

THE CHRISTMAS VIRUS

Wed 12 December 2012



This reflection for the season of Christ's coming is set in the context of human cultural history and the place within it of religion and science. My aim is to show why Christianity is distinctive and important.

Human life together can be traced from *Homo habilis* around two million years ago to the rise of settled agriculture and animal domestication in the Neolithic, from around 9,000 years ago. Developing our large brains, our symbolic and linguistic ability, ultimately our technology and institutions, all depended on our capacity to live together in relative peace, restraining something rare among our animal forebears: our capacity to fight to the death.

Archaic human reality was conjointly cosmic and cultural. Its stability, written in the stars and in nature's rhythms, was celebrated in the mythology of gods and heroes. Taboos offered protection against rivalrous conflict among archaic peoples, with strict rules governing reciprocal obligation and access to women. Order was regularly restored through ritual sacrifice.

It made no sense to separate culture and religion in the modern manner, or to divorce ritual from technology. Religion was the sacred canopy of protection that culture relied upon. Ritual provided the space in which all sorts of human progress took place serendipitously, from the domestication of animals and the burying of seeds to the toleration of intolerably mixed states that allowed fermentation.

The fierce but outwardly calm order of archaic societies survived up to classical times in the West, and into pre-Columbian Central and South America. It was the tragedians in classical antiquity who began to unveil the link between religion and violence underpinning this cosmic-cultural matrix, also the Vedic literature of India. But it was the Bible that most clearly undermined this tightly woven basis of archaic human life together.

The psalms and Job are the first texts in which the sacrificial victims who undergird archaic cultural stability are allowed to speak up. In one hundred out of one hundred and fifty psalms, we hear a lament of the unjustly accused and persecuted. Job likewise stands out against the enormous authority of a sacralized status quo and its self-appointed representatives with his insistent protest, "I know that my redeemer lives". Israel's prophets declared the sacrificial cults as alien to Israel's God, who was presented in the Bible as opposed to the Egyptian and Babylonian sacred cultures from which Israel was liberated. Here is a different vision of order, based on mercy, compassion and human conversion rather than repressive violence.

Christ and culture

From the womb of faithful Israel came Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution to keep the peace between Romans and Jews in Palestine most clearly revealed the typical violent sacred mechanism of human togetherness. From his teaching about whitened sepulchres to his own empty tomb, Jesus exposed the violent compact of culture and religion. He came to bring not peace but a sword, in the sense that disorder and division inevitably followed his exposure of humanity's hitherto violent accord. His resurrection reveals a new way of being human, and a new peace, which is so untypical that we describe it as 'beyond all understanding'. The Holy Spirit, God's Advocate for the defence, establishes a new humanity that no longer offers peace on the basis of targeted collective violence.

This Spirit overwhelmed the violently fatalistic Roman Empire and set the West on its path to modernity. The God of the Bible seems to come from outside the system of human order and control altogether, and so is described as transcending both cosmos and culture. The Bible liberates the cosmos from its annexation by the sacred to become, simply, the realm of God's creation amenable to human investigation. Hence science and a new type of human religion were born together, and neither were prisoner to the stabilizing demands of human culture. The God of the Bible opens a non-sacred world or *saeculum* that provides the context for human life in modern times.

To be sure there were setbacks, from sacrificial readings of Jesus' death in the early Church to medieval attempts at holding Christendom together by demonizing Jews, Muslims and witches, to today's newly-exposed betrayals of Christ in his Church.

Yet the genie was out of the bottle. Social equality, human rights, democracy, modern legal systems, and nation states with a place for religion though not dominated by it, all emerged from the collapse of archaic sacred hierarchies, as did modern financial markets. All these helped to contain human violence in ways that the sacred canopy of religious culture had once done.

Early modern Europe's so-called wars of religion are best understood as the growing pains of modern nation states, which took over the function of religion as an ordering principle of society. Likewise modern markets shifted the focus of religious discipline away from the monastery and into the principled acquisition of wealth, as Max Weber argued.

The nation state, a major modern contender for the status of new religious reality, nowadays needs many more victims to maintain the same awed effect as in archaic cultures, as revealed by the Nazi Holocaust and Stalin's purges. Likewise, markets and their imperative to consume help to contain our incipient rivalry, keeping us docile and preoccupied. But instability remains, with sacrificial victims remaining necessary. These are found among the poor of the developing world, and those condemned to structural poverty in western societies. The environment is a further victim, since it can no longer support the demands of perpetual economic growth. Wars are now bloodier, increasingly totalizing, and less containable despite Carl von Clausewitz's faith in rational statecraft. The so-called clash of civilizations between the Anglosphere and militant Islam is in reality a civil war within a single fractious global civilization.

The Bible's alternative is faith in Jesus Christ and repentance—never popular options, and much mocked in our modern West that claims to have found a better way. Now that this better way is looking increasingly problematic, however, Jesus' path of non-sacrificing, non-violent resistance to monstrous evil may prove less easy to dismiss.

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