

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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THE GROWING APPRECIATION OF WOMANHOOD

Christmas, with its beautiful story of the birth of a baby in simple circumstances two thousand years ago in a poor province of Palestine, is a good time to reflect upon the growing appreciation of womanhood. Equality of the sexes has been a recognition a long time coming. There is still much to be done.

Let us recognize that through the centuries most have assumed that paternalism was a normal and proper way of living. I am using paternalism here in the usual perjorative sense. Through much of human history, power and decision-making have rested, in all societies and human institutions, in the hands of a small elite - the few who had wealth or education or status. Most of humankind was assumed - perhaps correctly - to be incapable of ruling or making decisions. The king, the priest, the lord of the manor, the president of the corporation, or the father in the family was the decision-maker and the provider. Everyone else knew their place, stayed in it, did what they were told to do, and was expected to be grateful. Many of these power figures have been good people, generous and benevolent. They claimed, and honestly believed, that they were motivated by the best of intentions - they sought the "good" of those they ruled. But it was always the "good" on their terms, as they understood it.

There is still too much of this kind of paternalism in the structures and life of our society today. It exists still to a large extent in government, education, and religion.

The church has been greatly at fault in this. It has had good reason to know better. Too much has the church imitated the Old Testament patriarchal point of view, rather than the liberating viewpoint of the New Testament. St. Paul in his letter to the Christians in Galatia states: "you are all children of God by your faith in Jesus Christ (for all of you who had yourselves baptized into Christ have taken on the character of Christ). There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you belong to Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28).

One of the extraordinary aspects of Jesus' ministry was his acceptance of woman as equals. A perceptive reading of the New Testament shows he made contacts with women as well as men, and he had women in his many followers. He gave them the same responsibilities and opportunities as the men. The writers of the New Testament being males in a patriarchal society downplayed this aspect of Jesus' ministry.

After Jesus' death social unrest seized the women of the Corinthian church. They felt the hot promptings of the Spirit in their souls just like the men, and rose to prophecy. They, too, felt their intellectual life enriched with new thoughts and a wider outlook; why should they not have the right to teach in the church? They felt the emancipating sense of equality and the joyous sweep of the new fellowship in the new society of Christianity. They felt emancipated and

(Women, continued)

discarded their veils over their faces and the long-standing customs of social inferiority that had been forced upon them. The spirit of Christianity had accomplished that result in the slow in the slow progress of the centuries. Now our women are freer and more equal even than then.

As the movement spread among the women of the New Testament church alarm arouse among the men, even St. Paul who cautioned them to keep within the bounds of customary modesty and restraint. (First Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33-36).

The spirit of Christianity did not spread only sweet peace and tender charity, but the leaven of social unrest. It stirred women to break down the restraints of custom. It invaded the intimacies of domestic relations.

All this is neither strange nor reprehensible. No great historic revolution has ever worked its way without breaking and splintering the old way to make way for the new. New wine is sure to ferment and burst the old wineskins.

Jesus saw that his teaching of the realm of God including all people would disturb the traditionalists. He had a ministry to create fire in society, not peace but the sword. He was willing to pay the price to bring about the realm of God.

Christianity began not just as a religious movement, but also as a democratic and social movement. Or, to state it far more truly: it was so strongly and truly religious that it was of necessity democratic and social also.

We are living again in a time of great social upheaval and change. More people are better educated than ever before.

Institutions have become so

complex that no one person or small group can know enough to make all the decisions.

We are realizing paternalism is no longer an adequate expression of love. Even in our language of God paternalism is inadequate. God is our figure of speech for supreme love, the most sacred and holy aspect of life.

Women today face their most dynamic opportunity, their most decisive challenge to realize the full potential of womanhood. In the light of Jesus' teaching, woman stands beside man not as his competitor, not as his servant, but as his equal partner, his full associate, each complementing the other. We must recognize that whatever assails the dignity of women attacks the well-being and security of civilization and humanity. Feminism was born of women's natural reaction to the depressed condition in which they found themselves in a secularized, masculine, industrial culture. The best of feminism not only demands equality, but does not conceive this equality on a masculine pattern. Men often consider women lesser because they do not fight aggressively, hurtfully, indiscriminatingly, personally, as men are wont to do. Women are often above this level and must be commended for it.

When men realize they cannot merge with women, take them over, or be taken over by them, we will meet women as a separate persons, and our relationships will become vastly more peaceful and our culture much more productive.

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THE PARADOXES OF ADVENT

Northrop Frye, well-known Canadian writer and scholar, once said that there is an even more important question than, "Who am I?" It is, "Where is here?" It is important to know your identity. It is important also to know your situation.

