

# The Gloomy Quest for Hope - Christmas 2014

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There was a time when Christmas was a solemn and somber occasion - and with good reason. Before the industrial revolution, virtually everyone utilized beasts of burden in one form or another and knew the odors of a stable. Today, if you brought a pregnant woman to a stable and told her this is where she would give birth to her child, she could be justifiably horrified. Something else we have mostly forgotten is how perilous childbirth once was. For most of human existence, childbirth killed more young women than anything else. What the gospels are portraying in a simple narration was a horribly dangerous situation, and until very recently, everyone hearing the story understood that. What even religious leaders seem to have overlooked is that the nativity wasn't merely some expression of humility. Until our modern world, Christians would have understood that Jesus's first miracle was: simply coming into the world at all. As the Gospels would continue to underscore, Jesus would be hounded by powerful adversaries all his life. Unlike today, early Christians would have seen the hand of the devil in all this. Only recent events has forced modern humans to reconsider their revisionist view of the world in which concepts of evil are mere superstition.

Inexplicably, this very harsh reality was transformed into one of Christmas's more cherished traditions: the nativity scene. Instead of the unsanitary earthiness of a real stable, these miniatures portray a surreal "slice of heaven" on earth. The nativity scene is a microcosm of our culture's revisionist attitude toward Christmas. Within the nativity scene we imagine ourselves somehow connected to that moment of divinity and hope somehow that connection will "*rub off*" into our lives. We forget that this miracle almost never happened at all. Expecting it to stretch across the millennia seems far-fetched.

The secularization of Christmas is simply a continuation of this process. In some respect, it is the globalization of what happened when Jesus was going around Israel performing miracles. Whenever the word went out that a miracle-worker was nearby, people flocked to this person like moths to a flame. What the gospels

don't spell out are the people's motivations. Nobody understood what was going on, but let's face it, do you know of anybody who wouldn't accept a miracle? Everybody wants a free lunch and you can't do better than a miraculous handout.

Christianity is controversial and somehow never turned out to be the "light burden" that Jesus insisted it should be. But we all would like to be in the right place at the right time should anything miraculous happen. Just as nativity scenes romanticize the reality of Jesus's life, secular Christmas replaces Jesus's second coming and judgement day with a jolly figure in a red suit that does nothing but pass out goodies. All this started as merely a way to spare children of the heady matters of the real Christmas. Unfortunately, some people decided to never grow up and now they seem to be in the majority.

There is just one small problem: there is no Santa Claus. So we have taken it upon ourselves to procure and deliver out the goodies. We then insist that this utterly phony bit of magic is a better holiday than the original. Clearly we are only fooling ourselves. Come January, that harsh world we all live in will come roaring back to destroy any delusions of magic produced by our "*modern design*" Christmas - religious or otherwise.

I believe in the old saying: "there are no atheists in the foxhole" but not because there is a God, but instead because we still live in a world with war and foxholes. There is exactly one thing more precious than life itself: hope. Without hope, existence is insufferable. Alas, that is where the modern human runs smack into a paradoxical dilemma. Western democracies are founded on a simple idea: with freedom and shelter from nature's obstacles, happiness is simply a matter of making good choices. Well, modern civilization has succeeded in providing us with means to cope with much of nature, but we are not much happier than those without those material benefits. Making those good choices isn't hard - it seems damn well impossible. Worse still, our scientists, intellectuals, and specialists are at a loss to explain what is missing.

Rationalism has failed. We cannot seem to reason our way into being able to get along - whether we are people, religions, or nations. There is no better demonstration of that than the war that raged 100 years ago: World War I. Each side insisted they had the knowledge and technology to force the other to surrender

the desired territory. When the stalemate became unsufferable, neither side was willing to accept that the war would not be won and seek a more civil solution to the dispute. That stubborn refusal to accept the obvious ultimately lead to the deaths of 16 million people. After the war, so little effort was made to assuage the hard feelings that World War II became inevitable. The naive notion that people, when left to their own devices, will naturally seek what is best for them - simply isn't true.

