



Christmas Myths?

The Christmas season is upon us, bringing with it the usual bustle, stress, and commercialism, and triggering once again the inevitable escalation of the culture wars. Just after the moon set on Halloween revelers, and well before Americans sat down to Thanksgiving dinner, the airwaves were already saturated with Christmas advertising and holiday music, and in their wake the corresponding backlash from increasingly emboldened secular groups, atheist alliances, and civil-liberties organizations, all claiming a mandate to remove the religious aspects of Christmas from the public square. As with so many other cultural evolutions in the age of Obama, a stagnant economy feeds the rejection of traditional values in a nervous populace, who in the face of uncertainty are more eager than in prosperous times to sacrifice liberties in exchange for the promise of government-sponsored security. In this economic climate attitudes, and even core beliefs, change rapidly.



The California city of Santa Monica — dubbed “the City of the Christmas Story” because of the Nativity scenes that graced Palisades Park for the last 60 years — finds itself at the epicenter of the annual struggle between proponents of traditional Nativity displays and atheist groups that want them removed. Historically, the secularists have challenged Christmas displays on public grounds in the courts, marshaling well-worn arguments about the separation of church and state, while warning in ironically apocalyptic language that allowing baby Jesus His manger on the town green is tantamount to the institution of a national religion. In a devastatingly effective twist to this litigious Christmas classic — as much a fixture of the season as Rudolph or Charlie Brown’s hapless tree — comes atheist Damon Vix, who has chosen to co-opt public displays of Christmas and transform them into atheist infomercials, rather than sit back and watch them slowly suffocate at the hands of the judiciary.

Three years ago Vix applied for and received a booth alongside the Nativity scene in Palisades Park that he used to showcase a sign quoting Thomas Jefferson: “Religions are all alike — Founded on Fables and Mythologies.” Not content to counter the “propaganda” of Christmas with his corresponding declaration of reason and sanity, in 2011, Vix formed a coalition of the like-minded and besieged the city with requests for holiday space in the park, winning 18 of the 21 slots available for displays. The three booths that went to traditional groups — two for Christian displays and one for a Hanukkah display — were overwhelmed by the contrary and often sneering signs and displays that surrounded them. The applications submitted by Vix and his confreres requested space to celebrate the “Pastafarian religion”



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and honor its deity, the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Having secured the lion's share of space, the group used it to post signs depicting Santa Claus, the Devil, the Greek god Poseidon, and Jesus, proclaiming "37 million Americans know myths when they see them. What myths do you see?" The ongoing controversy finally led the city to cancel the holiday tradition altogether, prompting a return to — you guessed it — the courts, where a federal judge swiftly denied the injunction against Santa Monica sought by a Christian group. Thus ends a decades-long tradition in Palisades Park, a victory that leaves the bemused Vix satisfied — for now: "That was such a unique and blatant example of the violation of the first Amendment that I felt I had to act.... If I had another goal it would be to remove the 'Under God' phrase from the Pledge of Allegiance — but that's a little too big for me to take on for right now."

Canary in the Coal Mine

In many ways, the Christmas season is a canary in the coal mine of the culture wars, and while the advertising, spending, and increasingly gaudy ornamentation that typify the holiday proceed apace, something much more serious and substantial is being quietly asphyxiated by the gaseous emanations of postmodern, liberal, materialist culture. Put simply, the Mythological infrastructure of once Christian America has changed dramatically over the last five decades, so much so that the country as conceived, founded, and largely preserved for more than two centuries is on the verge of being lost forever. With all the implacably numerical problems that threaten to efface America and the West — from burgeoning debt to unsustainable demographics — it is by no means too dramatic to suggest that the root cause of these troubles, and perhaps their only hope of reversal, lies in Mythology. The founding Myths out of which the country was forged have been quietly but efficiently replaced in our history books, our entertainments, our schools, and our collective consciousness by an entirely new mythology that views the country as unjust, immoral, secular, illegitimate, and altogether undeserving of its wealth and influence among the other nations of the Earth.

When most people today encounter the word "myth" they think of fanciful stories and legends, the stuff of fiction. Whatever other connotations the word evokes, once something is deemed mythical it becomes for us in this quasi-scientific age "untrue" and often associated with superstition and prejudice, particularly with respect to religion. Thus, in popular culture, more and more the attitude toward religion in general and Christianity in particular is that it is mere "myth," made-up stories that may have satisfied some long-dead culture's need for security, self-validation, or even blood lust, but that no longer hold any relevance in our sophisticated and pragmatic world. The signs posted by Vix in Palisades Park convey exactly this understanding of myth, and the sentiments they evoke have become a permanent fixture of the cultural landscape.

