

CHRISTMAS I
by Lester J. Start
Undated

Over a hundred years ago, a Danish religious thinker by the name of Soren Kierkegaard, deeply concerned about the secular spirit of his society who wrote the following: (he called it “The Tame Geese” an evangelistic meditation)

“Suppose it was so that the geese could talk - then they had so arranged it that they also could have their religious worship, their divine service.

“Every Sunday, they came together, and one of the ganders preached.

“The essential content of the sermon was: what a lofty destiny the geese had, what a high goal the Creator (and every time this word was mentioned the geese curtsied and the ganders bowed the head) had set before the geese; by the aid of wings they could fly away to distant regions, blessed climes, where properly they were at home, for here they were only strangers.

“So it was every Sunday. And as soon as the assembly broke up each waddled home to his own affairs. And then the next Sunday again to divine worship and then again home - and that was the end of it, they throve and were well-liking, became plump and delicate - and then were eaten on Martenmas Eve - and that was the end of it.”

So with the divine worship of Christendom what Kierkegaard showed is that the geese never did take seriously the dream to try their wings. And what disturbed him was that the people of his day were similarly indifferent to the spiritual challenge of religion. Christianity had become a matter of course so that people gave it a polite nod of acknowledgment and then went about the more important affairs of their daily lives indifferent to it. They were like plump geese preoccupied with feeding, spiritually tame, so plump and comfortable that they had forgotten how to fly - like our commercially bred turkeys. And man has wings, wings of imagination and the possibility of soaring to spiritual heights. But in his comfort, he has forgotten how. So it is with Christendom, said Kierkegaard.

And today many have the same conviction. And it seems even stronger in the Christmas season.

There is such a contrast between the image of the quiet manger scene of Bethlehem and the bustle and blare and glare of the Christmas scene in our cities. A character in one of Saul Bellows' books says: “I come from a religious family - we always celebrated Santa Claus and the Easter egg.” Santa Claus and the Easter egg - not even Christian symbols - symbolize the secular spirit of the religion of our society. And it is Santa who dominates with all the pressures of shopping lists, gift lists, Christmas cards and holiday feasts, so that there seems to be no room in the inn of our lives for the birth of the Christ child.

This is a familiar concern - we've all heard it before, and felt guilty, I'm sure. I don't intend to dwell on it, though. On the contrary, I want to suggest that there is a truth to the secular mood in

religion which explains our persistence in it. And that truth is that religion must be relevant to our lives and our world. And that the marvelous thing is that the spirit of Christmas does break through the pressures of secular concerns in spite of ourselves.

If this sounds perverse, consider the alternative. Of course we don't want to identify Christianity with whatever values we happen to hold dear in our society; but we don't want to go to the other extreme and see God as wholly apart from this world and religion as removed from human concerns. We surely don't want to return to the unhappy consciousness of medieval Christianity which saw its world as a vale of tears and looked forward to hope and joy only in the sweet bye and bye. The Christmas spirit is: "Joy to the world; the Lord is come." God came into the world at Christmas. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. God Himself overcomes the separation between man and God in Christ.

Nor should we resolutely turn ourselves from the human joys of holiday festivities as if they were somehow wrong. The Puritans did this; they considered Christmas celebrations pagan and a disruption of their commitment to work in the spirit of righteousness. My Puritan great-grandmother rejected Christmas decorations, not only as pagan, but as wasteful, as tending to mess up the house.

We surely don't want to go back to the Puritan separation of joy and duty, happiness and righteousness, with the suspicion that whenever we really enjoy doing something it must be illegal, immoral or fattening. The spirit of joy is the spirit of religion, too.

We need some kind of larger understanding. The secular as defining the religious is not satisfactory. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. But the spirit of religion as sacred cannot be separated from our human concerns either. The sacred and the secular come together in what is best termed the sacramental view of the world.

Sacrament is a term Baptists resist. As Baptists, we reject the view that communion is a sacrament; we call it an ordinance. This means that the celebration of the Lord's supper has no automatic spiritual efficacy or saving power by virtue of the rite itself or its elements. We do this in memory of Christ so that the Communion may be the occasion for a spiritual renewal in ourselves. It is an inner experience of outward grace.