It seems to me that atheism has an insufferable outlook on life if taken seriously. The old question: "what is the meaning of life?" is this stuff of stand up comedy, but the joke is on us. We all struggle precisely because we truly need meaning in our lives but don't have it. Science cannot explain how life came about in the first place, much less explain something so bizarre as an organism that became capable of manipulating the natural world. All science can offer us is that we are the product of an incredibly unlikely sequence of random events: we are a kind of cosmic accident. That's really bad news because one thing is certain: accidents are not self-perpetuating. Sooner or later, our luck will run out and everything we have done will vanish into the atoms and molecules that our world is made of. In short, within the limited understanding of the physical world that science can provide, all human existence is ultimately in vain.

Considering the amounts of antidepressants prescribed these days, I fear many experience that futility. However, others do appear to have genuine hope. Yet, we must resign ourselves to a very disappointing truth: no religious tradition has managed to "*get it right*" about hope. Intellectuals are 100% correct, religion should be internally consistent, every bit as much as science should be. There is an old saying that oddly applies to religion: "*A man with a watch knows the time. A man with 2 watches is never sure.*" We are a world with **way** too many religious watches, and thus, we really are unsure what time it is spiritually.

Yet, I believe to dismiss all spiritually out of hand is, in an unexpected way, "*unscientific.*" Anthropologists insist that the emergence of religious practice is one of the defining movements in the rise of humanity. Clearly no ape does that. If it is part of the characteristics that has made us human - clearly it has to be in some sense - real.

I've come to some ideas that I believe truly bridge the opposing sides on what spirituality is all about. I've come to the conclusion that spirituality is real phenomenon, but a phenomenon for which there is only one known detector: human beings. My other key observation is that spiritual phenomena isn't at all static, but dynamic and evolving. The best way to understand this is to grapple with the transition from polytheism to monotheism. Traditional thought insists that religions before monotheism were simply the delusions of unsophisticated peoples. However, humans lived in a polytheistic world for a much longer period of time than our monotheistic view, and they achieved things we marvel at to this day. To naively dismiss such people as stupid is well - stupid. A much easier way to understand this enigma is to presume there was a time when polytheism was a genuine human experience and somehow it was transformed into the monotheism we experience today.

The transition from polytheism to monotheism appears to be proof enough that a God that is omnipotent, infallible, and benevolent cannot exist. To leave humans with an utterly misguided conception of the God for tens of thousands of years is either a mistake or clearly not benevolent.

From the observation, I believe we must accept a very unsettling truth: our spiritual heritage as been effectively "*hacked*." Religious traditions of spiritual wrongdoers are as old as faith itself. Yet, those traditions have not been taken nearly as seriously as they should have been. This obvious truth has been in front of our faces all along. Jews, Christians, and Muslims adamantly insist that they are all worshipping the very same God. They also stubbornly insist that their way of worship is the only appropriate way. Apparently very few worry that if worshippers of those other faiths could be so misguided in their path to God, then perhaps their own faith might harbor some misconceptions as well.

The extent to which this "*elephant in the living room*" has gone unnoticed is I believe direct evidence for this deceiving demon as Rene Descartes unintentionally described it. Worse still, contrary to their greatest hopes, Atheists are, I believe, still further evidence that our minds are being messed with. This essay is an attempt to grapple with the totality of human experience which clearly includes science and religion. Atheists are foolish enough try to deny the human experience of spirituality and think their work is done. They ignore the point I've already

made that spirituality is one of the essential things that make us human. The very stubbornness with which they argue their cause demonstrates they are no more rational than anybody else. Nobody argues so bitterly that Santa Claus and unicorns don't exist.

Atheists make a straw man argument from the philosophical concept of the omnipotent, infallible and benevolent God. They then obliterate that straw man in a manner that I agree with. The trouble with such one-sided thinking is that it doesn't even begin to exhaust the possible other ways that human spirituality could truly exist. Our inability to cure diseases like cancer and schizophrenia make it all too obvious that we don't understand the human condition as well as we would like. The vagaries of weather forecasting make exactly the same point about the physical world. Scientists occasionally brag about the fact that there is so much more that we don't understand about the world than we do understand. Given that uncertainty, I see no reason why there might be a still undiscovered explanation of human spirituality consistent with reason and science. Therefore the only honest conclusion is that, at this moment, science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of any underlying phenomena for human spirituality. That being the case, Atheism is not science - it is purely dogma. As such, it is just as potentially dangerous as the religious dogma it seeks to overturn.

