

Unto Us a Child Is Born: The Brief Observance of a Holy Nativity

By John Bennison

Alain de Botton, the British atheist who proposed building a temple in London where fellow adherents can religiously practice their non-beliefs, openly confesses that – while he presumably wouldn't place an ounce of credibility in (any variation of) the Christmas story – he nonetheless still loves to sing all the carols!



In turning our backs on all aspects of religion, we allow it to claim as its exclusive dominion areas of experience that should rightly belong to all humankind – and that we should feel unembarrassed about re-appropriating for the secular realm. Early Christianity was itself adept at appropriating the good ideas of others, aggressively subsuming countless pagan practices which modern atheists now tend to avoid in the mistaken belief that they are indelibly Christian. Much of what is best about Christmas is entirely unrelated to the story of the birth of Jesus. It revolves around themes of community, festivity and renewal; which predate the context in which they were cast over the centuries by Christianity.

The wisdom of the various faiths belongs to all of humankind, even the most rational among us, and ... deserves to be selectively reabsorbed. Religions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone.

Exerpt from an article in [The Guardian](#), “An Atheist at Christmas: O Come All Ye Faithless” – Alain de Botton

The Christmas “holidays” have long been the most secularized religious observance in Western culture; and shows no sign of letting up in this chaotic post-modern world in which we find ourselves. So the radio blares a combined medley of “O Holy Night” and “Jingle Bell Rock,” while “progressive” types like myself gather to consider what could, or would, make *any* and *every* nativity a *holy* one.

As a non-theist who places little stock in the standard orthodoxy of my own religious tradition – including the divinity of Jesus (see "[Taking the Christ Out of Christmas](#)") – I should probably be worried I might not pass any litmus test if I still claim to call myself a Christian. Given the current political climate where other religious types are indistinguishably clumped together, I might have to pack up and flee in the dead of night if Herod's latest proposal for homeland security were to prevail. Then I would end up like so many other millions in our world. They are those who -- in my humble opinion -- were the likeliest candidate for Time's “Person of the Year;” namely, the refugee and illegal immigrant.

In an almost uncanny way, ancient prophets come around this time each year to depict for us the desolate place in which we seem to still find ourselves; and wearily foretell once again the place we instead long to be. “The people who walk in darkness,” Isaiah prophesied, “have seen a great light.” Figuring out exactly what that light might illuminate for us seems to be the challenge for Christmas to mean anything more than a quaint, childlike tale for those who can still only believe it on such a level.

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I do not need to believe in angels and archangels hovering in a cold night sky over terrified shepherds and their flocks to know the welcome, “fear not” message they would bring to a nation now so gripped in fear. And, I need not believe a single Bethlehem star had once outshone all the others, in order to awaken in the hearts of wise people everywhere the words and deeds that came and dwelt among us to save us from ourselves.

The observance of a holy nativity occurs in a different guise and place all the time; beneath a steel blue sky studded with a million more stars. The words and deeds of the one I would still strive to follow come quietly and irrepressibly again; amidst the din and clamor of the holiday season, and the turmoil and lunacy of our worn and tattered world.

The little band of progressive Christian types that I lead will support a young Afghanistan student next year with enough funds so he can attend school, instead of begging on the streets to help support his family. So, unto us a child has been born. He is not a Jew from Bethlehem, whose name means “savior;” but rather a young Muslim from Kabul. His name is Wali Muhammad, and his life is as holy and wholly valuable as any on the face of this earth.

A member of our group recently shared this personal holiday story:

“My father was bipolar,” said Fred. “Raised in a poor family that made Christmas a time of regret for the things they lacked, he felt no nostalgia during the holidays. In fact, he would try to stay in bed on Christmas morning. Mother would send my brother and me to drag him out of bed and bring him to the family hearth for the opening of presents.”

“It is time, and past time,” my friend went on to observe, “for people of good will to drag their reluctant fellow citizens to the realization that a child is born; a child for whom we all bear responsibility, and for whom we have the stern yet joyful responsibility to bring gifts of inclusion and love.”

Let it be so. *jb*

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