

It's That Time of Year!

This is a very strange time of the year for those of us who are not Christians. We look on bemused as throughout the West all the tools of materialism are cranked up to panic point in the desperate quest for us to spend as much of our money as possible on buying, often totally unwanted and unappreciated, gifts.

It is as if the desire to give gifts or to be charitable can only be associated with myths. So we sit back and smile and congratulate ourselves that we do not have such ridiculous myths as Santa Claus and his reindeer. At least the Dutch have it ethnically right with their Black Santas. Thank goodness we tell ourselves, we don't have to believe in Virgin Birth, or God turning Himself into a human being or Wine turning itself into blood and then drinking it, or Gold Tablets turning up in Palmyra in the nineteenth century. And we Jews feel smug that really we started the whole thing and only much later, along comes Christianity and waters it all down and adds a whole slew of "bubbe maisehs".

While we are on a roll, we go on to discount Islam for trying to concoct a Bahai-like amalgam of everything that came before, and getting its quotes from our Bible totally wrong. And while we are at it, we can dismiss Kwanzaa as a Black way of getting in on the Christmas act and Diwali as an imitation of Chanukah.

As for Chanukah, we all now seem utterly convinced that it is part of our tradition to hand out presents. So we overdo it for eight days so that our kids don't feel they're missing anything over Christmas. Typical Jewish overcompensation, like the way Jewish mothers can't help themselves overindulging their poor, unloved, little ones (and may I say here, before I get into trouble, I AM NOT REFERRING TO MY GRANDCHILDREN). Oh yes, I nearly forgot those who are so deprived that they need to do a Christmas tree/menorah double act because Heaven forefend they or their children should be deprived in any way or have to make any uncomfortable choices

And remember, no sooner is Christmas over than we must start spending for the New Year or Sylvester, and barely will we have recovered from that when Saint Valentine's Day will be upon us. We have a double whammy. The slow inexorable advance of materialism allied to the increasing divisiveness of religion.

Every religion (and, of course, every political party, not to mention football club) spends too much of its energy rubbishing the other and too much time fighting battles that really ought not to be fought. All religions share certain basic goals and principles. They all say they want to make the world a better place. But for some reason they are all so insecure that they only seem capable of feeling good about themselves by telling themselves that they are right, everyone else is wrong, and that anyone belonging to a different religion is at best misguided and at worst doomed to burn in eternal damnation.

In principle, all religions have irrational myths. All religions have concocted all sorts of arguments to justify their own anomalies and inconsistencies. The human mind is amazingly capable of justifying almost anything it chooses to and that's why so much superstition pervades not only religion but also all human activity. Maybe that is why so much pernicious nonsense is spread by almost every religion about all the others and conspiracy theories abound so that it takes only a spark to ignite seething hatreds to erupt into violence.

Yet humans clearly need not just religious experience and spirituality, but to belong to groups and identify. This was Desmond Morris's theory. We start as tribes which share values and practices. The tribe grows and expands into a Super-Tribe where we no longer have common values, and so we create Pseudo-Tribes to have smaller groups again, in which we can feel comfortable.

So just as Jews knee-jerk to the defense of Israel and see anti-Semitism everywhere (I'm not saying it isn't out there, of course), or Muslims overreact when anyone (even a Muslim) dares to criticize Islam, this is the time of the year when Christians fight back and insist that they are a benighted minority and the only way to survive is by pushing Christmas into our faces.

In America there is a campaign by fundamentalist Christians who seem to believe that there's a conspiracy to stop Christians practicing Christmas. There isn't! There's just a natural desire in a multicultural world to live and let live and not ram it down everyone's throat.

The Archbishop of Canterbury thinks that without Christianity there would be no British culture. What codswallop. I guess I must be an uncultured Brit. Sure a thousand years ago when Britain was little more than series of tribes this might have been true in theory. The Christianity they practiced then was very loose and totally different to the one the Archbishop believes in. And then there were the Protestants who burnt Catholics at the stake, and Mary Tudor got back and burnt Protestants, and then the Huguenots came and the Dutch and the Jews and the Indians and the Muslims and the West Indians and the Sikhs and the Buddhists, and somewhere in the middle came the Marxists and the Atheists and the Rosicrucians and the Wiccans, and bless me if there isn't still a weeny bit of the Archbishop's Anglicanism in the stew, but it's hardly recognizable and nowadays most Britons don't seem to care very much.

Let everyone practice whatever nonsense they want to. Just don't hurt other people, overturn their gravestones, daub swastikas on their places of worship; don't ram your beliefs into their faces (difficult I know for those who think they are right and everyone else is wrong). I love my religion, but I am not blind. I can see how religions develop and I'm under no illusions about mine. I believe it is right for me. I don't want to push it onto anyone else and I deeply resent any do-gooder trying to tell me that he or she has found God and truth but I have not. It's as dumb as those who say they know which soccer team God supports. And I confess I get mightily annoyed when I hear Jews say that all non-Jews are immoral, drunken anti-Semites who would like nothing more than to shove us all into gas chambers.

So happy holidays, everyone, as they say in New York.

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