

The Oregon Statesman

"No Favor Sways Us, No Fear Shall Awe"
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Miracles . . . and Christmas

Why is Christmas? Why, every December, this caterwauling of the fragile, naive little tunes we call traditional carols; this annual irritable rapacity born of holiday gift-buying; why this mask of merriment? There isn't really a Santa Claus, Virginia.

Shall we be more charitable and say that Christmas just appeals to the never-quite-grown-up child in all of us? Legends and delightful myths are part of our cultural heritage. We respond with ingenious amusement or wistfulness to the miracle stories—the juggler in the monastery to whom Mary appeared or the Scrooges who are transformed. These stories are not unlike—since they are descendants of—the first and loveliest of all miracle stories in the Christian epic—the picturesque, symbolic story of Christmas: The Virgin Mary, the Christchild, the star and the angelic host and the shepherds believing, as simple people are wont to do, that indeed the Savior is born and on earth there is peace and goodwill unto men.

Very pretty, that Nativity scene—on Christmas cards or in grade school plays.

But that's as far as it goes. We hard-headed practical realists in a workaday world don't let it get any farther. We know all about The Infallible Coherent Laws of Almighty Nature. Miracles? Twaddle and bunk! Our Wise Men, the scientific researchers, will solve all cosmic riddles as long as we sensibly refrain from throwing ourselves sobbing at the feet of the Atom, as one contemporary columnist put it.

But . . . Is that all? Really? Since we are such rational people, not given to vain hallucinations or mystical contemplation of our navels, let us consider this matter of miracles. For surely, of all the sensuous pleasures accorded man there is none more exquisite than rational objective examination of a moot question, tracing in our minds the clean sweet paths of logic.

To aid us in our scrutiny we have a new book, "Miracles—A Preliminary Study," (Macmillan, 1947), by C. S. Lewis, Oxford don whose heresy is Christianity. The text seems forbidding at first but the argument moves precisely and swiftly once the reader establishes a receptive frame of mind and becomes familiar with the trade jargon of philosophy and theology.

It is not easy, however. We are too accustomed to peripatetic prolixity masquerading as intellectuality. We are uncomfortable when dealing with fundamentals. We are especially ill at ease when we match wits with a scholar whose uncompromising logic leads us suddenly to admit as premise a cosmos defined in orthodox Christian terms: 1. God—omnipotent, omnipresent, not a nebulous Spirit which wound the universal clock, set it in motion and withdrew, existing now only as a Force in Nature or a Super-soul of which our individual souls are necessary component parts. 2. Nature, distinct from the Creator who made and actively, eternally directs her. 3. Rational human beings, creatures of God endowed with free will to elect their destinies.

Lewis distinguishes between Christianity and religion, between miracles and miracles—many of which, he believes, are not plausible, therefore imaginary. But he believes, and convincingly illustrates, that some miracles are proper, probable and factual in terms of the premise and empirical experience.

He defines the word "miracle" as an interference with Nature by supernatural power. A miracle does not violate the laws of nature which we regard as necessary truths (like gravity). The laws are non-creative, they do not produce; they regulate, they state a pattern to which events must conform. He says, "A miracle is emphatically not an event without cause or without results. Its cause is the activity of God; its results follow according to Natural law."

Gradually, as we follow Lewis' dry (in the sense that saunter is dry) and unimpassioned exposition, we confirm what in our better moments we hoped for—that Christmas is indeed a miracle. . . . The miracle of the incarnation of God occasioned by the fall of man, necessitating Christ's death and ascension, and fulfilled, finally, in the redemption of man. "The whole Miracle, far from denying what we already know of reality, writes the comment which makes that crabbed text plain: or rather, proves itself to be the text on which Nature was only the commentary. In science we have been reading only the notes to a poem; in Christianity we read the poem itself," Lewis explains.

There is much more. This short essay leaves many questions unanswered which are discussed in the book. Lewis' examination of the miracles of the Old Creation and those of the New Creation, forecasting better than Wells the shape of things to come, is especially illuminating.

Suffice it to say, as Lewis does, that the credibility of the Miracle of Christmas does not lie in its obviousness. The narrow shallow creeds of optimism, pessimism, pantheism, naturalism, materialism all have "obvious" attractions, each confirmed at first by many facts, each later conquered by insuperable obstacles. The doctrine of the Christmas incarnation undermines our superficial opinions, shames our muddled rationalizations.

We of little faith, little hope, little love; we of much confusion, much fear, much intolerance, reading "Miracles" find that this is an experience akin to listening to Straus' tone-poem "Death and Transfiguration"—we are conscious throughout of our own incisive philosophic questioning, in minor tones or horns and lower strings, but simultaneously the violins and French horns inject the persistent hope that we may come to believe.

To believe the fragile enduring tunes we call traditional carols of Christmas, to experience the spiritual security of knowing that, if God can effect the original Christmas miracle, then the miracle of each annual Christmas, the miracle of eventual Peace on Earth, Goodwill unto Men is likewise within His power and ours. . . .

That is why, each year, there is Christmas.—M.W.

