

Toward a more than literal and more than rational and more than capitalist Christmas!

by [Matthew Fox](#) on December 23, 2015 | [1 Comment](#)

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Some people complain that there exists a “war on Christmas.” I propose that there are three wars on Christmas going on in our time:

- 1) There is the war of chosen ignorance and fundamentalist literalism that seeks to make of every Christmas story a literal truth (such folks are seeking the star of Bethlehem and all the rest by pouring over historical astronomical manuscripts)—and this destroys Christmas for many thinking people;
- 2) There is the war of rationalists who, in their eagerness to prove the fundamentalists all wrong are busy deconstructing the Christmas narratives but with little or no appreciation of the profound panoply and in fact rich banquet of archetypes and meaning and poetry and art that are embedded in the Christmas stories and no effort whatsoever at reconstruction;
- 3) The third war comes from consumer capitalism which, like a great river that is flooding seeks out weak spots to fill and rushes into the vacuums left by the hard line literalists and the hard line rationalists to fill it with an orgy of spending frenzy that appeals to the basest instincts of greed, competition, avarice, gluttony and more silliness that keeps us all distracted from the deeper meanings of the Christmas season.

What is ironic to me is that the fundamentalists on the right and the fundamentalists on the left are in bed together—whether they admit it or not—insofar as both suffer from severe reductionism. They both are literalists—this is what they have in common—for one wants to throw the baby Jesus out with the bath (the rationalists); and the other wants to wallow in the literal waters with the baby Jesus. Both are stuck in a literal past and both ignore the expansive and cosmic message that the Christmas stories are telling us: Stories about the coming of the Cosmic Christ (or Buddha Nature if you prefer; or Image of God if you prefer that). Stories that are mythical in size and scope. Stories that are more-than-anthropocentric. Stories and the archetypes that accompany them that blast through the narcissism of our species including its preoccupation with guilt, shame, self-destruction, power, control and death wishes. Stories that are so big that only artists can tell them. Stories that go beyond the left brain and water and wash the intuitive brain where, as Einstein teaches, values come from. Stories that are mystical and not merely intellectual. Stories that live, not stories that slumber in academic anal retentive obsessions and ego-driven power games of deconstructing.

What are some of these stories the Christmas brings alive for us? Here are a few known (and perhaps lesser-known) examples:

- One is the basic story of **Who/Where the Divine is to be found**. A key name in the Christmas story is the word “Emmanuel.” Biblical scholars have concluded that “Emmanuel” is the oldest name for God in the Bible and what it means is “God-with-us.” Notice what it does not mean: Not God over us; God above us; God outside us; God judging us; God as nobodaddy in the sky; God as Patriarch par excellence; God as Judge; God as Condemner; God as mathematician in the sky; God as power-over. None of these. Rather God-with-us, God among us, God in our midst. More a panentheistic God than a theistic God. A theistic God is a God outside us, God as object. A panentheistic God is us in God and God in us. God among us therefore, God in our midst.

- Another basic message from the Christmas story is **the primacy of the anawim, those without a voice, those who are the forgotten ones in society.** That is the meaning of the angels appearing to the shepherds with good news to tell the whole world. The shepherds were very much at the bottom of the cultural totem pole in Israel in the first century. They lived among sheep, smelled like them, were not educated or literate, etc. They are the first one, one might say the chosen ones, to hear good news about “Peace to the world.”

- **The anawim are also the children.** Then as now, children are often without a voice and are subject to adultism and the projections and projects of the adults whether their versions of societal institutions from education to economics to religion to politics. Children are often victimized by the agendas of the adults. But in the Christmas story we are told that Divinity is not afraid of childhood but actually chooses to be a child and to be vulnerable and dependent as happens with children everywhere. Christmas challenges adultism in all its forms. It awakens adults to their capacity for participating in the evil of endangering the young. It also shows the best way of dealing with children: Mother Mary and Father Joseph care for their young baby as every healthy and loving couple do.

- The Christmas story also **warns of the darkness to come in the life of Jesus,** the price he will one day pay in taking on the Empire of the day, when it tells us that Herod, the Roman Empire’s representative in Israel, is out to murder this “savior” and puts out a decree that all newborn male babies should be murdered. And the flight to Egypt is the response to that. Literalists want to think this journey was for real; rationalists want to throw out the whole story. But the meaning is clear and is deeper than any effort to commit reductionism: Every son or daughter of God (and that is each of us) will awaken powers that are threatened by the message of peace (and therefore justice) preached by people of good will. Christmas warns us that it will not be an easy task to live out one’s Divine incarnation.

· There lies another profound teaching from the Christmas stories: **Incarnation**. Literally, the taking on of flesh. By whom? By Divinity. God is so in love with humanity and the Earth that God becomes one of us, light embodied, flesh, very much “God-among-us,” very much a lover and user of Earth and her many gifts to humans. It follows that flesh is holy, flesh is sanctified, all of our chakras (including number two, our sexuality) are incorporated into the sacredness of Divinity. None of us need regret any longer our incarnation, our fleshiness, our sexuality or the sacred flesh of Mother Earth that welcomes us and nourishes us.

· **There is a powerful affirmation of the four-legged ones and the role they play in divine revelation in these stories.** Not only are the sheep present when the shepherds hear the news from the cosmic beings, the angels; but they are also there at the manger where the Divine baby is placed—see Isaiah 1.1 which talks of how “Israel has not known me but the ox and donkey have known me.” In other words the non-two-legged ones can be much closer to God than humans. They bless us; we learn from them; we are not here just to use them. That is a profound and necessary message in a time of eco-awakening such as ours. It strikes at the heart of speciesism, the narcissistic notion that our species alone is the “people of God.”

