

Christmas Essay: Spirituality, Secularism, and Civic Education

We feel the need to know things we can't know through empirical evidence. Many people, perhaps most, have certainties of belief that prevail over the uncertainty inherent in the limits of science. Sectarianism is when those beliefs go against our best scientific understandings, and beliefs are used as a cudgel against those who do not hold them. Sectarianism is often associated with fundamentalism and comes from our tribal origins as a species.

However natural it may be, sectarianism is destroying the future of humanity, and we must find some way to evolve from the better part of our natures. Great religions open windows on the spirituality needed to overcome sectarianism, yet all too often a narrow understanding of a great religion drags it down to sectarianism. The great religions have great teachings, yet, having developed before the age of science, they often have formulations that are inconsistent with a scientific understanding of empirical truth.

It is a mystery, then, that even the scientifically inclined can find so much wonder and love from untrue stories. Movies like *Lord of the Rings* and the *Potter* stories come to mind, and also *Star Trek*, *West Wing*, and *Jane Austen's* romantic comedies. They cover the gamut from fantasy to realism, yet all engage us in the struggle of imperfect beings to overcome challenges ranging from a huge abstract evil power to a little personal pride or prejudice. We can enjoy these stories because we don't worry whether they are scientifically true. The Bible poses more of a challenge because some insist it must be literally true, and that gets in the way of a spiritual understanding.

We have wonderful untrue stories for this time of year: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be counted in a census. ... And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee..." I love parts of this story but also find myself put off by other parts: Angels are OK but virgin birth? Bah! Humbug!

A young, poor couple went to Bethlehem and a child was born in a manger because there was no room in the inn. If it didn't happen, it should have happened, at least to somebody, even if not Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. The shepherds, the star, the wise men; throw them in too. Christmas trees, Tannenbaum, Santa Claus, and one of my favorites, Good King Wenceslaus; I'll take them all. "It was the night before Christmas and all through the house..." All these wonderful untrue things can fill us with the feelings of the season. Merry Christmas.

Yet science can also be wonderful. The accumulation of increasingly sophisticated descriptions of creation, tested by the senses and theories of intellectually disciplined observers, provides us with the surest empirical knowledge we can have, and also suggests meanings going beyond the empirical itself. Science tells a creation story vast in size, in time, and in complexity, a story which, for me, is far more persuasive than any other, not only as understanding, but also with a spiritual meaning. God can be in the whole existence and time, and thus more intelligible and powerful than some anthropomorphic creation linked to our imagination. My intelligence and knowledge act to discipline my emotions to forgo the security of belief and idolatry of a God limited by human superlatives. The findings of science are more compelling than the myths of ancestors written in holy books.

My scientific knowledge of how my family and culture have induced my enjoyment of untrue stories does not diminish the stories in the least. I am also a creature of mindless DNA trying to keep itself going in a chemically continuous chain of separate lives going back to the beginning of life. Existentially, some philosophers will say I am choosing my definition of my essence, but I think I am, essentially, just recognizing and accepting the culture and chemistry of myself.

Spirituality can grow from science, but it can ignore science where stories have a human meaning. There is a difference between belief, which relies on science, and meaning, which needs both science and the imagination.

Secularism is overly committed to dry science and has a fear of religion largely caused by confusing it with sectarianism's threat to civil society. Unfortunately, secularism unplugs political action from the electrifying power of religion because it confuses religion-as-belief with spirituality. Secularists who have no problem with modern stories get uptight when the stories use old-fashioned religious words. They can enjoy poetry, but balk at the equally transcendent language of the more overtly religious spiritual community.

Progressive politics must overcome this division or it will continue to lose to those now in power at the national level. Our nation's future is being dragged down by sectarian anger and intolerance, by the corporations of the resource industries committed to short-term greed and anti-scientific claims, and by paranoid megalomaniacs who think they are realists, the neocons. Our policies are alienating the civilized world, undermining our national security, pursuing money growth at the expense of sustainability, and begging the poor to help the rich. We are in thrall to sprawl and the automobile, mired in auto-dependency, and so committed to subsidizing auto use that we do not even have a name for it, but it has a name, carism.

There is not a single teaching of a broad spirituality or real Christianity that is not being violated by those in power today. We have come through dark times before—world wars, depression, the Kennedy and King assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate. Now is a darker time than any before, because the problem is deeply embedded in us as a people. I keep wanting to include here the latest outrage I've read about, in this case Bolton's conduct at the UN, but the list would go on for pages and pages, and I might forget my point: pervasive failure in a democracy means the problem is in the people, not just the leaders.

The American people, however politically capable at the local level, vote for national leaders who espouse American values and implement the opposite, who embrace simple ideologies making them incompetent to deal with complex realities. Perhaps a third of Americans have any real understanding of science, and fewer know about policy. The Age of Enlightenment only started in the Eighteenth Century; it is still underway. Secularism has won many fights against superstition but should embrace spiritual insights into our common human purpose.

We need, then, a new civic education infused with science and spirituality to inspire an interest in politics, and, thus, much more knowledge about politics. I see this challenge; I do not know how to meet it. The political process itself can be educational, however slow it may be. For example, public opinion is now where Alison and I were three years ago, opposing the war in Iraq and critical of G.W. Bush. We still have a long way to go on Global Warming, on Palestine, and many other issues, but the incompetency of the pseudo-conservatives seems recently to have been checked and their power may ebb. This progress seems to come in spite of the media, whose passivity or bias contrasts so sharply with the high points shown in *Good Night and Good Luck* and the Watergate investigations.

Personally, I am distressed by my own dependency on fossil fuels. I am doing market research on a proposed development, Quarry Village, a large neighborhood development nearby which would limit the role of cars while providing mobility and a high quality of life. Achieving it is a 100 to 1 shot, but I can imagine moving there—Alison maybe not, but I can—to a six bedroom condo. All I need is 999 more committed families, and we can sever the umbilical cord to the car. The example could educate the nation. -Sherman