If you doubt this, consider that the moral underpinnings of all civilizations are religious. Undeniably, western civilization is founded on the Christian moral tradition. Secularists have long sought to replace that Christian moral system with a rationalist one. Philosophers have tried very diligently to come up with that rationalist alternative and finally concluded that the task is impossible for a surprising simple reason. It isn't good enough to come up with some sort of "*moral calculus*," you have to compel people to actually do what the system infers is the moral thing to do. If somebody wants to cheat, no matter how logically one argues against cheating, that won't prevent someone from cheating if they are free to do so.

There is no denying that we are facing a very serious moral crisis in the western world and that crisis has many debilitating consequences from political corruption to the divorce epidemic. Also, there is absolutely no doubt that this crisis has arisen in precisely the time that many in the west have turned away from

Christianity. So to those who would insist that Atheism is somehow a “safer” dogma than any religious dogma - think again. Arguably, atheism is driving the moral decline that is destabilizing our civilization.

Like many, I have struggled all my life with the contradictions of faith and science. I have confronted the contradiction of Jesus being omnipotent and Jesus being benevolent. Knowing the story of Jesus I simply cannot question his benevolence. Therefore that leaves me no choice but to reject the presumption of omnipotence. Jesus has not failed to help because he doesn't want to. He has failed because he - **cannot** - help us in the way we desire. We have been misled into a grandiose notion of God and the entity responsible for that deception is the one coveting all that power and control.

If spirituality can change over time, then I think we can understand Jesus in a fundamentally different way. If spirituality exists at all, it must have existed in the distant past as cave paintings suggest. So what has become our modern experience of monotheism wasn't static, but instead has been transformed over time. Before the crucifixion, there was a diverse set of divided and sometimes conflicting spiritual forces. The crucifixion somehow unified all that spirituality into a single cause - as if against a common enemy.

On this view, Jesus becomes something very different. Jesus is a kind of Greek hero, akin to Hercules and even Gilgamesh. Viewed in this way, through the crucifixion, Jesus was somehow transformed into someone capable of immortality. I believe this explains why Christianity spread so rapidly through the western world. Jesus wasn't in conflict with the ancient beliefs - instead he was literally the fulfillment of those beliefs. What the ancient peoples didn't understand is that the hero they truly needed would possess, not physical strength, but moral strength. Consistent with Christian doctrine, Jesus is showing the way to an immortal future. However, completely against Christian doctrine, Jesus cannot bring us there by magic. We are going to have find our own way, all he can do try is help us. Like the Jews who 2000 years ago who condemned Jesus to death, we have been expecting much more help from Jesus than turns out to be reasonable. Until very recently, Christians took their responsibilities in seeking salvation very seriously. It seems clear such people lived and died with much more hope about an eventual paradise than we do today. Could it be that we are left with the sense of

hopelessness that we deserve?

I fear that this is the state of the world for Christmas 2014. Mistakenly taking Jesus to be an omnipotent God, we have become disillusioned with him. Feeling let down, we have tried to strike out on our own in defiance of the teachings about the tree of wisdom. Unfortunately, by definition, any relationship are a two-way street. If we have turned our back on Jesus, we have hurt him. We don't understand the mysticism behind the second coming; however, we do know that Jesus is overdue. If we have a real relationship with Jesus, and Jesus doesn't have infinite patience, perhaps we are to blame for the delay (just as scripture would insist.)

Never has humanity been so empowered - and yet - never has humanity been so utterly uncertain about where to turn. Our preoccupation with freedom has overlooked a very serious downside: there is such a thing as having the freedom to - *make a mistake*. In the wake of the human experience are far too many mistakes to count, and in some way, we suffer from all of them.

So this Christmas, I implore my fellow humans to reconsider kicking Jesus out of his own birthday party. To believer and non-believer alike, I have terribly distressing news. In the voice of Scott Wolter: "*What we have been taught about Jesus - is **wrong**.*" Worst still, rationality clearly isn't up to the task of untangling the mess and the faith that should be our deliverance is seriously strained. Perhaps hope does remain, but it is anything but a sure thing and indeed, our path to hope remains obstructed by a deceiving demon.