

DECEMBER 23, 1968

THE TRUSTEES

- 1 - Christmas 1968 - - - - - Robert H. Allen
- 2-1 Remember Grandmother - - - Ernest I. Miller
- 3 - Christmas anno
Domini 1968 - - Charles D. Aring, M.D.

1 Christmas 1966

Is it merely chance that the joyous festival of Christmas falls so close to the winter solstice? I don't mean to ask if the Lord especially arranged for this date, but rather am thinking of the character of our celebrations.

Easter for example comes with spring and is the celebration of the resurrection, yet I don't think of Easter - despite Handel - as a joyous festival. It is rather formal, in fact, and its gaiety quite restrained.

When you think of it, no holiday can compare remotely to Christmas. It is our lengthiest, most arduous celebration - the one for which we prepare most carefully, and that which engenders the widest circle of love.

Christmas really starts on Thanksgiving day which is sort of a preliminary bout. The menu is similar and on the very next day everyone turns his energies to the serious consideration of enjoying Christmas itself.

Christmas shopping begins with a bang on that Friday and the first Christmas decorations appear. Within two weeks, the first Christmas cards begin to arrive and all through December the Christmas trips and preparations and shopping are a matter of concern at home and conversation all over. Will it snow for Christmas? Our thoughts never stray very far and the sight of a friend with a package automatically calls forth comment - something that in October or May we would scarcely

think of.

Now we have all sorts of holidays all year long. The weather at Easter is better. Or take the 4th of July. Thanksgiving too! Why is it that we seize on Christmas to make the great festival of our race? Can it be in spite of the time of year? Or do these darkening days require that we build up this great anticipation and let off all this steam - and express so fervidly our love for our fellow man?

As with so much that we should like to know, the truth lies behind many veils. What we do know is that we love Christmas - so much that the Jerimiah's amongst us deplore our ardor.

Christmas is richest of all our celebrations in its imagery and in its lore. Not only the birth story, but Santa Claus and Scrooge and Rudolph and on and on.

The great theme of Christmas is love. All the stories are tales of generosity and redemption. If indeed the darkening days have had some role in the need to play it big, then it speaks not too badly, I think, of the race that we respond to peril with love. It is as if we feel that if we can just pour out enough love then the light must return.

I do not like - I think I take as a somehow personal affront - the constant attacks on the taste - or lack of it - that we display at Christmastime. People exhort us to return the Christ to Christmas and to abate the hoopla and conspicuous consumption.

They fail to recognize that taste has little to do with the matter and that good taste has never notably stood in the podium when we worship. Very few of the world's great cathedrals are done with any restraint. Many of them are positively garish. Generally we tend to regard most of the art of immediately preceding generations as tasteless and at the same time to regard the developing changes affecting our own period as

outrageous.

So the varied and vivid, all-consuming and generally very sincere enjoyment of Christmas should be looked at from the point of view of its purpose. And surely among other things its purpose is to be an exercise in our ability to express the idea of community, to escape from our own excessively self-centered concerns and to show ourselves and the world that we love - above most else - our fellow man. Christmas is an exercise in belief, an expression of the poetic character of the species. The variety of images, the very gaudiness of the whole more truly expresses us than either the work of the world or the neatness of single purpose forms. For indeed we incorporate in our being all of the complex movements of development that nature has displayed. How fitting it is that we express all of it in this great and gaudy explosion of love at Christmastime.

Robert H. Allen

2

I Remember Grandmother

Christmas was usually a relaxed day, at least for children in our Nebraska neighborhood. The family would have attended the night before the Christmas Eve services at the church and the family Christmas presents distributed on our return home. Milking and other chores were usually completed when we arose the following morning, a concession that set the holiday apart. After breakfast the feature of which was a Christmas kflchen, we would get underway for my paternal grandparents' home. There being little storage space safe from fidgety feet in a horse-drawn carriage, my mother would be holding carefully packed pies and other food.

On this particular Christmas Day, the year of which I am not certain since these early years run together we found my grandfather sitting on the porch. This was not surprising since it was one of those occasional balmy days that make a Nebraska winter bearable. But we discovered on

entering the house that had it been 20 degrees below zero my grandfather would have been sitting on the porch for my grandmother was, as my father termed these furious moods, "on her high horse."

My grandmother, as I came to appreciate more in later years, was quite a lady. As a bride of 16 she had left her Wisconsin home on her wedding day in a covered wagon to homestead in Nebraska with her 19-year old husband. They had spent their first years in a sod house and later experienced drouths, blizzards, grasshoppers and "hard times". Yet she never lost her enthusiasm for growing things. She grew with some success currants, gooseberries and, of course, strawberries. But she never gave up trying to do the impossible in that semi-arid climate, of growing peaches, apricots and apples. Flowers she managed with irrigation from a windmill. She was the first person I knew to grow chrysanthemums and the smell of the foliage still takes me back to the flats of cuttings she maintained through the winters by keeping them in the cellar and bringing them up occasionally for sun. But probably the quality that most impressed her family was her ability to radiate fury without throwing things or raising her voice. I never knew her to touch one of her grandchildren. One person who was not cowed was my mother who probably realized it was all a bit of acting. One of the traumatic experiences of my childhood was the day my grandmother appeared at our home to lecture my mother. My mother, broom in hand, literally swept the older woman out of the house. And because they understood each other, the incident frightened only the onlooking children.

