

AND YE SHALL BE AS GODS
By Michael A. Schuler
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GLEANINGS FROM LIBERAL RELIGIOUS WRITERS

"Walter" by Thomas Goldsmith

Mitch Smith plays center for the University of Utah basketball team and receives a lot of publicity. We went to see him play the other night, and my six-year-old got real excited. He knew all about Mitch already, and did a few basketball imitations of Mitch in the kitchen before we left.

At the game our eyes focused exclusively on number 43, a fellow who could serve as a choir boy, if he ever lost his penchant for basketball. He had long, straight blond hair which flowed with the breeze as he hustled from one end of the court to the other. But the gods were not with Mitch that game. In the first two minutes of play, three fouls were called against him. He went to the sidelines kicking and screaming, knocking over a chair in his wake.

"Where's Mitch going," asked my son?

"Don't worry about Mitch," I said, "We're not going to see him for a long time."

Off the bench came Walter - a black man of massive proportions. His shorts didn't fit him quite right, but I doubt he could ever find a pair that adjusted to the contour of his frame. He looked a bit startled being on the court just two minutes into the game, but conveyed confidence. He could always be a sumo wrestler if he ever lost his penchant for basketball.

The Salt Lake City crowd came to see Mitch and were asking themselves in irritated tones, "Who's this guy Walter?"

But when the opposing team missed a shot, Walter jumped as high as the angels fly in order to snag the rebound. The crowd gasped, and when Walter returned to earth the other team conceded that nobody was going to wrestle the ball away from him.

Walter did this a lot, and gained a cheering section all for himself. We forgave him when he didn't make it to the other end of the court. He just stood around catching his breath, waiting for the action to flow back to where he was. Walter played his heart out and we loved him.

Mitch returned in the second half, scored 12 points and did all those things he was famous for. But when we left

the arena, my son said. "That Walter! He was really something."

The next morning I checked the stats in the paper and was surprised to see that Walter hadn't scored any points. But that really didn't seem to matter.

This is a Christmas story to remind us that not all saviors look alike. Sometimes great gifts do come in large packages. Miracles are inside all of us, and they may need to be tapped in surprising times when we least expect it. So be prepared to give miracles as well as receive them.

For all the second-stringers in life, may there be joy, not fear, when we set out to accomplish the impossible. And when we're asked to go forth from the bench - to do the work of great people - let's put our whole weight into it. Who knows? We may touch the heart of a child.

"What Child Is This?" by Lynn Unger

What child is this? inquires the carol,
And so, might well, could we.
What child, asleep on lap or shoulder
Is occasion for new stars, lights in windows
And the gleam of gifts?

What child, tender-skinned and
Head-heavy, could hold up
The name "god is with us?"
"What child" we sing,
Heaping our gathered longings
On that tiny head...

"What child?" What child is this
Whop before the thought of words
Brings the promise of new life,
A world tipped toward hope?
Of course, for all the loveliness
Of that old verse, the query
Falls just off the mark.

Listen. The stars continue
To sing in celebration.
Why not ask, "What child isn't this?"
And let each new face
Bring its own simple salvation.

** REFLECTIONS **

Followers of Prairie Home Companion and its creator, Garrison Keillor, may have read or at least heard about an opinion piece he published last week. Since Unitarian Universalists are among some of his most ardent fans and generally take in stride the gentle jokes he makes at our expense, many - including yours truly - were taken aback by this particular essay.

It was not gentle, it was not amusing and it was not friendly.

Keillor's comments were, in fact, wholly out-of-character for a man who has come to epitomize "upper-Midwestern nice." It was the sort of commentary you dash off, intending to send it to someone who has ruffled your feathers, but then delete once your better judgment has kicked in.

On this occasion Keillor was really in attack mode, lambasting East Coast elitists, Jewish composers and, Unitarian Universalists for compromising his enjoyment of Christmas. Our own offense? Apparently some revisionist out in Cambridge, Massachusetts had altered the lyrics to "Silent Night" - a brazen act of spiritual piracy, according to our friend from Lake Wobegon.

"It is wrong, wrong, wrong to rewrite Silent Night," he stormed, before re-directed his ire on all those "Jewish guys that trash up the malls every year with Rudolph and chestnuts and the rest of that dreck."

"Christmas," the indignant Keillor huffed, "is a Christian holiday."

if you're not in the club, buzz off... The holiday does not need any improvements. It is a common, ordinary experience that resists brilliant innovation. In short, "don't mess with the Messiah."

