

Four years ago I made a very personal post about my feelings about Christmas, the day after. It was one of my personal favorite posts of all time. I repeat it again here, this time the day before.

In the opening chapter of my book God's Problem, I talked about going to church on Christmas Eve in 2006 with my wife Sarah and brother-in-law Simon, in Saffron-Walden, a market town in England where Simon lives, not far from Cambridge. It was a somber but moving Christmas Eve service, and yet one that had the opposite of the intended effect on me. It made me realize just how estranged I was from the Christian faith, from the notion that with Christ God entered into the world and took its sufferings upon himself. I just didn't see it, and it made me terrifically sad, resentful, and even angry. There is so much pain and misery all around us, and yet the heavens - in my judgment - seem to be silent.

This is not what led me to write God's Problem. I had been planning to write it already for some time. But the service encapsulated my feelings that eventually came to expression in that book. I realized the other night that I have not stepped into a church since then, that Christmas Eve midnight service, six years ago.

But I went again this year - same market town, same company, same church, same service. It had a very different effect on me this time. I think I'm less angry now. Less mystified by the lack of a divine response to the horrible pain and suffering going on in the world - crazy gunman in Newtown MA; hurricane Sandy; wars in the Middle East; horrible tragedy of Syria; disaster in Congo; not to mention the daily ravages of starvation, epidemics, droughts, floods, and on and on and on, world without end. But why *should* there be a divine response? There appears to be no divine responder. Not much to get angry about any more.

At the same time, I seem to be less antagonistic to the faith that I once held and cherished so dearly. I realized three nights ago at the service that even though I still don't believe it, simply DO NOT believe it, there are things about the Christian faith that I value very highly. And I wish very much that I could still be a Christian, even if that means simply holding on to the Christian myth (I would never think that it's some kind of historical, empirical, or even metaphysical reality) as the myth that I want to embrace. And the reason is this.

On the way to the church, walking through the dark streets of Saffron Walden, we passed a pub open late. The young people were lined up en mass to get in. Christmas Eve is a night to get completely blitzed, loaded, drunk out of your gourd for many people (not just 19-year-olds) in England. By comparison, the church in town, for this major service, had a good size crowd, but it was nowhere near full. And I started thinking about the values represented by these two groups of people, and about which set of values I personally feel aligned with.

Let me be clear: I am not against a good bit of drinking and lots of good cheer. Just the contrary. But what if my life consisted in doing that all the time? And what are the values and the guiding life-principles of people who do so? Or of those who do not do so, but live completely secular lives? What exactly do people value outside communities of faith? Some of us outside these communities, of course, value fairly traditional social values. At least I do. Good family relations; good friends; little pleasures in life; doing good for others.

But that's not what society as a whole values and I might as well face it. Most people in our society principally value themselves. Egotism and self-centeredness rule the day. Most

people (frankly) don't give a damn about the pressing problems of our world. Most are far more interested in how much money they can make, and spend, and how many great things they can buy. They might give a buck to a panhandler on the street corner and feel good about themselves, or twenty bucks at Christmas to a charity; but basically they, most of us, want to earn all they can to use it for themselves. (I'm **not** complaining about people who give 20 dollars and that's all they can afford to give; I sit in wonder and admiration at **them**). When I look at my own community of Durham NC, I see a fairly typical community where a very few people give a LOT for the sake of others (probably the majority, of these, however, are people of faith), but where there is an ungodly amount of money that is hoarded or spent on personal pleasure without a care in the world that less than a mile away people are sleeping on the streets in the cold without having anything to eat all day.

And what about the church? Well, the church is a mess too, mainly because there are people in it and people, as a rule, are a mess. But what I told Sarah after the service was that I wished I could believe, because the values that are espoused by the church are the ones I hold. Not by the mega-churches. Not by the Southern Baptist Convention. Not by the Vatican. Good god no. But by the humble, local, church, which teaches people (whether they do it or not) that they ought to love their neighbors as themselves, that they ought to do unto others as they would have them to themselves, that they should clothe the naked, feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, visit the lonely, and so on. That they should give of themselves for the sake of others, and not simply live for the fleeting pleasures of this life.

Of course, I myself think this life is all there is. I don't think there is a reward for good behavior or generosity. I don't believe in a supreme being who created the world and will redeem it and who has given us the chance to spend eternity in heaven. I think when we die, that is the end of the story. But the values espoused in the form of Christianity that I am most comfortable with - good, liberal, humble, caring Christianity - are really the values that I myself treasure and that, frankly, I do not see expressed very often in the secular society in which I spend my life.

Why aren't their non-religious social institutions on every street corner (with or without steeples) that embrace these values? Why do religious people give so much more of their possessions (they do!) and of themselves than secular people (I know, I know: for many it's because they're hoping to early favor with God; but others are, quite frankly, simply generous and self-giving). Why do religious people so much more frequently commit themselves to the good of others than secular people do (again, I know, I know, there are real jerks among the believers - arguably the majority - and most Christians, at the end of the day, are not better people than the rest of us, and there really are amazing people among the secularists - think Doctors Without Borders for starters). But why are so many people so obsessed with the fleeting pleasures of the flesh and the superficial enjoyments that the media crams down our throats? Why aren't their humanist and secularist societies that band together in fellowship with commitments to love others and do good to those in need and to live for the greater things in life, societies as highly visible as the church (at least as the church used to be)? It is one of my perennial puzzles and concerns.

I think the question(s) came so deeply and disturbingly this Christmas Eve because when I was a Christian, acknowledging that the myth of the incarnation was a myth, I accepted the myth as saying something very profound. In that myth, the ultimate reality (call it God) did not come into the world in a blaze of power worthy of a Roman emperor or with an astonishing abundance of wealth worthy of, well, a Roman emperor. He came as an

impoverished child to an unwed mother in the midst of a world of pain and suffering; and this child grew in poverty and urged his followers to give of themselves for the sake of others, insisting that it was the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the hungry, the sick, the demon-possessed, the sinners, the outcasts who were the concern of that ultimate reality. That made a lot of sense to me. It still does.



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