become accustomed to angelic visits, and promptly obeyed. As to Egypt being their destination, libraries have been written on the esoteric meaning of that land. Often it's a place of initiation, whence wisdom originates, Nile-like, to run as an underground stream throughout the rest of the world.

This, then, is a look at personalizing the first Christmas story. The characters are pieces of the whole self. Some of our interior world is enthralled by the appearance of the Christ-idea, that of the oneness and wholeness of all creation, the "primacy of nonphysical reality," and love as the only real motive and transformative power. Some of our ideas are threatened by this, though. What would be without adversaries, without blame and shame? *Who* would we be?

The original Christmas story, as Linus told it onstage, has picked up a lot of pretty baggage in being handed down from generation to generation, and cross-

ing over oceans. In Rome it met up with Saturnalia, further north with the rites of the Winter Solstice, on top of which its date was imposed by the early Church. From the pre-Christian world came lit-up trees, now typically topped by a star or angel, and holly, ivy and mistletoe too. A little drummer boy came into the equation, while the Magi's quest got an added stopover one night with Amahl. A saint of dubious actuality in the Christian canon became Santa Claus, and an American poet placed him behind the reins of a tiny reindeer-drawn sleigh, which then was said to issue from the North Pole and be big enough to hold presents for all the world's well-behaved children, while those not so well-behaved got a lump of coal — this, it has occurred to me, was for centuries a tool of pure survival, where candy and toys would have been pointless. So everyone, well comported or not, gets to live in this putative heaven on earth...

And living, gets to wonder what it all means...

And wondering, gets to employ his or her mind to delve into the stories of yore for new, personal, and astonishing insights...

And finding these, gets, in truth, to be reborn as the Christ, the child of the Living God.



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