Apart from the bitter tone and its extraordinary claim that only "true believers" are entitled to celebrate Christmas, the most surprising aspect of this column was the author's appalling ignorance.

"Silent Night" aside - and, by the way, any number of English translations of the German original have been produced - what made this rant so odious was its complete ineptitude. Was the author unaware that classic Christmas carols like "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," and "Jingle Bells" were all composed by 19th century Unitarians? Or that some of the most famous Christmas figures of all time - Scrooge, Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchet - were the product of a Unitarian's

imagination? Or that the Unitarian minister Charles Follen first introduced the Christmas tree to North America? Or that Jewish composers were responsible not only for the ballad of "Rudolph," but also gave us perennial favorites like "White Christmas," "Silver Bells, and "Winter Wonderland?"

Coincidentally, just two days after the Keillor piece appeared, the Jewish musician Michael Feinstein reminded Americans in a *New York Times* column that,

we live in a multicultural time and...the mixing up of traditions is an inevitable result. Hence, we have the almost century-old custom of American Jews creating a lot more Christmas music than Hanukkah music."

Feinstein then expresses a sentiment common to most Unitarian Universalists: that the symbols and customs of Christmas "tap into a sense of comfort, longing, security and peace" that Christians and non-Christians alike fervently desire and can easily relate to.

Moreover, Keillor's nostalgic claim that "Christmas does not need any improvements" ignores the plain-as-the-nose-on-your-face fact that people have been "improving" Christmas from the very beginning.

The earliest Christians didn't observe Christmas at all, and it wasn't until the 4th century that the Church introduced a new festival designed to draw attention away from the pagan sun god, Mithras, said to have been born on December 25th. Most likely, actual Jesus' birth occurred earlier in the year, so those wily Church fathers weren't above doing a little "spiritual piracy" of their own.

In addition to the celebration date itself, many of the Christmas customs we follow today were themselves co-opted from the pagan traditions that many Northern Europeans still held dear.

However, the observance of Christ's birth did not always meet with the approval of sober, upright Christians. The English and American Puritan divines dismissed Christmas as a "corrupt, pagan evil" and sought its abolition. They had good reason to feel this way, for as the historian Stephen Nissenbaum notes, for several centuries this was an occasion when people were permitted to "let it all hang out."

In the early modern era Christmas came to resemble a carnival. Reveling could easily become rowdiness...and making merry could edge into making trouble... It was a

season of misrule...when not only hunger but anger and lust could be expressed in public.

Christmas, Nissenbaum sagely observes, "has always been an extremely difficult holiday to "Christianize."

What, then, of Garrison Keillor's claim that only people who affirm Jesus as God's only begotten son have a legitimate claim to this holiday? Is this reasonable?

At one level I will grant the man's point: Christmas ultimately is about incarnation -- the presence of the divine in mortal, human flesh. But must that incarnation be confined to a single individual at a single moment in history? Are we obliged to agree with Keillor that Christmas is about one unique and unrepeatable incarnation and one only?

This is precisely the sort of hidebound sectarianism that Ralph Waldo Emerson protested against more than 170 years ago. Speaking before the 1838 graduating class of Harvard Divinity School Emerson, a former Unitarian minister, said:

Jesus Christ belonged to a true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul...he lived in it, had his being there... He saw that God incarnates himself in many, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world... If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice...

"God incarnates himself in many," Emerson insisted, and Jesus' mission was to put men and women in touch with their own divinity. He offered himself as a model of fulfilled humanity.

Unfortunately, nothing Emerson wrote is likely to soften Garrison Keillor's attitude, for in that same essay he casually dismisses the 19th century's preeminent man of letters as a "foolish man" who has been "leading people astray" for well over a century.

But what about Elaine Pagels, one of the world's foremost authorities on early Christian thought? Theories of incarnation varied widely among early Christians, she points out, and Jesus' uniqueness was still open for discussion.

To the Gnostic, Arian and Pelagian schools of Christianity it was clear that human beings were all created in "God's image," as the book of Genesis attests.

The divine nature that Jesus possessed, we possess as well. It should be possible, then, to emulate Christ and become Christ-like ourselves.

Others disputed this claim, and their position became the orthodox one we've lived with ever since. As the result of Adam and Eve's "fall" the image of God in human beings had become hopelessly corrupted, damaged beyond repair. Bound and fettered by original sin, we now need someone free of sin and in whom the image had not been fatally corrupted to save us.