But to return to Christmas Day. The cause of the domestic blowup had occurred the night before. It was the custom on each Christmas Eve as you arrived at the church to bring the preacher a gift. It might be a ham, bacon or a few dollars in an envelope. Presumably it was this latter gift which my grandfather would present. Instead he had two packages and it was not until the trip home after the services that he confessed that the packages contained a box of cigars and a bottle of wine.

Now my grandmother wasn't personally against alcoholic beverages. She was proud of her dandelion wine and experimented less successfully with elderberries and wild plums. But these were never offered to a man-of-God, anymore than you would invite him to play cards. You just didn't reveal your self-indulgences. Pleasure was very close to if not actually sin.

My grandfather should have known better than to mix alcohol and preachers for he had run afoul of grandmother's fury with a previous lapse. Coming home with a load of coal he had kept himself warm with the help of a bottle of whiskey. The alcohol had loosened his vocal cords and as he drove into the yard he was lustily singing a slightly bawdy German song. That a buggy followed him into the yard he either ignored or didn't notice. At any rate he finished up his song while his wife came up to greet the visitor. It was the preacher, who grasping the situation did not descend from the buggy. It was at this point that my grandmother decreed the house off-limits for all hard liquor except the bottle she needed for her fruit cakes. Obviously, off-limits didn't apply to other farm buildings for when we moved to the home place someyears later we found empty whiskey bottles tucked here and there in the haymow, grain bins and even in discarded machinery. It is possible, of course, that the bottles were placed here and there as protection against being lost in unexpected blizzards. We didn't have St. Bernards.

Christmas dinner began that day as all family dinners began with a prayer in German by the youngest child able to mumble grace. This assignment of "grace-sayer" was sought after since it marked your graduation from the infant class. Comprehension of the prayer was unimportant, nor was intelligibility essential. My uncle had married a Swedish girl and grace there was mumbled by my young cousins presumably in Swedish. Years later when my cousin wrote down phonetically what she had recalled saying she couldn't identify a single word in a Swedish dictionary. Truly, as the catechism said, God was omniscient.

What was served at that Christmas dinner I cannot really recall. But because the dinners were always identical it is easy to reconstruct. Goose would have been the entree and not because the Cratchett's served goose. Even had my grandmother known Dicker's Christmas carol she wouldn't have cared. She raised geese. Her expressed reason for having the mean, messy fowl about was that they kept rats away. This was an obvious misconception for rat hunting in piled corn fodder was a boyhood pastime. A legitimate reason was that feather beds were much prized and geese survived a rigorous plucking. And, I suspect, grandmother had a penchant for the unusual. While the common breeds of chickens were Rhode Island Reds, Barred and White Rocks and Leghorns, she raised Houdons, a crested fowl and bantams. But to return to the meal there would have been also mashed potatoes, gravy, peas, oyster dressing, an apple salad and two kinds of pie, mince and pumpkin topped with whipped cream.

Our meals, holidays or otherwise, were not marked by sprightly conversation. But this was a particularly silent meal. After we had finished the men moved out on the porch, the women of the family started the clearing of the table. My brother and I strolled about poking here and there for cottontails for the dog to chase. Somewhat restrained by my mother's cautious advice to remember we were wearing our good clothes, we returned to sit on the porch.

Down the hill past the schoolhouse came a top buggy drawn by a jogging sorrel. It turned in at the drive and my father called to those inside the house, "Here comes the preacher".

Grandmother, apron removed, came out of the house to greet the visitor. Obviously she was prepared at best for a lecture on the evils of alcohol or at the worst for excommunication from the church of which she was a charter member.

But before she reached the buggy, the pastor, anticipating her invitation to alight, called cherrily in German, "Frau Miller I cannot

stop. But I thought I must tell you that yours was the best of possible Christmas gifts. I can help the wife with the wine and smoke the cigars myself." And calling Merry Christmas he drove off.

Grandmother turned, eyed Grandfather carefully, possibly suspecting a smile might be lurking on his face. But hearing no snickers she walked back to the house. When she reached the porch she turned and called, "It's time for the fruit cake." And after a moment's pause her face broke into a smile and she added "And some dandelion wine."

Ernest I. Miller

3

Christmas anno Domini 1968

Yes, yes I ought to remember Moses
jogging down on his mule from the Mount
with the old law, the old mistake,
safe in his saddlebags, and chiselled
on the stones we cannot bear or break.

I like to imagine it must have been
simpler in the days of Lot,
or when Greek and Roman picturebook
gods sat combing their golden beards,
each on his private hill or mountain.

But I suppose even God was born
too late to trust the old religion—
all those settings out
that never left the ground,
beginning in wisdom, dying in doubt.