Such an approach to Myth is potentially devastating to culture, because in another, more ancient, abiding, and philosophical sense, Myths are the surest and most sublime expressions of Truth available to mortal men living a transient existence in an enduring universe. Myths express those universal truths that have no earthly origin and that cannot be explained exclusively through reason or logic. In talking about Myth this way, we do not deny the literal truth of a belief, event, or creed. Rather, the Mythic allows us to express and acknowledge the divine origin of those beliefs that we hold literally true on Earth. One need look no further than the Christmas story to understand this seeming paradox, for the Incarnation is the most profound and enduring Myth ever expressed in human culture. Once again, to refer to the Incarnation as a Myth is not to suggest it is untrue on a literal level, quite the opposite, actually. Most would concede Jesus was born, but it takes faith to believe he was born the Son of God. The first premise can conceivably be proven or accepted by anyone on a strictly literal or rational level.



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It is even possible that scientific proof might one day confirm the actual human existence of Jesus with a degree of forensic certainty as would quiet even the most intractable skeptic.

But the second premise — that Jesus is the Son of God — must be understood and known Mythically, in ways that cannot exclusively be observed or demonstrated scientifically. Belief in the miracle depends on faith, and as an example of the miraculous, it of necessity requires something more than mere reason and science to explain its existence and operation. That “something” is here defined as “Myth,” and to those who understand the power and purpose of “Myth,” the mythic aspects of the Incarnation are far more fully and eternally True than anything we can know or affirm in a literal or material sense on this transient planet. Such an understanding does not invalidate our literal belief in the Incarnation, it simply recognizes a higher, more deeply and transcendentally True origin for the event than is available to us in this fallen world and with our limited comprehension.

Looked at another way, the Mythic is those aspects of the Incarnation that are True from the divine perspective of God Himself, True in ways utterly unavailable to the ways that men know, however much legitimate earthly faith and belief might seek to approximate Mythic belief. In other words, Myths are the only vehicle through which certain crucial Truths can be uttered, and the continued relevance of these Truths depends on the preservation of their Mythic status as a necessary precondition for literal belief. Throughout this essay I use the lower case “m” as in “myth” to express the sense of myth as falsehood or fiction, and employ the upper case “M” when referring to Myth in the context of enduring and universal Truth.

Replacing Old With New

The consequences in this shift in thinking about Myth cannot be understated, for man is a Mythic creature, whether he realizes it or not, and never more so than when denying Myth. For in denying the Mythic, he unwittingly sets up new, material, and ultimately political “myths” to replace the old, transcendent and universal Myths. This the communists and socialists understood well, and strove earnestly to elevate the man-god to the throne once occupied by the God-Man. This is why in communist mythology, the corpse of a devout atheist such as Lenin of necessity should be preserved under glass — at the very center of a public space that used to be a church — and venerated as a type of saint by those who crossed continents to pay tribute bordering on worship.

And even as secularists in this country seize upon the Christmas season to deride the birth of the Savior, an increasingly Myth-less America re-chooses a mythical president to fill the void, a figure of messianic self-aggrandizement and neo-socialist sloganeering — Yes we can! Forward! — at the expense of pragmatic or even competent leadership. There can be no doubt that Obama and his handlers understand the universal desire for the Mythic in the hearts of men, so much so that they have created an entire mythology that effaces the man himself, of whom so little is actually known by the public at large. A man about whom two autobiographies have been penned — before the age of 45 — the content of which gives us composites and generalities, seldom actualities; a man who transposes his personal logo over the flag of his country and receives the Nobel Peace Prize at the outset of his presidency, rather than at its conclusion; a man in whose presence young women have fainted and before whom narcissistic celebrities abase themselves; a man whose every fault, misstep, or blunder becomes deflected from him and onto adversaries, underlings, or the racist misunderstandings of his subjects; a man who accepts accolades between Greek columns and surrounds himself with unaccountable czars; a man who promises by the force of his personality to lower sea levels and who issues executive orders with the impunity of an autocrat. And all of these self-perpetuating and media-



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sanctioned myths — the mantra-like repeating of which led to Obama’s political and cultural apotheosis — ultimately tell us less about the man than they do about the country that clamored for him: a nation in which the balance of power has shifted from those who rightly understand and affirm Christian Myth to those who unwittingly prefer their myths political and secular, and who have lost the ability to see them as myths at all.

Whenever I lecture on the topic of Myth to conservative or Christian audiences, I am invariably approached by earnest antagonists who argue that myth is exactly what our side should avoid, that we have reason and right with us, and should shun myth and its deceptions. Like Plato banishing myth-making poets from his *Republic*, they seek a full-out retreat from the Mythic: “We must follow the lessons of Ayn Rand and replace myth with logic,” they warn ominously. But the simple fact is that we are in this current predicament because we have for too long ceded Myth to our adversaries, leaving in their corrosive care the schools and universities, the entertainment complex and its manifold, manipulative tentacles, and the journalistic watchdogs turned lapdogs, those complicit myth-makers that were once empowered by the Founding Fathers to strip away pretense to godhood and expose false idols, and who now eagerly serve as Pharisees and docile votarists, chanting their faint hymns through the thick incense of ink, insular self-delusion, and the occasional leg-tingle.