Clemency to Draft Law Violators

Christmas was an appropriate time for President Truman to issue pardons to 1,523 who had been convicted of violating the wartime service act. Some may be bitter that these men escaped the risks of combat and now are released from prison; but those who are set free presumably are those who went to prison "for conscience's sake." The war being over they surely can be set free safely.

Of the 15,805 cases examined by a board headed by former Justice Owen D. Roberts 10,000 were classed as willful violators, 4,300 Jehovah's Witnesses, 1,000 conscientious objectors and 500 others. Clemency might well have extended to the full roster of Jehovah's Witnesses, for they suffered not from conscientious objection to fighting but by virtue of their peculiar notions about state authority. Keeping them longer in jail will not change their thinking.

Residents of Panama who paraded so enthusiastically when the assembly rejected the treaty continuing leases to the United States for 14 bases will probably change their tune as they see the U. S. pulling their troops out. The withdrawal will hurt them in the pocketbook more than retaining the bases hurt their national pride.

Matter of Fact

By JOSEPH ALSOP and STEWART ALSOP
Hqqs.: Washington, D. C.

The Ease of War—II

WASHINGTON, Dec. 24—This is a Christmas when there is no peace on earth and precious little good will among men. The peoples long for peace. Yet hardly more than two years after a terrible world conflict, the aggressive policies of the Soviet Union have again brought the world into what is technically called "the zone of war." And one of the few Americans whom all can trust, Secretary of State George C. Marshall, has just indirectly but frankly admitted that, for the present, there is no use trying to negotiate a settlement with the Soviets.

It is worth seeking to understand why this should be so. If the experts are correct, the best place to begin is at the ultimate source of Soviet policy. The motives, mechanics and methods of Soviet policy making are another subject on which most of the experts of the last induced to agree among themselves. The events of recent months have produced near-unanimity on the following analysis:

The source of Soviet policy is the Politburo. In the hands of this small body of men all control of the Soviet Union is concentrated. Its members have risen to their present lonely eminence by ruthless struggle, by iron determination, in cutthroat competition against uncounted rivals. Secret conspiracy was the first life experience of the older members. And since the establishment of the Soviet regime, all have been engaged in a perpetual contest, in which the prize was absolute power, and the penalties for failure were exile or imprisonment or death. None has even seen much of the outer world. All of them, furthermore, are high priests of a new world faith, international communism; and while cynical realism is common enough among powerful ecclesiastics, even the Borgias were not atheists.

The Mistake of War Time

The mistake that was made in war time was to assume that these men were not very different from western leaders—to suppose that they could be appealed to by the same arguments and convinced by the same marks of good faith, as Ernest Bevin and Anthony Eden, Secretary Marshall and Senator Vandenberg. Yet even in war time there were already warnings.

One such warning was the conversation between Stalin and Eric Johnston.

Speaking with all the authority of the Dalai Lama interpreting scripture, Stalin firmly assured the horrified successor of Will Hays that the whole non-Soviet world would be plunged in ghastly depression after the war.

Again, it was something of a warning when Stalin remarked to a high American official that the works of Machiavelli were his favorite reading. Machiavelli is, after all, the classical analyst of politics as a naked struggle for naked power. This also is the method of Soviet post-war policy. And finally there was still another very grave warning indeed. Stalin showed clear signs, at more than one of the great war-time conferences, of being deeply convinced by obvious horror stories about his western allies, which had obviously been manufactured by his intelligence nets.

Here, of course, is another factor, which influences Soviet policy probably more deeply than the policy makers' life experience of ruthless struggle, or the Marxist indoctrination. The decisions of the Politburo must be based on facts, as facts are known and understood in the Kremlin. But war-time intercepts of Soviet diplomatic dispatches, the Canadian Royal commission investigation and other evidences have now established beyond doubt that facts reach the Kremlin in fantastically distorted shape.

Again, this is inevitable. In the Soviet Union, the Politburo lays down the party line. The party line is the sacred truth.

Party Line for Expediency

Anything that challenges the truth is heretical and sinful. Thus the Politburo may promulgate a new party line for reasons of pure, cynical expediency. But an echoing, answering roar, confirming this party line in every detail, comes back from embassies, intelligence nets, communists abroad, bureaucrats and experts at home, press in Moscow and every other possible source. In the end, what was said from mere expediency must begin to convince even the men who first said it.

Stalin and his colleagues are far too astute to have believed their own charges of capitalist encirclement and imperialist aggression, when they first began to make these charges as a smoke screen to cloak their own imperialist program. But it is considered entirely possible—indeed, highly probable—that they have now been convinced the charges are all true, by the endless echoing of their own voices.

Thus we are dealing with a system whose leaders embarked upon a program of aggression as the natural result of their life experience, and have been confirmed in this program by the peculiarities of the system. That is why mere negotiation is hopeless. As Secretary Marshall has indicated, there is only one way out. The Politburo must be confronted with western unity and western strength too great and too unshakable to be concealed or misinterpreted or ignored. Then the Politburo may alter the policy which is endangering world peace. Such at least is the working theory of the western leaders.

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GRIN AND BEAR IT By Lichty



"Seems the quality was a little better this year, dear—or do I merely imagine the larger pieces are intact!"

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