

YEAH, BUT WHAT ABOUT XMAS?

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In the autumn of 1982, as part of an Introduction to a Unitarian Universalism seminar, the Reverend David Bumbaugh and others spent a bit of their time together discussing the nature of religion in a world—post-Christian and post-modern. People reportedly listened politely as David explained why he was no longer comfortable with the Jewish-Christian traditions, why he no longer found himself part of either of those traditions, why he had come to doubt that the Exodus had ever occurred, and why he was even convinced that Jesus of Nazareth never existed.

Suddenly, David reported, the quiet was broken when the youngest member of the group, unable to contain himself any longer, broke in to ask, “Yeah, but what about Christmas? Are Unitarians allowed to observe Christmas?”

The quick answer, of course, is that since Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion, embracing a multiplicity of opinions and beliefs, UU’s are free to celebrate whatever holidays and observances speak to them and are important to them. Of course, Unitarian Universalists celebrate Christmas, which is a much older holiday than Christianity anyway, and only became Christian by baptism.

That is the quick answer to the obvious question. But there is a deeper question that was being asked that evening—one that required a fuller response.

That question concerns how a Unitarian Universalist who has rejected the Christian tradition can celebrate this holiday that seems to be so deeply rooted in the theological assumptions, the creedal affirmations, the specific world-view of Christianity.

If you do not embrace the story about the baby born in a stable to a virgin mother, the baby who was God incarnate, who grew up to teach a unique message necessary to the salvation of the human race, who died a martyr and was resurrected from the dead; as a promise to all true believers that they, too, would inherit eternal life; if you cannot affirm the myth which provides the coherent structure for Christmas, then on what basis do you celebrate the occasion?

This is a very perceptive question and one which demands a fuller response than could be provided as part of an ‘Introduction’ program.

Because I share so many of David’s views of the world and especially his liberal outlook on religion, I wanted to bring his 1982 sermon and poetry to you as a timely and provocative thought this 16th day of December, 2001.

This morning I would like to wrestle aloud with the child’s question, for, in truth, it is a question I have not fully resolved for myself, a question I am still in the process of answering.

To begin with, let me suggest that there are very few areas of thought in which I find myself in agreement with the so-called “Religious Right”. However, when they bemoan the fact—as they regularly do—that the spiritual center of Christmas has been lost, I find myself in agreement with their analysis. Over the course of my lifetime I have watched as the great holiday at the time of the Winter Solstice has expanded until it has consumed fully a quarter of the year. I have been witness to the addictive process by which a significant portion of the nation’s economy has become dependent upon Christmas: Without its annual fix from Christmas shoppers, it cannot survive. I have been witness to the inexorable process by which bits and pieces of various cultures, traditions and festivals have been grafted onto the celebration—Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Solstice, and Santa Claus—until it is difficult to define what the celebration is all about.

Indeed, I have witnessed the process by which the holiday, whatever it may once have been about, is now defined almost exclusively in terms of nostalgia—a pining for a world that is fixed firmly in our memories, a world which, in truth, never existed. When a religious observance succumbs to nostalgia, its meaning begins to evaporate. No one knows, any more, what this great holiday is all about. The myth that explained it is no longer able to command our belief. All we are left with is the ritual—the traditional decorations, the traditional foods, the going to church the night before, singing the songs that sound familiar, without any attention to or understanding of what they say, lighting the candles and witnessing their beauty but not understanding their meaning; giving and receiving the gifts without any appreciation of any deeper significance to the act, gathering the family and preparing the meal, reading the stories, and always, always, feeling that something is missing, that something has dropped out, that something has been forgotten. Driven by that sense of something missing, we look back to the past, to other years and other celebrations, trying to recreate something that once was strong within us and now is no longer there.

Into the spiritual vacuum at the center of this great and commanding ritual moves the commercial spirit, promising us that with enough money, we can buy the Christmas we remember and long for, and recreate it in our homes and in our own families this very year. Or, if we don’t want to spend all the money, with a little extra effort we can recreate it out of environmentally sound recycled bits and pieces. We need only purchase the magazine that tells us how. It is not that the spirit of Christmas has succumbed to the crass materialism of our culture. Rather, it is that the meaning of the season is already dead.

