

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage Unitarian Universalist Theology and Spirituality

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The Path of Love

The bhakti path, the path of devotion, the path of love, worships gods who have shapes and personalities and stories about them.

There are said to be four levels of bhakti devotion. In the first, you relate to God as a child to a parent, or a servant to a good master. In the second, you relate to God as a friend. In the third, you relate to God as a parent to a child. In the fourth, you relate to God as one lover to another.

Christianity is a bhakti religion. Christianity has its personal deity in Jesus, the Christ, who can be loved. Of the four levels of love, most Christians devote their attention to the first, the love of a child for a parent, or of a servant for his or her Lord, but at Christmas time especially, Christians enjoy the love of parent for child.

There may be objections from those who do not wish to think of God in terms of a human-like deity with myths describing his activities. Shouldn't God be conceived of without form, perhaps as the ground of our being, or the essence of our existence, or our ultimate concern?

Bhakti is not the path of philosophers. Their's is the jnana path, the path of knowledge.

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For devotion, a human-form god is utterly required. You cannot truly love an abstraction, not the way you can love a person.

And this is also a reason for the concept of the Trinity. God the Father can be identified with Brahman, the transcendent God. The Holy Spirit can be identified with Atman, God within, the immanent God. And what then is Jesus? As Luther said, Jesus is the "mirror of the fatherly heart, apart from whom we see nothing but a wrathful and terrible judge." When Trinitarian Christians wish to speak of God, they can speak of Jesus, and communicate their meaning much more clearly than by speaking in philosophical abstractions.

Distraction

In the Buddhist Wheel of Life and Death, the realm of the humans is symbolized by a multitude of activities, which is to say, human life is characterized by distraction, confusion, and aimlessness. Lacking a unifying purpose, humans tend to wander from one attraction to another. If a Buddha appears in this picture, he carries a begging bowl and staff, symbolizing the spiritual life that simplifies and stabilizes.

The holiday season is a season of forgotten diets and lapsed projects. It is filled with distractions, and the greatest challenge is to maintain self-discipline and a unity of purpose through it.

Perhaps you will have more

success if you plan your season so that you participate in the activities that will best allow you to enjoy the holidays, but limit your activities, not to get overwhelmed.

Symbols of the Nativity

Pictures of the nativity contain symbols whose meanings have become obscure.

The animals by the manger may include an ox and an ass. The white ox is a symbol of Osiris, and the red ass of the desert is a symbol of his brother Set, figures of the mystery religion of Isis. Their eternal conflict is resolved, or at least suspended, as they gaze down upon the deity who is to succeed them.

The gifts of the Magi symbolize the triple nature of the Christ: gold is tribute to a king; incense, tribute to a god; and myrrh, embalming spice for the sacrificial lamb.

The Black Madonnas

Various places in Europe there are black Madonnas, icons of a black skinned virgin Mary with the Christ child in her arms. Why black?

Probably because the icon, or its precursor, is older than Christianity. It is a relic of the cult of Isis, showing Isis with Horus the Younger on her lap. Black skin was an ancient Egyptian symbol for youth and vigor.

The birth of Horus the Younger occurred as follows: Set killed his brother Osiris and cut his body into fourteen parts which he scattered

Black Madonnas, continued

across Egypt. Isis, Osiris's wife, sought out the parts and reassembled them, but the phallus had been tossed into the Nile and eaten by fishes, so Isis fashioned one from wood, had intercourse with the reassembled god, and conceived Horus by him.

Horus the Elder was also the child of Isis and Osiris, and their brother as well. When the sky goddess, Nut, lay with the Earth god, Geb, she conceived four children and gave birth to five. On the first day, she delivered Osiris, "The Lord of All." On the second day, she delivered the Elder Horus; on the third day, Set; on the fourth day, Isis, dark and beautiful, the wife of Osiris, the Lady of Love; and on the fifth day, Nephthys, the wife of Set. Isis had mated with Osiris in their mother's womb, and gave birth to Horus, who was then born to Nut.

The theology of the religion of Isis is coherent with the geography of Egypt. Osiris may be identified with the Nile and his brother and enemy Set with the desert. Isis, the wife of Osiris, is the fertile Nile valley, and Nephthys, the wife of Set who has occasional affairs with Osiris, is the land along the edge of the desert. As the Nile would ebb and flood, so Osiris would be killed by Set and be restored to life again.

The initiates in the cult of Isis would go through rites to become identified with Osiris and so partici-

usually written and sent through the postal service. On Christmas Eve, the children leave a sacrifice for the deity of cookies and milk and then go to bed. Late in the night, the parents play the part of the deity by consuming the sacrifice and leaving presents under the tree.

Orgiastic rites. An orgy is a "secret ceremonial rite in honor of a ... deity and usually characterized by ecstatic singing and dancing," "drunken revelry," or "an excessive sexual indulgence (as at a wild party)." [Webster's New Collegiate]. In adult gatherings during



the Christmas season, especially at office parties and social clubs, the sacred tree gleams and pressed plastic icons of the deity gaze down from the walls. Often the deity himself visits -- enacted by one of the members -- handing out gifts. The rites include heavy consumption of alcoholic beverages and foods rich in fats and sugar, singing hymns to the deity and to the Christ child, dancing, and kissing those whom one does not otherwise kiss.

Sacred Time

Christmas time is a strange kind of time. What we mean by time is a sequence of events, a flow, change, progression, development. Christmas has none of those. The same songs are sung each year. The same ceremonies are performed. The same kinds of parties are attended. There is no progress: Christmases make no advances upon earlier

ones. We want a Christmas, as the song says, "just like the ones [we] used to know." Christmases are not individuals; it is as if there were a unitary "Christmas time" that intrudes once a year upon the flow of months and days that constitute conventional time.

Christmas time is our best example of "sacred time" as opposed to "profane time." As Eliade makes the distinction, profane time has a sequence of events. Sacred time, the time during which rituals and ceremonies are performed, has no progression; it is the same each recurrence, as if it recreates the mythical once-upon-a-time when the ceremonies were established.

For Reflection

Eliade wrote that new year's rituals tend to include five elements: (1) purifications such as confession of sins or driving off of demons or expelling evil; (2) extinguishing and relighting fires; (3) being visited by the spirits of the dead, symbolized by masked processions and feasts; (4) "fights between two opposing teams"; and (5) orgy or Carnival. [Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Meridian, 1958.] He suggests the purifications represent the driving out of the old year. Extinguishing and rekindling fires destroys the old year and creates the new. Carnival represents the reestablishment of the primordial chaos from which new creation comes: the abolition of limits. The masked figures represent the spirits of the dead, who can only visit the living in the interval outside of time, during the chaos between the old year and the new. The battle between teams reenacts the battle where order defeats chaos and creation is accomplished.

Which of these five elements do you see in our new year obser-

Faith Watching

Christmas time allows us to observe the rites of the Santa Claus cult.

Family rites. The deity's (Santa's) sacred tree is cut down, brought into the house, and decorated. The children offer prayers to the deity requesting gifts. These prayers are