156

<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/12/get_christ_into_christmas.html>

**Get Christ into Christmas**

*"Keep Christ in Christmas!" is the familiar refrain of Christians who fear the secularization of the holy day celebrating the birth of Jesus, their savior.*

*But in America, non-Christians often celebrate Christmas.*
*According to a*[***recent poll by the Christian group LifeWay Research***](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-12-20-unchristmasinside20_ST_N.htm)*, "A majority of agnostics or those claiming no preference (89 percent), individuals claiming other religions (62 percent), and even atheists (55 percent) celebrate Christmas along with 97 percent of Christians."*

*Do you need to be Christian to celebrate Christmas? What is Christmas all about?*

People (and their cultures, religions, ideas) flow over one another, the flow sucking up from below all that is*digestible*. Since this is a fact of our species' life-story, only ignorance or malice inclines anyone to be cynical about it.

And yet every Christmas we hear again that Christmas is a mix of Christianity and paganism. Of course it is! Christianity overflowed Mediterranean and European paganism and sucked up from below what it found*digestible*. For example, Mithraism was the dominant religion of the Roman armies, and Christianity sucked up from it a birthday for Jesus, Mithra's birthday, December 25. After the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, his soldiers could go right on celebrating the god's birthday every December 25; but now - if they became convinced Christians, or only wanted to please the supreme commander - with a change of gods.

Well, why didn't the Christian flow suck up *more* of Mithraism? Because nothing more was digestible. Christianity certainly couldn't stomach the fact that Mithraism was a male-only religion. In Christianity, gender was not a membership-factor: women and men were equally "in Christ," equal in the churches (e.g., Galatians 3:28: "Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female....you are all one in Christ Jesus.").

When *commercialism* overflowed Christmas, it sucked up out of Christmas what it found digestible, which wasn't much: Christmas became almost unrecognizably a Christian festival. What could Christians do to "keep Christ in Christmas"?

Well, we could buy nothing, strip off our clothes, and stand naked in public. This solution is not recommended for the faint-hearted, maybe not now for anybody. But Francis of Assisi did it. The clothes he stripped off, in the presence of his wealthy father in the public square, were elegant. The family's life was so commercialized that when the business expanded from Italy into France, his father changed the son's name from "John" to "Francis." But Francis became a POW, and in prison in another Italian province he was converted to Jesus, and loathed the materialism of his family's way of life. Returning home, he chose the most dramatic way of going public with the loathing: public nakedness.

But that was only *negative*. What, *positively*, could he do to get Christ back into Christmas? (He would have thought that "keep Christ in Christmas" was an underestimation of the situation in his culture.)

He invented the*crèche*, and set it on top of the commercial flow. In what now we would consider a Madison Avenue triumph, he distracted public attention from purchasables to Jesus, who can't be bought or bought off. Historically, it was a stack-up. Jesus sat on Mithra, the market sat on Jesus, then (with Francis' help) Jesus sat on the market.

Francis' first crèche - Christmas, AD 1223 CE - was in a stable, with live people (Jesus-Mary-Joseph, shepherds, magi) and live animals. He read the Gospel at that Christmas eve worship. Soon, artists began making crèches for public and private use in many lands.

And everything else he did - forming communities of monks and nuns whose lives of simplicity and service called attention to Jesus, confronting authorities both Christian and (in North Africa) Muslim, writing memorable prayers and hymns - was *in "imitation" of Jesus.*

An ancient prayer, older than Francis, expresses his heart, the Christian heart for every Christmas and every day:

"Day by day, of Lord, three things I pray:
to know thee more clearly,
to love thee more dearly,
to follow thee more nearly
day by day."

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  DECEMBER 21, 2010; 12:27 AM ETSAVE & SHARE:                       
PREVIOUS:**[**OUT OF DARKNESS, LIGHT: SOLSTICE AND THE LUNAR ECLIPSE**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/starhawk/2010/12/out_of_darkness_light_solstice_and_the_lunar_eclipse.html)**| NEXT:**[**CHRISTMAS HAS ALWAYS BELONGED TO OTHER TRADITIONS**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/max_carter/2010/12/is_christmas_christian.html)

**Comments**

**Please report offensive comments below.**

TO BOBDOGS3

You say Christianity is "fabrication,"
I say "construction."

