

What Christmas Means

by Chris Hedges via jane - Truthdig *Monday, Dec 25 2017, 2:59am*
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In the early 1980s I was in a refugee camp for Guatemalans who had fled the war into Honduras. It was a cold, dreary winter afternoon. The peasant farmers and their families, living in filth and mud, were decorating their tents with strips of colored paper. That night, they said, they would celebrate the flight of Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus to Egypt to escape the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem ordered by Herod. The celebration is known as the Day of the Holy Innocents.



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“Why is this such an important day?” I asked.

“It was on this day that Christ became a refugee,” a farmer answered.

I knew Matthew’s biblical passage about the flight to Egypt by heart. I had heard my father, a Presbyterian minister, read it in services every Christmas in the farm town in upstate New York where I grew up. But it took an illiterate farmer, who had fled in fear with his wife and children from the murderous rampages of the Guatemalan army and the death squads, who no doubt counted friends, even relatives, among the dead, a man who had lost everything he owned, to explain it to me.

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The story of Christmas—like the story of the crucifixion, in which Jesus is abandoned by his disciples, attacked by the mob, condemned to death by the state, placed on death row and executed—is not written for the oppressors. It is written for the oppressed. And what is quaint and picturesque to those who live in privilege is visceral and empowering to those the world condemns.

Jesus was not a Roman citizen. He lived under Roman occupation. The Romans were white. Jesus was a person of color. And the Romans, who peddled their own version of white supremacy, nailed people of color to crosses almost as often as we finish them off with lethal injections, gun them down in the streets or lock them up in cages. The Romans killed Jesus as an insurrectionist, a revolutionary. They feared the radicalism of the Christian Gospel. And they were right to fear it. The

Roman state saw Jesus the way the American state saw Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Then, like now, prophets were killed.

The radicalism of the Christian Gospel would be muted, distorted and denied by the institutional church once it came to power in the third century. It would be perverted by court theologians, church leaders and, in the 20th century, fascists. It would be mangled by the heretics in the Christian right to sanctify the worst aspects of American imperialism and capitalism. The Bible unequivocally condemns the powerful. It is not a self-help manual to become rich. It does not bless America or any other nation. It was written for the powerless, for those the theologian James Cone calls the crucified of the earth. It was written to give a voice to, and affirm the dignity of, those being crushed by malignant power and empire.

Undocumented parents living in mortal fear of being seized by immigration agents and being separated from their children, African-Americans living in the hellish violence of south Chicago, know the true meaning of Christmas. They feel what Mary and Joseph felt. Fear, even terror, is the foundation of Christmas.

“And the United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian descent fairly, she failed,” the Rev. Jeremiah Wright thundered from his pulpit in Chicago in a 2003 sermon that, when it became publicized in 2008, saw presidential candidate Barack Obama turn his back on his pastor. “She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese descent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating her citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains, the government put them in slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest-paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into positions of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless America.’ No, no, no, not God Bless America. God damn America—that’s in the Bible—for killing innocent people. God damn America, for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America, as long as she tries to act like she is God, and she is supreme.”

Wright paid for his honesty. He spoke a core truth about the Gospel that few preachers dare to utter, lest their jobs and their status are jeopardized by the big donors in their congregations walking out. Preach the Gospel and you don’t last long in a cathedral or a well-heeled suburban church. The preachers there are skilled dissemblers. And this is why, in our moment of crisis, they have little to say. All institutions including the church, the theologian Paul Tillich reminded us, are inherently demonic. You can serve God or Mammon. You can’t serve both.

Writer James Baldwin said he left the pulpit to preach the Gospel. There is more Gospel in Baldwin than in most Sunday sermons or theological texts. Those who proclaim the Gospel are outcasts, including from the institutional church. They are often branded as heretics. They defy power. They stand with the oppressed. And when you stand with the oppressed you are treated like the oppressed.

“Being in jail on Christmas day is not just counter-cultural, but anti-cultural,” wrote the Rev. Daniel Berrigan from his cell on Christmas 1993, imprisoned for one of his many acts of civil disobedience. “The culture has no sense of Christ’s spirit. People spend billions of dollars in an orgy of consumption, exchanging presents while ignoring the plight of the poor and the demands of discipleship. As George Anderson of St. Al’s says, ‘We cannot mark Christmas without remembering—and taking up—the cross. Instead of marking this day with the cultural spirit of

materialism, we sit here in poverty. The only gifts we have to give each other are a piece of bread and an embrace of peace in Jesus' name. That is more than enough."

Christmas is not about the virgin birth. It is not about angels. It is not even about a historical Jesus. There is no evidence that Jesus existed. To debate these topics is to engage in a theological Trivial Pursuit. The Christmas story is about learning how to be human, about kneeling before a newborn infant who is helpless, vulnerable, despised and poor. It is about inverting the world's values. It is about understanding that the religious life—and this life can be lived with or without a religious creed—calls on us to protect and nurture the least among us, those demonized and rejected.

I have seen the infant Jesus in the United Nations feeding stations during the famine in Sudan, in the squalid and overcrowded refugee camps in Gaza, in the rubble of wartime Sarajevo and in America's inner cities, where children go to bed hungry and live in fear. I have seen too the spirit of Christmas. As a boy I saw it in my father during civil rights demonstrations and in street protests against the Vietnam War, ones he joined as a minister and a World War II veteran. I saw it in his standing up for gays and lesbians at a time when the church chastised clergy who championed gay rights. I saw it when he gave his annual sermon to raise money for orphans, a sermon he never managed to complete. He tried each year to tell the stories of these abandoned boys and girls. His voice always gave way to tears. I listened, along with the hushed congregation, to my father weep for the infant Christ, unable to continue. There was an elderly woman in our church who set up the candles before every service. She struggled with dementia. She was often unsure which end of the candle was supposed to be inserted into the base. My father, without saying a word, would help her place the candle in the holder. He did this every week. These tiny, often unseen acts of kindness, ones that take place in war and peace, are humankind's meaning.

I met with the Rev. Coleman Brown, the university chaplain and my professor, once a week when I was an undergraduate at Colgate University. He gave me books to read by Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, William Stringfellow, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. One winter's afternoon, as sheets of snow fell outside his office window, he read to me T.S. Eliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi."

In this poem the wise men make the long and arduous journey to the infant Jesus. This is not only a physical journey. It is a spiritual journey. Eliot writes:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.

The magi turn their backs on their old world to embrace one that is alien, obscure and perplexing. They are full of doubt. They feel pain, not joy, "with the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly." There is no sudden epiphany. There is only bewilderment. They become aliens in their own land, "with the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly." Faith, they find—this new faith—is exhausting and even disillusioning. Eliot concludes:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

America is in terminal decline. It is enveloped by radical evil. Its corporate systems of power and empire exploit and kill with impunity. Its perverted values champion cruelty, mendacity and greed. It bows before the idols of money and power. It is severed from the human. It, like Herod and the Roman Empire, damns the infant Jesus. There is nothing easy about faith. It demands we smash the idols that enslave us. It demands we die to the world. It demands self-sacrifice. It demands resistance. It calls us to see ourselves in the wretched of the earth. It separates us from all that is familiar. It knows that once we feel the suffering of others, we will act.

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[Moderator's note:

I have read the New Testament four times, not as a religious bigot or myth deluded fool, but as a textual analyst and I couldn't agree more with the above. I urge everyone to read this wonderful text more about moral and social reformation than about religious or divine magic; it was written by skilled writers and the message is clear, perhaps that's why its important social messages about money and state power are ignored today. You nailed it this time, Mr Hedges.]

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