For the Union Dead

Robert Lowell

The birth of Christ has been sacrosanct
in the annals of Christianity. With these rapidly
running their course, nothing is sacrosanct as the
range of tolerable behavior modernly illustrates.
Nobody quite knows the date of Christ's birth;

even before the fifth century there was no general consensus when it should come in the calendar. Over the centuries favored dates have been: January 6, March 25 and 28, April 19 and 20, November 17 and December 25.

December 25 was a festival day in Great Britain long before the conversion to Christianity. The holiday became a conglomerate of seasonal, pagan, religious, and national practices, hedged about with legend and tradition. In the beginning many of the earth's inhabitants were sun worshipers because their lives depended on its yearly rounds. Vestiges of their behavior reside in us. In ancient days feasts were held to encourage the return of the sun from distant wanderings. In Rome the Saturnalia occupied a week when homes and temples were ornamented with green boughs and flowers, and there was much merrymaking and giving of presents. The Druids gathered mistletoe and hung it in their homes; the Saxons holly, ivy and bay.

The central idea of the winter solstice in the modern climes was the return of light. This hope of the world became symbolized in the birth of Christ, the light of the world. Thus Christmas became both religious and secular in its celebrations, at times reverent, at others, gay. The light was pre-Christian and was represented by candles, fires and yule logs.

Since the date of the birth of Christ is not known - though December 25 has served well - and since historically the celebration of the day means many things including the contradictions engendered modernly by commercial determinants, the human condition at Christmastime is about as confusing as at any other time. Holidays can be unduly stressful for the uneasy, a condition we should do what we can to alleviate.

In the early 1920's George Herbert Mead formulated the thesis, now reasonably well established, that social situations and human behavior in them, are analogous to games which must be played by certain rules. In life the games are infinite. As social conditions change, old games

are scrapped and new ones started. Most people are unprepared to shift from one type of game to another. Early in life they learned one set of rules or a few, and find themselves forced to play new games by these old rules. This conflict leads to problems in living, some severe enough to be termed mental illness.

Dedicated to the unconfusing of human beings, I propose some clarification of Christmas anno Domini 1968. Hopefully the rules of the game, advertised on occasion as keeping Christ in Christmas, may become clear.

As Paul Goodman, the author of "Growing up Absurd" has observed, "it is evident that Americans are no longer a Christian society in any important sense. Their vital dogmas, tinged with superstition, are largely scientific; their ethics, rapidly changing, are the product of economic and urban institutions that are only distantly related to Christian ideas. I rest the argument with the modern prophets (see Goodman, Post-Christian Man, pp. 80-91 in Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals, Vintage Books, New York, 1964) to pass on to a consideration of a new rite, the celebration of the rival scientific superstition, more desperate than the medieval superstition of the church.

I say superstition because magical fears have not been dissolved. As the specialist cast of wonder-workers grows more specialistic, the rest of the people get more out of touch and inept. For the latter, science has the power of magic. The majority of modern scientists are not magically afraid of their own powerful experiments, whose operations they have the illusion of controlling. For them science has the exclusive virtue of an orthodox theology. The scientists today work on fantastically harmful projects that ordinary mortals would shy away from; and with no sign of extraordinary moral suffering. Skilled mathematicians estimate that fifty million sudden American corpses would not set back the "economy" more than ten years. Now that's a remarkable statistic for having been drawn in the first place. No wonder the superstitious respect for the wizards has become

tinged with a desire to tear them limb from limb which says nothing whatsoever of youthful loss of faith in any orthodoxy.

Christianity once thrived on its sacramental magic, its relics and its miracle workers. Over the centuries, as Goodman says, it has been defeated by experimental science in a frank and fair contest of miracles and wonders. Science has worked better against plagues and it has proved to be better at flying and communication. As late as the Russian Revolution, a means of defeating Christianity was to take a moujik up in an airplane and prove that God wasn't in the sky after all. There was a recent note that the same holds true in outer space according to the Soviets.

What with the scientific era and the precedence of the gross national product (GNP) it may be argued that a move away from phantasy might further the cause of sanity. It is unrealistic to deny the primacy of secularism, and the ascendancy of science and business as worshipful. Our graven images are obvious; youthful ecstasy and orgiastic behavior only confirm the elders in pragmatism.

The social critic Malcolm Muggeridge in a sparkling collection of essays (The Most of Malcolm Muggeridge, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1966, pp. 367) has entitled one "The First Church of Christ Economist" (pp. 222-230). In it he proposes the desperate need of a new religion to counter the spread of the dread Communism. He points out that Christianity's weakness lies in certain basic propositions of its founder in competition to Communism, for example, "Blessed are the Poor", when the whole dynamic of our society is in the opposite direction.

The "Sermon on the Mount" can hardly hold its own in our polluted biosphere with the effluvia from Madison Avenue and dust and ashes, ancient pollutants, do not embellish TV ads, a worse pollution. Then there is the doctrine of modern love, versus St. Paul and concupiscence, and abstinence versus indulgence, and Christian doctrine