The reality is that when as a culture we abandon Myth, we are inevitably overcome by mythmaking of the most political, cynical, and dangerous sort. This is the reason Marx found the removal of God the necessary precursor to the implementation of the statist ideal: The grand Myth must give way to the shabby myth. President Obama did not win the election because his opponents overlooked reason: No, if anything, they had too much faith that the people would see reason — how could they not, given the obvious and ongoing debacle that has unfolded under their noses over the last four years? To paraphrase (and bowdlerize) Shakespeare: We have wasted Myth, and now doth myth waste us.

Ironically, and in conjunction with the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte that nominated President Obama for a second term, an atheist group mounted a billboard campaign that targeted religion, urging people to “Join American Atheists,” defining Christianity as follows: “Sadistic God; Useless Savior; 30,000+ Versions of ‘Truth’; Promotes Hate, Calls it ‘Love.’” However easy it would be to counter these claims — as if contemporary rationalism and scientism, modern replacements for faith and religion, have not been responsible for a great deal of sadism and hatred while promoting a worldview where “Truth” is impossible in all but the most technical and self-serving sense of the word — the fact is that the Mythology of the United States has shifted dramatically in the last five decades, and we would be foolish not to recognize that as a country’s myths go, so goes the country.

Belief and Reality

The power of the Mythic to shape every aspect of culture — or transform it altogether — becomes self-evident when we consider the Myths upon which this country was founded, and then look to the ways those Myths have been eroded away or completely rejected in the space of a few short generations. A key aspect of American Mythology was the view that the country’s founding was miraculous: the result of divine intervention, the abiding faith of the people, and the courage of our communal convictions. Despite the imperfections of our nascent union — the incomplete realization of our initial ideals — the nation we forged and the documents that delineated, sustained, and nourished it guaranteed the promise that liberty and opportunity would indeed come to be blessings available to all. And, true to those ideals, over time this is by and large what happened. The Founders’ emphasis on self-reliance, limited government, property rights, equal protections, the separation of powers, and the intrinsic



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worth of the individual suffused every aspect of our history, and these became the central ideals of the Myth of America.

Historians now tell us that George Washington never chopped down the cherry tree and uttered those immortal words “I cannot tell a lie.” From the perspective of Myth sketched above, those words are True — and express something vital and undeniable about the American ethos — whether they were ever actually said or not. Everything we do know about Washington justifies this Mythic understanding. The examples can be multiplied a thousandfold — from the legend of Daniel Boone to Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders; from Ben Franklin to Frederick Douglass; from the Alamo to Guadalcanal; from Betsy Ross to Sojourner Truth — the stories and the people all reflect the founding Myths, refracted thousands of different ways down through our history, the True story of who we are as a people.

And perhaps the most vibrant thread in our Mythic mosaic — the pattern that recurs most prominently and insistently down through the centuries — is the enduring link with the larger story of our Judeo-Christian heritage. We may have modeled our government in the mold of ancient Greek and Roman institutions, but the underlying philosophy, spirit, and gravity of the founding documents rests in their incorporation — both implicitly and explicitly — of Christian understandings of responsibility, charity, law, and human dignity. Indeed, so much of what is left unsaid of our reliance on the word of God need not have been said at all during the time of the founding, but was universally understood, given the context of the age and the inescapable verities of the culture that shaped our Founders and instilled in them the desire to be free.

But now in our public schools — from grade school through graduate school — students learn that this Mythic framework is nothing more than a series of lying “myths,” and that our history offers little more than a litany of cynical self-interest, blatant hypocrisy, and untrammled exploitation. As a university professor who has taught in a wide range of colleges and universities in five different states, I can attest to what is obvious to anyone paying attention: that a key objective of contemporary education is to tear down these foundational Myths and replace them with an entirely new mythology, one that emphasizes government and the collective, promotes dependence, decries traditional Judeo-Christian morality, and seeks to diminish the individual. In order to usher in this new order, two things are necessary: a pervasive ignorance of the history and Mythology of the country as founded, and an ongoing revisionism that enables and justifies a radical rethinking and remaking of our institutions, our economy, our ability to defend ourselves, and the ultimate relationship between government — our own and the world’s — and the individual.