Like you I enjoy the poetry of Christmas: the stories of the shepherds, the angels' song, the wise men and the star. But, the advent message must be viewed in the context of the world of reality - in the midst of the struggle of good over evil. The advent meaning is the opposite of sentimentality. It means reality, that the realm of God is within our midst, but threatened by the secular expectations and selfishness.

Advent reminds us of the struggle between good and evil. It confronts us with the challenge can we survive in the struggle against goodness? Here is the true measure of a person and a society. Margaret Atwood has said that Canada's struggle is now for spiritual survival. In Jesus' time it was thought by many that the kingdom of God was at hand. Today we too see the reality of the spiritual struggle between good and evil. The struggles of our time are essentially spiritual struggles - a war of beliefs, ideas, and attitudes. The outcome will decide what kind of persons and society we will be.

Advent further reminds us the struggle is more internal than external. The realm of God calls us to have spiritual imagination and resourcefulness. Secularism may be desirable for selfish economic reasons, but the realm of God cares for the welfare of everyone. This calls for sharing, sacrificing and giving. Our fiscal deficits are

majoring over our social responsibilities and needs. Today's politics are revealing what kind of persons we are and reveal what kind of society we ought to be.

The underlying sanity and goodness of the majority in our communities is shown in our increased response to charity and helping others in this time of cruel cut-backs and unemployment.

The battles going on in society are only the larger expressions of the inner battles being fought by every thoughtful and sympathetic individual.

If we are fearful or pessimistic regarding the future this indicates a lack of integrity in ourselves. We are afraid of our future. We worry about our material wants.

What manner of persons ought we to be? Honest persons - persons who seek to do the right thing even though it costs, persons whose word is good and whose promises are kept. That is what integrity means, and our society suffers from the lack of it.

The struggle must be creative. Hardship and struggle can inspire the creative spirit within us. We must know the meaning of evil and suffering. Out of this understanding our creative spirits may be led to answers to the needs among us.

We must rise to the knowledge that the realm of God is within us and live as the children of God. Spiritual imagination is not an accident. It is the product of a philosophy of life that all worthy religions teach. Integrity does not stand alone in a person's character. It belongs to a whole family of attitudes and convictions that spring from religious faith. Long ago the Hebrew prophet, Micah declared, "and what does the Lord require of you but

(Spiritual Struggle, cont'd)

to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

The real meaning of advent is not in the story that a baby was born in a stable and slept in a manger, but that there was a man who fought in the ring with evil and lived love to all within his reach. The tidings of comfort and joy at Christmas is that love overcomes. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This is the gift of advent.

A PRAYER

May the enchantment of Christmas lead me to find a real place deep within me for what is happening on the outside of my life to so many in my community and world today.

I am ready to be swept along with the joyful renewing call of the music, the words and extraordinary warmth of this celebration. Through it all may the advent miracle be worked in my heart. May the word, the happening of God, become incarnate in me. And when the coloured lights are removed and the tinsel packed away, may the eternal love renewed in me be my strength and my guide. Amen.

HANUKKAH

As we ponder the need for bilingualism and biculturalism, it is becoming more obvious another "bi" has crept into our culture - bi-festivalism.

We have become aware that a holyday with striking similarities to

Christmas falls at the same time - the Jewish Festival of Lights called Hanukkah.

Jews didn't used to make too much of Hanukkah in our communities. Traditionally a minor festival, Hanukkah goes back to the war of 163 BCE in which Judas Maccabee, against near impossible odds defeated the Hellenized Syrian king, Antiochus IV, after he defiled the Temple. More important is the tradition that one day's supply of sacred oil burned for eight days in the rededicated Temple. Hence the eight-day holiday in which an additional candle is lighted each day.

Jews under pressure from their children and unable to escape the Christian Christmas celebrations started emphasizing the features of Hanukkah similar to Christmas - the lights, gift-giving, merry-making, exchanges of greetings.

Some families set up an evergreen tree and call it a Hanukkah bush. Others put illuminated candelabra in the windows. Hanukkah cards are mailed and Hanukkah gifts given. The star of Bethlehem is replaced with the star of David.

The battle is almost won to eliminate Xmas and put Christ back into Christmas.

It's time to recognize Hanukkah as well.

LET'S BE HONEST

Why is it that Scrooge, who appears to be a quite normal and acceptable individual most of the year, suddenly appears out of character with what we expect of a human person at Christmas? Why do we uphold the wealthy most of the time but give attention to the poor at Christmas. Think about it!