Yet in the broad sense, this is what the sacramental point of view suggests. The world is not wholly apart from God, so that we must choose between it and God, the secular and the sacred. The world is a vehicle for the purposes of God. It is a reflection of His creative power. It is an image of His order of beauty, goodness, and truth. This is the meaning of the earth as sacramental.

And this is the wonder of God that appears especially in the advent season. God is in history, in his world, God comes to earth at Christmas. A child is born who is the Word made flesh. The secular is visited and transformed by the sacred. The world is open to the transforming power of God. A light shines in the darkness and joy in the hearts of men - to find God in the land of the living. This is a promise of advent. Sometime this Christmas, Christmas will break through here

and there in spite of everything. For example, some kid doing his shopping without much money wanting to buy his mother or dad something really nice - and a sales clerk forgets for a moment how her feet hurt, and is really helpful. - So Christmas breaks through.

There is another way of saying this. As the hymn puts it so beautifully, love came down at Christmas. It is love that mediates between the human and the divine. It is love that is the spirit of the sacred in the secular that lifts us in the creative power of God. God so loved the world that he gave his son as intermediary. It is love that draws God to man and man to God. Love is the message of Christmas, the heart of religion.

Love in all its forms has always been intimately related to religion. In our own Western tradition, before Christ, the Greek philosopher Plato described the ladder of love between man and the divine. In his famous dialogue, the Symposium, a series of speeches in praise of love, the conclusion is clear that there is no absolute separation between human love and love of the divine, but that love mediates and is the bridge to God. Love is the desire to share in the creative spirit of God to create in truth and beauty and goodness.

Here, I think, is the clue to our proper uneasiness about the secular spirit. It is so easy for love to be inverted to self-love. This is the spirit of the tame geese who thrive and become plump in their own comfort. And, let's face it, this is the spirit of our own age so often. We are dedicated to newer ways of enjoyment and are concerned for our own welfare. We may not go so far as to twist the basic commandment to read. "Do unto others before they do you." But we are so sure that God helps those who help themselves that most of us think the Bible said it, not Ben Franklin.

And, let's face it. So many of our concerns seem self-directed. The current focus on individual rights, for example, has a constricted focus. Margaret Mead has recently criticized the women's rights movement for its selfish interests, unlike the wider concerns of earlier movements. The whole tactic of insisting on one's rights contributes to divisiveness and fragmentation of society. No family can survive on this level of righteousness - nor can a society for long. And even within the religious communities there is a new interest in cultivating spiritual "highs" for oneself in charismatic experiences which is reminiscent of St. John of the Cross's concern about spiritual gluttony in his fellow mystics. In brief - the Santa symbol of Christmas - the I want this and this - is indeed too much with us.

But if self-love is a hindrance to a relation with God, and Jesus warns us that we must deny the self in order to follow Him, there is still some truth to this focus on the self. We clearly have outgrown the view that we are worthless worms in the face of our obligation to worship the Almighty in love and adoration. When we repeat the classical confessional prayer, for example, after confessing that we have done those things we ought not to have done, we discreetly omit the next line - "and there is no health in us." We cannot believe in a God of love that marks such a separation between His goodness and our evil. There is some good in us in so far as we are creatures of God. No, the answer to self-love is not self-abnegation or self-hate - nor is it an adoration of a transcendent emptiness that bears no relation to our own lives.

Love, Christian love, the love which came down at Christmas, is creative love, which shows the possibilities of goodness in the land of the living, which lifts us to our potentialities as children of God. It is other directed and self affirming at the same time, for our selves are as large or small as the range of our relations directed outside ourselves. This is the creative power of the Christmas spirit that shows us that we gain our true self only as we deny the selfish self.

The love which came down at Christmas breaks through our lives in unexpected places. It may be in this season of the promise of peace and goodwill - the most significant example of God using history will be a Muslim leader Sadat, making overtures for peace to Jewish leaders - and a gift from a Jewish grandmother Golda Meier to Sadat's grandchild as a symbol of a new creative thrust out of the bonds of self-love and concern.