Each of us uses the correct word.
Fabrications are makings from made up (unreal) materials.
Constructions are makings from real materials.

Given the reality of Jesus' resurrection, the development of the Christian mind was a continuum of constructions.

But if I did not believe that Jesus didn't stay dead, the development of the Christian mind would be a continuum of fabrications.

May you, some day, come to believe that Jesus didn't stay dead.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | DECEMBER 28, 2010 12:27 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO GRCAC

To prevent your misreading (in your first paragraph), twice I italicized "digestible."

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | DECEMBER 28, 2010 9:14 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Dear Rev. Elliott,

Thanks so much for your eloquent reply, and congratulations on the 70th anniversary of your ordination!

I have shared your comments with my most Significant, and, like me, he was deeply moved. I only wish that all who claimed adherence to a religion could reach such greatness of spirit as you reveal in your words.

A Blessed New Year to You and Your Loved Ones!

Farnaz

**POSTED BY: FARNAZMANSOURI2 | DECEMBER 27, 2010 8:45 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Actually, Reverend, on this:

""Christianity certainly couldn't stomach the fact that Mithraism was a male-only religion.""

Not one that made women subservient and silent, like Paul said? :)

Actually, "Mithraism" wasn't per se a "Male-only religion," it was a mystery cultus within a polytheistic context: originally, a Phyrgian one. What the military version of it became was in some ways a separately-imported piece of the original context (For instance, the Phyrgian Mother was famously accepted into Rome a great deal earlier and by a separate vector from the secret-society-like and martial versions of the Mithraic mystery-cult: the former as very much a re-infusion of some things an increasingly distant and bureaucratic state religion had rather lost track of, though much of it all came from common roots.

Don't forget the polytheism. Martial Mithraism became rather henotheistic in its emphasis, but the symbolism and much of the rest came from a more complete context, originally. One in which Mithras was a 'men's mystery' as we'd say today, amid a much broader 'religion.' :)

And Christianity grabbed more from that than is generally-accepted, actually. Just obscured the meanings of a lot of it.

**POSTED BY: APAGANPLACE | DECEMBER 27, 2010 3:54 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO FARNAZ, 26 Dec 10

Thank you for your great question, "What is all this thingness about?" A few comments:
1
Your ten-year-old daughter was unconsciously paying a precious compliment to her parents when she said, "I'm not a thing person."
2
When I was a little older than that, I heard a sermon (on Esther) each section of which ended with the refrain, "Things can never satisfy the human heart." That sentence helped protect me against consumerism.
3
Today is the 70th anniversary of my ordination as a Christian minister. Jesus teaches us to pay secondary attention to our outer life, primary attention to "love God, and your neighbor as yourself." A "thing" is to be viewed as a means of love for God/neighbor/self. With this ordering of priorities, one may approximate what a great prayer calls "a right judgment in all things."
4
My 1995 Eerdmans book is titled, "Flow of Flesh, Reach of Spirit." As human life flows from one generation to the next, each person
reaches out for the beyond, for beyond "things," for transcendence, for God. This out-reach is by in-reach, meditation, prayer.
For CBS television, I produced "The Inner Life," a program largely of visuals, to help "see" with the inner through the outer eyes.
5
As a Christian, I believe God has come to our world in & as Jesus, so we can see what in the prophets we could only hear. That's how big Christmas is for us, if we don't let ourselves get buried in tinsel.

God bless you and yours!

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | DECEMBER 26, 2010 10:54 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Using Willis theory, the first century Christians should have adopted Mithraism and Saturnalia and Sol Invictus and made them their own.

Yet we find Pauls counsel exactly opposite -
2 Corinthians 6:14-17 (Revised Standard Version)

14 Do not be mismated with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? 15 What accord has Christ with Be'lial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 17 Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them

Seems clear most "Christians" know nothing about the bible.....