Commercialism is only responding to the emptiness at the center of a ritual that continues after its explanatory myth has evaporated. Since we do not know, any longer, what the rituals are all about, we are offered the opportunity to purchase, each year, a reasonable facsimile. And each year, we do.

David said that one of the few things the ‘Religious Right’ and he agree upon is the critique of the contemporary Christmas. It will not then surprise you when he says that

“we disagree about the appropriate response”. The Christian fundamentalists seem to follow a Peter Pan approach to resurrecting Christmas.

You remember that when Tinker Bell was dying, Peter called on all children to affirm their faith in fairies, so that they might lend her the strength of their faith. The Christian Right, with its exhortation to “Put Christ back into Christmas” and with its admonition that “Jesus is the Reason for the Season” and with its struggle to mount nativity scenes on public property, and encourage carol singing in public schools, seems to be following a similar strategy. If we all just try hard enough, we can come to believe the unbelievable once more, and resurrect a worn-out and failed faith.

I don’t believe that for a moment.

The emptiness at the center of the Christmas celebration is but one more evidence that we are living in a post-Christian world, one in which the great Christian myth has lost its power to explain the world to us, to explain us to ourselves.

It is not the first time this has happened. The fact is, of course, that the great solstice celebration predated Christianity by millennia and has been reformulated many times over the eons. Many of the rites and rituals that we associate with Christmas were observed long before Christianity came into being; indeed, they can be traced back to a time before writing, even before history. Over time, the myths, which had explained those ancient rites, had lost their power and new myths had emerged. Two thousand years ago, Christianity inherited those rites and rituals, offered a new myth to explain them and to renew their power and the great solstice festival became Christmas.

Now the wheel turns again. The Christian myth is dying. We are left with the rituals, and we perform them with diligence, but are no longer certain why. We are waiting for the new myth that will explain our venture through time and space and bring new meaning to this time of celebration.

Some years ago, David wrote he had occasion to visit his hometown during the Christmas season, and there, was suddenly confronted with a visual image of the process in which we are engaged. Coming home from that visit, he wrote the following poem:

In December, every year
 The streets of the town were transformed.
 Standing on the crest of the hill
 One could see the street
 Running, unerringly,
 To rendezvous
 With its opposite number
 At the center of town
 Where, together,
 They quartered the community—
 East end,

West end,
 South end,
 North end,
 Balanced on the point of intersection.

As usual, on dark, winter nights,
 At least after the war,
 The course of the streets was outlined
 By tall lights at regular intervals on either side,
 And farther back on either bank,
 Less regular and less predictable,
 Lights from shop windows,
 And from living rooms of modest homes.
 Always and ever the street defined
 By the spangle of lights on its verge
 And the flow of lights along its length.

In December, every year,
 The streets of the town were transformed.
 Between staid, conservative street lights
 Were swung raucous globes of color—

Green lights and red lights
 Blow in December winds.
 Shop windows were a wonderland,
 Piled with cotton snow,
 Draped with tin-foil icicles,
 Lined with painted-on snow drifts
 Enticing shoppers to pause
 To study entrancing gifts and offerings.

From the windows of homes
 Chaste electric candles glowed yellow at their tips—
 Except for one house
 Where all the candles burned blue—
 A quiet, solemn badge of distinction.

Here and there,
 Peeping through demure curtains
 A family Christmas tree
 Displayed its incredible glory.
 Dominating it all—

Straight down the hill,
 At the point where two main streets intersect—
 At the very center of town

Where the quarters pivot—
A huge Christmas tree,
The traffic of the town
Flowing around it on all sides.
The life of the town revolved around that tree
In December, every year.

One tree, built of
How many trees
All nailed to a center post,
One tree, decorated by
How many lights,
One tree, symbol of
A shared hope
A shared joy
An invisible unity.

In the dark December night
It was as if all light and hope
Flowed from that single center,
Marked by the tree
At the point where the quarters pivot.

Now the tree is gone.
The December nights are brightened no more
By the tree at the center.

