



The Meaning of Christmas

EACH YEAR the Christian world gathers to celebrate the birth of Jesus. No one in history has been more celebrated. No one has been more misunderstood. This is strange, since “Christmas” signifies the “Mass of Christ” — the “message,” “mission” or “promise” of Christ.¹

The Archaic Framework for Reality

If we are to better understand the message of Christmas, we need to return to the “beginning” (Genesis 1:1). The evidence strongly indicates that, with the dawn of consciousness, ancient man (male and female) became aware that life on earth was uncertain and death was inevitable. Nothing he could do could forestall the earthly destruction of oneself or of one’s family, friends, neighbors and environment. Mankind had no power, no capability, no effective will to prevent this decline and death of life. Every material being was destined to sink into the chaotic waters believed to exist beneath the earth’s surface (cf. Genesis 1:1-7; Exodus 20:4). This nether world was the place of nonbeing or nonexistence.

At the same time, early man believed that life had originated in a self-existent Being known as the Sky God. The Sky God lived in the heavens above the earth and was the ultimate definition of life, actuality, reality or “Being.” Yet this God could not be approached or known by mankind, nor did this God ever intervene

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on behalf of mankind. However, the Unknown and Unknowable God had a divine companion, who was the Self-Manifestation of God. This Self-Manifested God — this God who could reveal himself — became the agent of Creation. He was the Logos — the cosmic principle, mind or personality (cf. John 1:1-3).²

In the beginning the Logos created the originals, models or patterns of all things. These created originals, which were kept in the heavens, represented actuality. Since these patterns were reality, anything that was ever to “be” already existed in heaven at the eternal moment of Creation. Because these originals or archetypes were kept in

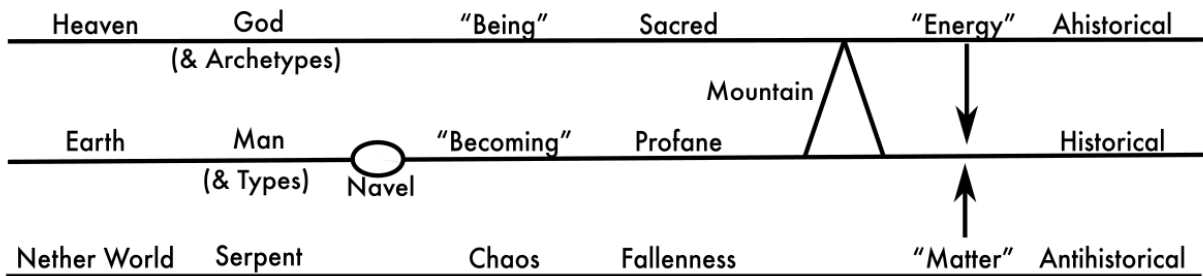
heaven, in the presence of Being, they never grew old. No moth or rust could corrupt them. No thieves could break through to steal them (cf. Matthew 6:19, 20).

For earthbound mankind the only hope of avoiding the pit of ultimate death and destruction was to be united with the ageless archetypes in heaven. Fortunately, ancient man believed that a sacred mountain connected this earth with heaven. By ritually climbing the sacred mountain, he could return to the sacred place of God's presence, to the sacred moment of God's Creation, and to sacred union with his own archetypes (cf. Genesis 11 :4). Only at that ageless moment could mankind be secure from the pitiless presence of earthly death and destruction.

This archaic framework for reality was developed in the mythology of all ancient cultures. It persisted down through the ages and was refined by such philosophers as Plato (427?-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). It was Aristotle who introduced the revolutionary idea that the heavenly archetypes were not only transcendent (in heaven) but also immanent (in man on earth). The archetypes in man were the ideas or forms of reality that existed in man's mind, reason or spirit. Archetypal reality existed only in the *mind*, while manifestations of the archetypes, known as copies, types or representations, existed in the sensual *body*.