**POSTED BY: GRCAC | DECEMBER 25, 2010 6:01 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

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By: "JJ" [**http://onwapo.wordpress.com**](http://onwapo.wordpress.com/)
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*MADE IN AMERiK*

**POSTED BY: BEAUTIFUL-MIND | DECEMBER 25, 2010 12:54 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Christmas is Christian..in mans sight.

Trouble is, scripture is very clear on who's 'sight' is the right sight.

Jesus himself said 'In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men'

Read about the commandment from the early church that gave into the pagans and inculcated their revelry and celebrations.

Ask yourself, Mr Elliot..was that from God/Jesus Christ....or from man?

Rev 12:9 fulfills the whole story - the adversary has decieved the WHOLE world.

Think about it

**POSTED BY: DCWCA | DECEMBER 25, 2010 9:58 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Hi Rev. Elliott,

Thoughtful essay, as always.

I confess I've always been at a loss when it comes to "consumerism" and the lust for material things. In this, I'm not alone. Neither of my parents understand it yet, and nor does my most significant of others. I mean we just don't get it. I'm not being disingenuous. We don't understand.

Maybe, you could explain to us why so many people want so many "things." To me, they are just objects. Some of them are pretty, eg., pretty clothes, jewelry, furniture, etc. But even if they're of good quality and last long, one's interest in them fades, and people who spend a lot of money on clothing have to keep buying new clothing because they want to be in style. It occupies them, preoccupies them, diverts their attention from other things. What does it all do for them? How does it benefit them?

These are the things we don't understand. We want our daughter to grow up in an environment in which she has the right foods to eat, access to good medical care, clothes appropriate for the season, everything she needs to stretch her mind, spirit, and body. We want her to know that she is loved and we want her to love.

A few weeks ago, a friend took her daughter and mine to a museum to see a film. Afterward, she wanted to buy tokens for the girls at the gift shop. Az, my girl, had no interest, my friend lamented. Seeing my friend's distress at her inability to want something in the shop, Az, I'm told looked up at the friend with wrinkled brow, and said, "I'm not a thing person." (She's ten.) Then, report has it, she brightened and said, "But I'm a film person. Thank you!"

The problem is that all this makes sense to me. She didn't want to insult my friend. She's just not interested in things. She's gracious about gifts as are we all and she gives them as we do.

I don't know. I'm rambling, Rev. What is all this thingness about? Do you know?

Merry Christmas to you and your family!

Farnaz

**POSTED BY: FARNAZMANSOURI2 | DECEMBER 22, 2010 10:57 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

The "new" religion, Christianity, "sucked up" a whole lot more than Christmas from the pagans, including the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection and others. And religious leaders today continue to make it up as they go along to suit their own purposes. Christianity is a complete fabrication by men who sought to ursurp religious power from the "pagan" religions. In doing so, Christianity throughout the centuries became an evil and destructive religous power wielded by a series of men who were far less than Christian. And if we look at the examples set by America's religious leaders today, there is very little that is Christ-like at all in Christianity, and that includes Christmas.

**POSTED BY: BOBDOG3 | DECEMBER 21, 2010 3:33 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

There is no discernible difference between Christianity and Paganism.

**POSTED BY: JIMZ1 | DECEMBER 21, 2010 1:53 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Rev: "In Christianity, gender was not a membership-factor: women and men were equally "in Christ," equal in the churches (e.g., Galatians 3:28: "Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female....you are all one in Christ Jesus.")."

--Except that Paul admonished women to be silent in church, and not to attempt to teach men. Not my idea of equality. But we digress.

I have no problem with people celebrating what they want when they want. I have a niece and nephew whose birthdays fall close to fall and winter holidays, so my sister holds a birthday party for them in the summer so that their personal celebrations don't get lost in the other celebrations. But she's not arrogant enough to hold their party on July 4 and then demand that everyone act as though the fireworks are in honor of her kids.

**POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | DECEMBER 21, 2010 10:35 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**