The refrain of the new mythology is so common as to become cliché, and that is the time to worry, for when these new tales and legends are so pervasively understood as to become clichés, then they have indeed become the “myths” that shape our cultural understanding. You can recite them all without a teleprompter. Columbus is a ruthless killer who did not “discover” America as much as he exploited and colonized it. The Founding Fathers are hypocritical slave-mongers, privileged white men who created a country for their own aggrandizement. There is a movement afoot that calls itself “anti-Thanksgiving” and that rejects the holiday and its Mythology, choosing instead to see the event through the eyes of contemporary Native-American activism, much of it conceived and spurred by white academics lacking so much as a drop of native blood, from Ward Churchill to Elizabeth Warren. Industrialization equals exploitation of the workforce; the enforcement of national borders is xenophobia; all our wars with foreign adversaries — from 1812 through 2012 — ultimately amount to little more than blatant colonization and genocide. Capitalism has not brought prosperity, but enslavement and corporatism. To



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emphasize the freedoms won by minorities and women is to engage in propaganda designed to conceal the ubiquitous and insidious bigotry that is at the core of all our institutions. To preach sexual responsibility is to be repressed and repressive; to oppose homosexual marriage is to be a homophobe; to expect women to pay for their own cheap and widely available birth control — let alone question the wisdom of underwriting it at the federal level — is to wage war on women.

Gone from our classrooms, our journalistic reporting, and our Hollywood entertainments is any sense of context. Every semester, more and more of my students are convinced that slavery did not exist until Americans instituted it, and that it does not exist now anywhere in the world except residually in the United States. Our past is judged exclusively from the perspective of the academic “now”: Wherever our history fails to match the ideals of cocktail-party liberalism and faculty-lounge activism, that history is condemned. Lost in this progressive approach to history is the entire concept of progress, the evolving struggle and perfecting over decades and centuries that has made us collectively so free, prosperous, and relatively stable and civilized. From the perspective of our cultural elites, for women, this is still America circa 1900; for blacks, America circa 1950; for consumers, the America of Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and Carnegie. The Tea Party, that spontaneous expression of mature, conscientious, and civil dissent, is irredeemably racist, xenophobic, and dangerous, while the mob-driven, lawless, and anarchic Occupy Movement is heralded as the true spirit of civic concern and empowerment.

And what about those Judeo-Christian roots? When not busy denying their existence and whitewashing them from the history books, we nonetheless blithely attribute to them every evil, social ill, or oppressive tendency in the nation’s zeitgeist or our own human natures. He’s “Dr.” King — thank you very much, not “Reverend” King — and his brand new monument in Washington does not once mention God, in any context, even though the Rev ... errr ... Doctor referenced God in almost all his major and minor speeches, while saying next to nothing about his academic standing. Over the years not one of my students in a hundred has had any idea that the movement to abolish slavery in America was essentially a Christian movement; not one in a thousand can draw the connection between the evolution of Christianity in the West and the emergence of hospitals, orphanages, and organized charities. We teach them that the Crusades began the moment vile Christians marched to war in the Holy Land, rather than at any point over the previous three centuries in which Islamic Crusaders marauded their way across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. To even suggest to them that it was Christians who founded the very university system in which they now learn about everything other than God, well that would be a delicious irony if they had the education to grasp it.

And thus we return full circle to that listless Christmas canary in the cave of the culture wars: a microcosm — to be sure — of all that we have encountered in this essay, but an important one. The hope that is still left us will emerge as it always has from that most primal of Myths, and we can indeed follow the star back to its inevitable and eternal origin. However degraded, commercialized, and under assault the Christmas season may be, we must never forget what we have always known, but have lost beneath an avalanche of tinsel and glitter: The miracle of Christmas is a very different thing than the Christmas season. As part of the Christmas season this year, you can actually purchase Obama nativity figurines to set alongside — or in place of — the baby Jesus, or even a book written by a Florida professor entitled *The Gospel According to Apostle Barack*, that describes the president in messianic terms. We need Damon Vix back on the case: Are Nativity Scenes now acceptable if the god they herald is the president? And are the gospels now appropriate in the public domain, if he is the Apostle they proclaim?



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But however much the new mythmakers expunge the real face of Christmas — His Face — from the public square and the national discourse, the Mythic timelessness of the Incarnation can never be appropriated, superseded, or even forgotten, however neglected. God in His glory chose to become flesh and blood during a time when His people were persecuted slaves, not frantic consumers, a time when another god-king was worshiped on his throne by a deluded and weakening empire that had given away its freedoms in the name of security. The Miracle of Christmas has always resounded the loudest when men have been the most desperate and hope the most elusive. Now is the time for us to turn again to that heavenly light and shelter in the glow of that insignificant manger, comforted by the realization that whatever we lose on Earth we gain in heaven if we just keep the image of Him alive in our hearts. The power of Christmas has always been to demonstrate the powerlessness of temporal tyranny and oppression and the hope of His kingdom to come.

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