Through this philosophical approach, Aristotle claimed that man was a mind/body. While the *body* was limited, profane and subject to death, destruction, and return to the nether world, the *mind* was unlimited, sacred, immune to death and destruction, and destined to return to the supernal world of the heavenly archetypes.

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Grecian Philosophy and the Christian Church

As the Christian church emerged following the Christ event, it encountered the world of Grecian (Hellenistic) philosophy and quickly adopted Aristotelian thought. The "flesh" indeed was grass, which today "is" and tomorrow is cast into the oven (cf. Matthew 6:20). However, the mind was the place of the heavenly archetypes — of reality, of "Being," of God. Thus, at death the divinity of man's mind returned to heaven and to God. It was from this background that orthodox Christianity concluded that man is destined for divinity.

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Writing in the Catholic journal, *Commonweal*, the religious columnist, John Garvey, states:

Saint Athanasius [293?-373? CE (common era), patriarch of Alexandria] said that God became human so that human beings might become God. This doctrine of deification is central to Orthodoxy and to the mysticism of the West (for example, in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the *Letter of Private Direction*, and the writings of Saint John of the Cross). . . . [D]eification is seen as the state to which all are called, a complete restoration of the communion with God which is broken by sin. Jesus revealed what we are to be: though he is divine by nature, we become divine by adoption.³

In the second century the early church father, Irenaeus (140?-202? CE), bishop of Lyons in Gaul, contended that

the substance of life is participation in God. A vision of God is the means by which we enter into immortal life. . . . [Irenaeus] so emphasizes participation in God as to suggest deification. Salvation involves the transformation of human nature into the divine, the mortal into the immortal, immortality being the distinguishing characteristic of deity. Irenaeus shared this concept of deification with the mystery religions, the Stoics, the Cynics and the Platonists. For him, this experience of deification was the very heart of Christianity.⁴

Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662 CE), who is known as the father of Byzantine theology, contended:

On Mount Tabor Jesus' glorified humanity showed us the deified human condition to which we could all aspire. The Word was made flesh in order that "the whole human being would become God, deified by the grace of God become man — whole man, soul and body, by nature, and becoming whole God, soul and body, by grace."⁵

Mircea Eliade endorses this view of Christianity when he states: "Christian love is consecrated by the example of Jesus. Its actual practice annuls the sin of the human condition and makes man divine."⁶

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contends that man *becomes* God. Gnosticism believes that Christ came to liberate divinity from bondage to the fallen flesh and world. Christianity believes that Christ came to redeem fallen man from the flesh and the world, elevating man to divinity. Not surprisingly, therefore, secular humanism's claims that the Creator and creature are united in divinity are found to flourish within Christendom.⁷

Tragically, when Christianity adopted the Hellenistic idea of man's ultimate divinity, it adopted the seeds of its own "fall." To assume one's own divinity is not only a delusion; it becomes the justification for sacralizing one's natural predation with its possession and domination, on one hand, and submission and absorption, on the other hand. And the end of all predation is death and destruction.

The Contribution of Abrahamic Thought

If man's true destiny is not achieved in the "nonbeing" of chaos or in the "Being" of heaven, just where is man's destiny realized? We will now turn to this question and its answer.

During the time of Abraham, archaic thinking still maintained the concept of a three-layered universe with heavenly archetypes and their earthly copies.

However, Abrahamic thought contended that man did not ritually ascend the mountain to reach "Being." Rather, God himself descended the mountain to reach man. In this new metaphor the sacred came down to the profane, "actuality"

came down to "potential," "Being" came down to "becoming." For example, when man attempted to build the sacred mountain at the Tower of Babel in order to reach God, God came down to punish man for his impudence (Genesis 11:4-9). Again, when God called Abraham to embark on the age-long journey of creational "becoming," God and his archetypal representatives repeatedly came down and appeared to Abraham and his descendants. God came down to enter into covenant, to repeat covenantal promises and warnings, and to further the process of Creation (Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 15:1-6, 18; 17:1-22).