The years after the war brought changes
No one dreamed.
The center of the town decayed,
Traffic increased,
Affluence fled
Carrying Christmas commerce along.

Something had to be done,
The center square must be
Revitalized,
Renewed,
Redesigned.
Now there was no room for the tree
It was, after all, a traffic hazard;
A small tree
On the sidewalk,
Off to the side,
Behind the bus stop—
Would that not suffice?

The consequences are unmistakable
The decorations still span the streets
Running from light pole to light pole,
The remaining shops still—
Like aging coquettes—
Seek to cloak the mundane in glory.
The yellow candles still grace windows,
Except for the house with the blue candles.
All is the same;
Only the magic is gone.
The decorations are now
Just cheap plastic
Without a life of their own,
With no ability
To mediate a message.
At best, they only hint
At a vanished glory
Departed from a world which
Has lost its center
Of light and hope.
Perhaps the loss of glory is mine,
Not the world's at all.
To younger eyes,
Eyes less befogged by disillusionment,
Eyes less dimmed by disappointment,
The December streets
May convey
Magic as great,
Mystery as deep
As ever they did.

To my eyes
The luster is tarnished and begrimed and dulled.
My ears hear only the sound of Musak now,
Programmed to seduce;
Angel voices are dim and distant and unreal,
The center has vanished,
The magic has fled,
Driven off by
The iron touch
Of cold reality.
It is too simple to speak
Of the commercial beast,
The great, silent goat
Who bears all the burden

Of our season of discontent.

There is more to it than that,
 Something to do with loss,
 A pervasive loss
 Of the ability to be surprised,
 To see in the ordinary
 More than appears on the surface,
 To hear in the echoes
 Something not audible in the original sound,
 To find in the mundane, the path of transcendence.
 It has to do with faith and the loss of it.

In December, every year,
 As the year unravels,
 I hope I may discover that all is not lost,
 That what Christmas was is not lost.
 It has all be disappeared
 In my outer world,
 Or become strange and unrecognizable,
 Smothered by haste and hurry,
 Confusion and turmoil.
 The center is gone,
 The great tree at the intersection
 Inviting pause and care,
 Replaced by regular, rhythmic traffic flow,
 The signs and symbols of the season isolated,
 No longer related,
 No longer unified or unifying.
 But the rituals remain
 And call me to seek within
 A new center, a soft hub
 To pivot a new world.

From WE BELIEVE IN CHRISTMAS, David Bumbaugh, 1982

I am not willing to surrender this great festival to nostalgia which inevitably becomes the servant of commercialism. I cannot believe the old myth. And so, each year, as I prepare to celebrate the Great Solstice Festival, I seek for the meaning behind the rituals, the hidden connections to which the customs and practices point, and then I attempt to devise forms which invite the new myth to emerge.

That is why I rewrite the carols. I am seeking ways to open up the celebration, to free it from the past, from the myth that no longer explains, to open it to the future and clear some ground in which a new center may emerge, a new story may be

told. This is why I do not read the nativity story from Luke or the conflicting version from Matthew, or the theologized version from John. My celebration does not center upon the birth of the baby Jesus. I find it impossible to separate that story from the omnipresent plastic nativity scenes which are impossible to miss in a world which has substituted the symbol for the meaning it no longer understands.

Instead, I celebrate the birth of all children, and the unmeasured possibilities they represent, and the measureless responsibility they place upon all of us. My celebration does not center upon the incarnation of God in the world, once upon a time long ago and far away.

Instead, as the earth turns us from darkness to light, I celebrate the turning of the seasons, the quickening of the light in the midst of enfolding, nurturing darkness, the natural process which supports and sustains us, the incarnation of the sacred, the holy in every place, every day, in every one.

I do not pretend to know what the shape of the new myth will be—the story we will tell ourselves long years from now, to explain why we celebrate at this season of the year, and in the telling, explain who we are and what is the meaning of our venture on this little globe spinning through the vastness of space. I do believe that a new myth is emerging. I keep the season, and in the keeping, seek to remain open to strange voices whispering a new tale.

I invite you to do the same.

Reverend David E. Bumbaugh, The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ
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