Humankind's absolute dependency on an utterly unique God-man - Jesus Christ -- was established as an indisputable truth. To teach otherwise was deemed blasphemous and heretical. Elaine Pagels finds this troubling. "What I cannot love is the (widespread) conviction among Christians that...(Christ) alone offers access to God," she writes.

The world's other great religions are much more open-minded about the idea of incarnation. Neither Judaism nor Islam gives credence to the notion of original sin and both acknowledge that human beings retain their likeness to God.

Hinduism teaches that Avatars - human incarnations of the divine -- have appeared on many occasions. They have assumed the form of gurus like Ramakrishna, benevolent Emperors like Asoka, social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi. The Bhagavata, a 9th century Hindu manuscript, lists twenty-two Avatars of the god Vishnu. But, it says, "Avatars are really innumerable, like rivulets flowing from an inexhaustible lake." Jesus himself is regarded by Hindus as an Avatar.

Buddhism teaches that many human beings beside Gotama Buddha have achieved full enlightenment, and that they equal the latter in knowledge, compassion and penetrating insight. "Although there are differences among them," Eastern Religions expert Geoffrey Parrinder writes, "All Buddhas are exactly the same in their Buddha-nature."

And then there is Mormonism, which claims to be a legitimate Christian sect. It's estimation of human potential is huge. That movement's founder, Joseph Smith, declared in 1844 that God himself was once a human being and that human beings were capable of becoming gods. "What we are, God once was; what God is, we too shall be," is a frequently quoted Mormon aphorism. This startling assertion deviates sharply from accepted Christian doctrine, yet no one has asked the Latter Day Saints to forgo Christmas.

Personally, I am not ready to venture an opinion whether human nature includes some sort of metaphysical

component - a divine spark or its equivalent. It might be true, and it might not be. What does seem evident to me is that human beings, howsoever we are constituted, have greater capacities than we sometimes give ourselves credit for.

For instance, Rebecca Solnit has recently documented people's amazing behavior in the wake of catastrophes like Katrina, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the San Francisco and Loma Prieta earthquakes, the London Blitz. Acting on their own and without direction from any higher authority, people rise above raw self-interest and take care of one another. Perhaps in such circumstances, Solnit writes, "We revert to something we already knew...something altruistic, resourceful and imaginative."

But it doesn't always take disaster for the unselfish, self-transcending, saintly side of our nature to emerge. Hannah Teter is a 22 year-old Olympic Gold medalist in snowboarding. Since the Olympic Games, Teter has earned over \$100,000 in prize money, all of which she has given to a Kenyan village of 60,000 so that they will have a reliable, clean water supply. "Clean water is a treasure we take completely for granted in the United States," Teter observes, "but every 15 seconds someone in Africa dies of a water-related disease."

What prompted this young woman's exceptionally generous gesture? Two things: gratitude and compassion, wholly natural sentiments that bring out the best in human beings. Near the end of his life the noted psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote:

My studies of...fully evolved and developed people make it clear that human beings at their best are far more admirable than ever before conceived, in their own proper nature. There is no need to add a non-natural determinant to account for saintliness, transcendence and heroism...

Maslow believed that humankind's "higher possibilities" had been stymied because of deflating doctrines like "original sin" which caused people to sell themselves short. Thus men and women were actively discouraged from putting love, virtue and altruism at the center of their lives. Maslow's work has now been complemented by a new generation of "positive psychologists" whose research reveals that people who feel good about themselves are more likely to act on that feeling in ways that benefit others. A negative self-concept, on the other hand, causes people

to pull back and separate themselves from others, to be more grasping and less generous.

This, then, is what I think of when I hear the word "incarnation:" Not a once-and-for-all infusion of the divine essence into Mary's womb but the flowering of certain divine qualities in the ordinary human soul. When the sacred principles of love, compassion, altruism, justice, patience, sacrifice shine forth in our lives, we do become godlike, and even superior to some gods I'm familiar with.

If Keillor and others prefer to see the birth of Jesus, a supernatural savior, as the sole reason to celebrate Christmas they are at perfect liberty to do so. Certainly a few Jews and Unitarian Universalists aren't going to stop them. But if some of us want to mine that ancient story for golden "good tidings" of a different sort, we should not be censored like disobedient children for doing so.

Although I don't believe he was utterly unique, I do think Jesus of Nazareth was distinctive. There never was and never will be anyone quite like him and that in itself is clearly something to celebrate. But one quality that made him special was his disdain for those who propagate a religion of narrow-mindedness.

I really don't think Jesus was the type to check people's credentials before letting them attend his birthday party. He would, as Lynn Unger's poem puts it, "let each new face bring its own simple salvation."