Thus, mankind does not ascend the sacred mountain to achieve "Being," nor does God descend the sacred mountain to instill mankind with "Being." Rather, God as "Being" descends the sacred mountain to covenantally join mankind in the journey of "becoming." It should be noted that there can be no archetypes for "becoming," since archetypes are only an expression of preexistent "Being." While archetypes might be employed to impart "Being," *God himself joins mankind in the conjoint process of "becoming."*

Many biblical images portray this process of "becoming" as a creative journey of God and mankind together. For example, in the Bible, Creation is symbolized by the process of conception and birth (Isaiah 7:14). Creation also is symbolized by baptism (cf. Exodus 14:16, 21, 22), by the ritual severing of the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15), by erection of the altar (Genesis 12:7,) and by offering the ritual sacrifice (Genesis 15:8-21; 22:13).

The True Meaning of Christmas

In this light, the true meaning of Christmas is not that God's visible manifestation has come down to earth to liberate man from the flesh and this fallen world and thus divinize mankind. Rather, the true meaning of Christmas is that God himself has come down to earth as the incarnate Babe of Bethlehem (Philippians 2:6-8). By this act self-existent "Being" has adopted "becoming," and "becoming" has become the mode of "Being." In the Bible, God's new creative act of incarnation is symbolized by virginal conception and birth (Matthew 1:22, 23; Luke 1:34, 35). This creational activity of God also is symbolized by baptism (Mark 1:9), by the expulsion of demons and diseases (Mark 1:34), by forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:5-12), and by sacrificial death (John 10:17,

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18). The condescension and sacrifice of the Creator involves just “one offering,” “once for all” (Hebrews 10:10, 14). This creational action is final, irrevocable and irreversible.

While orthodox Christianity declares that God became man so that man might become God, the simple truth is that God became man so that “God-man” (Jesus) and “animal-man” (we) might together become “human.” While “animal-man” is a territorial beast consciously intent on domination and possession, condemned to live and die in a predatory world, God intends for man to be creatively transformed into ever-living, egalitarian, compassionate human personhood. Such personhood involves an everlasting “becoming,” unfettered by predation and death. This was the vision of Old Testament prophets:

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The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. — Isaiah 11:6-9.

So God came down as a humble Jewish peasant. He adopted the rugged, dusty road of *creation continua* — continuing Creation — for himself and for the entire created order.⁸ This covenantal journey of eternal “becoming” is a creative process of change, development and transformation for God, mankind and the universe. This process is prefigured by Judaism’s journey of “becoming.” It is a process indicated by a scientific understanding of the evolutionary development of the universe, life and mankind. It is a process demanded by the current pitiful human condition of “unbecoming.” Moreover, it is a process assured by the presence of the Risen Christ (Matthew 28:20).⁹

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With Christ, the status of “Being” is finished, while the epic pilgrimage of creative “becoming” has just begun. This “human” journey is never abandoned. It can never fail. It will never end. This is the true meaning of Christmas.

Endnotes

1. See American *Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “Christmas.”
2. See A. C Bouquet, *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), pp. 137-165.

3. John Garvey, "Putting on the Mind of Christ," *Commonweal* 122, no. 17 (6 October 1995): 8, 9.
4. J. Deotis Roberts, *A Philosophical Introduction to Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), pp. 90, 91.
5. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 129.
6. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 23.
7. See John Carroll, *Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 228.
8. See John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), p. 72.
9. Rather than a nonrelational, *immediate* presence, in which we absorb the Transcendent ("God *in* us") or are absorbed by the Transcendent ("us *in* God"), the evidence indicates that the Risen Christ *mediates* his presence *with* us in history. That is, he reaches us through our neighbors. We reach him through each other. We reach each other and our own objective selves through him. This relational "reaching" may therefore be referred to as Christ's "intermediatorial" presence, which is defined by the gifts of faith, hope and compassionate love. See "The End of Human Alienation," subhead "The True Resolution of Human Alienation," *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.7).

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