I began with an illustration from Kierkegaard. I would like to conclude with another. In illustration of God's love to man, Kierkegaard invites us to imagine a great king who fell in love with a humble peasant maiden. How could he show his love? We could readily imagine a Cinderella ending, an elevation of the maiden to princess status. But then she would never know if he loved her as she was or only because she was elevated and changed. The only solution is for the king to take on the garb of a peasant and woo her as an equal. And so God takes the form of a servant in his love for man. Love - and this is the essential point - does not desire to alter the other, but itself. One does not show one's love by marrying another in order to change the loved one. But one can be transformed in the passion to change oneself to be worthy of a great love. And so with man and God. Man does not seek to change God by prayer or otherwise to suit what he loves, but in the earnestness of his love seeks to transform himself in the image of what he loves as God. Love moved God to become man - love moves man to change from his narrow self and relate to the larger purposes of God. And man too, has wings of the spirit. Man can fly. As we turn to the spirit of God in this communion in remembrance of Christ, may the love which came down at Christmas touch and change our hearts in this service and throughout the Advent season.

Almighty God, whose love creates us, sustains us, and inspires us, in this Advent season may we see the light of the Star of Bethlehem above the neon glare, the sound of angelic voices beyond the noise and blare, above all the sense of confident expectation that Christ is indeed born, that love comes down at Christmas to transform our hearts and minds. May we find joy in Thy world, peace in the hearts of men, and a sense that each of us counts with Thee. In this communion service in this Advent season may we renew our spirits in Thy love. We pray in the spirit of Thy Son, as we lift to Thee in silence prayers from our individual needs and concerns - for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. This is the marvel Christmas.

Almighty God, who hast planted eternity in our hearts so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee - open unto us, we pray, the gates of that invisible realm wherein Thou dwellest, so that as we worship Thee we will sense Thy greatness round about our incompleteness, about our restlessness, Thy peace. On this day may we remember that Thou hast guided our nation to freedom. May we remember Thy guidance and be faithful to Thy spirit of justice and peace that the freedom of the spirit grow in us. Hear us as we pray.

We are now about to celebrate the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. This table is open to all fellow Christians; we invite all who earnestly wish a closer communion with Christ to share in this service with the assurance that He who came into the world to [be] the Savior of all will in no wise cast them out.

Come to the table not from duty but from a desire to respond to His invitation to be a disciple, a follower, a fellow Christian. Come not to show one's virtue, but one's constant need for the uplifting power of the Spirit. Come not because you have any claims on God, but to express your willingness to do His will. Come to seek a Presence, a Friend, a larger Spirit to fill the sanctuary of your souls. Come in the prayer that His Spirit may be in us all.

We would remember the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread - and when He had given thanks He broke it and said: This is my body which is for you: this do in remembrance of me.

In like manner also the cup - saying This cup is the new covenant in my blood, this do as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. In eating the bread, and drinking the cup we do proclaim the presence of the living risen Christ.

I.

Merciful God, as we come to the Lord's table in remembrance of Christ, we give Thee thanks for the changes wrought by the power of Thy spirit. How great Thou art! We bring bread and wine to the table, and by Thy grace we take away in our hearts and minds a sense of the presence of Christ. We bring ourselves as imperfect instruments of Thy will and by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit we take away a new sense of commitment, strength and energy to do Thy will for our lives. We give Thee heartfelt thanks, O God, for the life and example of Thy Son. We pray through this service for a closer walk with Thee through Christ our Lord.

Jesus said - this is my body which is for you ministering in His name -

Let us eat of this bread.

Jesus said: this cup is the new covenant

Let us drink of the cup.

II.

Eternal Spirit, Almighty God, as Thou didst break through into our world in Thy Son, so may some sense of that same spirit break into our lives through this service. We tend to be conformed to the cares, concerns and anxieties of our daily lives. May we instead be transformed by the eternal spirit of the love of Christ. May we find Thee in a renewed spirit within us, in the inner sanctuary of our souls. And so may we go forth to the week's opportunities and duties looking to

a world not measured by our fears, but seen through the eyes of faith, a world of opportunity for sharing Thy spirit of love in the lives our lives must touch. We pray in Jesus' name -

And now according to our custom let us exchange greetings, beginning with the left end of each pew.

Benediction