· The baby Jesus was born in a manger, his parents were poor, with no room in the inn. **But the Cosmic Christ is born there also. In poverty; in exile; like immigrants; excluded from the hotels and motels.** All this is a teaching also of the preferential option for the poor that the Scriptures announce and that we still have to learn and practice. It challenges all those who stand by while strangers and those in exile suffer immeasurably trying to survive. It is a story about **justice and justice-making**.

· Christmas day is not so much a **Birthday Party** for the baby Jesus in the year 2015—an exercise in nostalgia certainly—so much as it is a Birthday Party for the Christ in all of us, the Buddha Nature in all of us, the Image of God in all of us yearning to Come Alive and Be Born finally, throwing off the shackles of history and fear and lack of

self-worth to take on the dignity and the responsibility of being grown-ups; of being God-like; of being compassionate; of being fully alive.

- There are many reminders of **the Cosmic dimension to our lives** in the Christmas story. The star of Bethlehem is one such reminder: the heavens themselves, the cosmos, is part of the birth of each of us and part of the incarnation of each of us. It is revelatory and can point the way to the Divine. Science tells us that it took not just stars but supernovas and galaxies and the birth of atoms and the life, death and resurrection of multiple beings in the sky and the preparation of the earth including fine-tuning the atmosphere, for each of us to be born to this amazingly rich and beautiful and unique planet.

- **The story of the magi** searching for this star reminds us that cosmology moves us beyond sectarianism and living in our comfortable boxes of religion or ethnicity or race or class for the magi were not Jews but seekers from other cultures seeking the same goal: A savior or teacher or Messiah who will remind all of us what life is truly about in its depths.

- Wherever there are **angels** there is the cosmos represented for angels are cosmic beings not restricted to our planet or to human endeavors alone. Angels accompany all creativity and certainly all new creation. Their prominence in these stories then beginning with Gabriel's announcement to Mary and culminating with the appearance to the shepherds are part of the necessary messaging that as humans wake up to their own dignity, to their incarnation and marrying of the Divine and the human, all of creation is eager to accompany us and to praise with us. But in the meantime we need the angels and need to call on them for their inspiration (a "muse" is another word for an angel) and guidance as we try to find our way as a species on an endangered planet. Angels are allies, cosmic allies, eager to assist us.

- **Light and Darkness.** Christmas time is of course solstice time which in the northern hemisphere corresponds to the darkest time of the year. So many cultures have honored this special, dark time of the

year with pyramids and monuments (think New Grange in Ireland or Stonehenge or the pyramids of the Yucatan peninsula) made by intellectual genius and serious manual labor to get people to connect psyche and cosmos, honoring the dark but inviting in the light also. In this context the “light of Christ” and the light of all of us is invited to shine not just one day a year but every day of the year, any one of which can be very dark. Especially in the dark times is the light of Christmas to be remembered. And darkness is the most appropriate time for the birth of the Divine. It is a time of stillness and of quiet and from there the Christ is born.

· The tradition of the **Christmas tree**, borrowed from ancient so-called “pagan” practices, is still another reminder of our interdependence as humans with the more-than-human peoples. Not only animals but the tree people are honored at Christmas—and for good reason. It is the ancestors of the trees after all that first emerged from the waters of the oceans and learned to defy gravity and built circulatory systems that later evolved to become our blood systems. It was the tree people, so many millions of years older than ourselves, that taught us how to stand erect. And proud. And stately. Our lighting of the tree, our decorating of the tree, our inviting a tree into our homes for a few weeks is such an invitation to move beyond our narcissism as a species and learn anew how blessed we are by so many beings that are more than human.

These are just some of the lessons of Christmas. These archetypes do what all archetypes do: They wake us up. Christmas is a time of awakening.

Recently I read a well-intentioned article published where the author wrote that stories about Jesus are “sometimes the truth and sometimes myth.” **There looms a dangerous dualism in this statement.** Adults ought to know by now that *myths are truths*; they carry truths that are too big for just factoids to carry. It would be a disaster to attempt to purge all religion of its myths. As psychologist Rollo May points out, myths are the basis of all

morality. There is an unnecessary dualism here between “truth” and “myths.”

The stories of the Nativity need not be factual but mythically they are immensely powerful. The artists who composed them knew what they were doing—they catch the deep imagination and yearnings of the human heart for justice for the poor and in doing so offer what is in many ways the essence of the Christ path—that Good News will come to the poorest (the shepherds) and the four-legged ones (ox and sheep) will be in a privileged place and that Divinity is young—a child—not just an old, bearded fellow. And that we are cosmic beings born of a cosmos that has loved us and we will find no peace without remarrying our psyches to the cosmos. The Gospel writers were NOT members of academic seminars: They were ARTISTS and they wove together powerful teachings and stories from the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere including their own hearts and imaginations to create powerful works of art. It was the Jesus event that aroused this creativity and breakthrough thinking in them. It is an insult to throw out their brilliant mosaics based solely on a modern perspective of “facts only.” Do not underestimate the power of myth and story to move minds and hearts and thereby create metanoia or transformation.

We do not need a literalism from the left. We and our children will be the poorer for it. Academia, for all its accomplishments, like the quest for the historical Jesus and all its accomplishments, carries a great shadow side as well. One that needs some uplifting regarding the deeper, archetypal, mythical and therefore truly BIG stories of our religious lineage.

Are any of the lessons I have outlined here been truly heeded, lived out, celebrated, achieved by the human race in the past 2000 years? Isn't it time we begin? Isn't it time Christmas arrives, the Cosmic Christ arrives, finally?

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