

More than any other time, event, or celebration, Christmas, for me, shows that you can take the boy out of Christianity but you can't take Christianity out of the boy. As much as I am a completely secular-humanist/agnostic/atheist (pick your term), I am still hopelessly attracted to Christmas and what it stands for.

As I said in the previous post, it is not that I "believe" in the Christmas story (stories) as a historical event (events). In my judgment the biblical accounts have virtually nothing historical about them, other than that Jesus was born to two lower-class Jewish peasants somewhere in the land of Israel during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Beyond that - I don't see anything historical in the accounts. No need to explain why here - I've talked about it enough on the blog before.

And yet I'm drawn to the season and all it stands for, surely in a way that someone who had not been raised Christian simply cannot be. I think for me, in my thoroughly secular life, it is because of what I take to be the very best features of the season.

Before detailing some of those, let me say emphatically that I know for lots and lots of people Christmas is the most miserable time of year, a time of loneliness, isolation, fragmentation, and unwanted obligation. I think the fact that so many people find it such a happy time is precisely what makes it such a miserable time for others, either for those who have lost their most cherished loved ones, or all their families; or whose families have fallen apart; who have no one to cherish the season with, or who can't stand either the grotesque materialism or the superficial happiness of it all in the midst of real suffering, or ... well or lots of other things. I completely get that.

Even so, for me, still at this stage of my life, it is the happiest season of the year. Today I was trying to think why, since I'm no longer a believer. I think Christmas embodies for me most of the things in life that I think of as inherently good. (While I say that, let me stress emphatically: I despise the materialism of it all, and would be far, far happier to be rid of it all.) Here are some of them:

- Christmas makes me remember very good times of joy and peace and happiness with my family growing up. And it makes me feel particularly well connected to my family now (even though I'm not with my kids - they are grown and doing their own things! Still....). It was, and still is, a time for togetherness, for being together in spirit if not in fact, for sharing, for celebrating together.
- Good food and drink! OK, I know that sounds rather banal, and epicurean, but the reality is that I'm an Epicurean at heart (I'll explain that some time) (I mean in the ancient sense, mutatis mutandis for a 21st century setting....) and I very much enjoy the simple pleasures. Couldn't we get rid of the frantic materialism of the season and focus on the family getting together over amazing culinary delights?
- The goodwill. Is it just me, or do people on the street just seem happier at Christmas? More smiles, laughter, friendliness? And general good will toward one another. "Peace on earth and good will to all" - what could be better than that?
- The sense of giving. Even though I don't like the crass consumerism of the season, I like the idea of giving very much. Wouldn't it be great if we just gave each of our loved ones one carefully chosen and meaningful thing? OK, 9/10 of us might not think so - but I think it would express far more love and attachment than the pick-up-whatever-catches-your-eye-as-you-go-down-the-aisle mentality so many of us (US!) have.
- The image of God it conveys. The God of Christmas is not a God of wrath, judgment, sin, punishment, or vengeance. He is a God of love, who wants the best for people and gives of

himself to bring peace, joy, and redemption. That's a great image of a divine being. This is not a God who is waiting for you to die so he can send you into eternal torment. It is a God who is concerned for you and your world, who wants to solve your problems, heal your wounds, remove your pain, bring you joy, peace, happiness, healing, and wholeness. Can't we keep that image with us all the time? Can't we affirm that view of ultimate reality 52 weeks of the year instead of just a few?

I myself do not believe in God. But if I did, that would be the God I would defend, promote, and proclaim. Enough of war! Enough of starvation! Enough of epidemics! Enough of pain! Enough of misery! Enough of abject loneliness! Enough of violence, hatred, narcissism, self-aggrandizement, and suffering of every kind! Give me the God of Christmas, the God of love, the God of an innocent child in a manger, who comes to bring salvation and wholeness to the world, the way it was always meant to be.



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