

Epiphany—The True Story Behind the Miracle on 34th Street

A Christmas Reflection

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Our image of Christmas this year is rather dominated by the remake of the 1947 Hollywood film classic, *Miracle on 34th Street*. Here an avuncular Kris Kringle, working as Santa Claus at Macy's, has to prove to a doubting girl that he is the real Saint Nicholas, complete with his sackful of abundance and reindeer-driven sleigh. In effect, Macy's Kris Kringle has to *show forth* his true identity as Santa Claus, as quite more than a man. In a curious way, this Hollywood notion is light years away from the essence of the Christmas event yet at the same time it's as close as noses to its esoteric truth. In a strange convolution of myth, iconography, and religious symbolism, the image of Kris Kringle is crucially relevant to the reality of the Christ. And as the new year—and century and Millennium—draw upon us, what will this perennial holiday show us about our future?

Many in America probably do not know that until 354 A.D. the festival we now call Christmas was celebrated two weeks later on January 6 and was known as Epiphany. This comes from a Greek word (*epiphaneia*) and means to manifest, show forth, to reveal the light, to show, appear, shine. What really appeared? In the purest sense, it was light—the Light of the World.

Esoteric Christian tradition informs us that on this date Master Jesus, age 30, took his baptism in the River Jordan under the hands of John the Baptist who, spiritually quaking, recognized the apocalyptic moment. Before John's eyes the cosmic Christ descended into the Earth plane and entered the prepared physical and subtle bodies of Jesus, generating a unique being, Christ Jesus. A cosmic being or pure spiritual force became one with a human, which is to say, the Christ was born on Earth and became one with the soul of the planet and all of humanity. In this view, there never was a Christ "child" as such, only the cosmically pristine Christ consciousness freshly incarnating in a mature human being. The revelation, or epiphany, was that this celestial spirit had become one with the "flesh" of humankind.

Up until the mid-4th century A.D., things remained fairly straightforward regarding Epiphany. In the East, the Alexandrian calendar said that January 6 marked the winter solstice and thus began the new year. In Egypt, January 6 marked the Festival of Osiris, the god who had been slain and cut into 14 pieces by his evil brother; the great Osiris was re-membered and thus reborn on this date. Eastern churches also observed a rite called "The Blessing of the Waters," in which a body of water, such as a river or pond, was blessed by a bishop who invoked the power of Christ into it, in imitation of the event at the Jordan. There was no Christmas as such. Then beginning in 354 A.D., the religious calendar underwent some major changes, most of which, from our vantage point, highly confused the important features of this globally significant event.

For example, January 6 eventually became known as the Festival of Three Kings. Here the famous Star of Bethlehem guided the three magi, Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar, to the newborn Christ child, called Jesus, where they beheld its epiphanous glory. The three magi brought the divine infant the precious gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold, in effect beginning a millennial custom of Christmas gift-giving. What *showed forth* in this revision of the original Epiphany event was now the peculiarly mobile Bethlehem star guiding the wise initiates to the presence of the newly incarnate Christ child. What had been the Christ descending as a star in Jesus was now a star guiding the magi to Jesus as an infant.

It wasn't until the 12th century that the *Cristes maesse*, the festival Mass for Christ (Christmas), became a liturgy for the birth of the infant Jesus, observed on December 25. Theologians of the day admitted they didn't know when exactly Jesus had been born; his birth

date would therefore be a flexible one, moveable according to symbolic expediency. An almanac appearing in 354 A.D. declared “Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judaea” on December 25. There was sound reason for making this identification.

At that time, the Winter Solstice occurred on that day. Marking the year’s shortest day in the depth of winter yet also the beginning of a world renewal, the solstice was a pivotal moment in planetary time. Anyone familiar with “pagan” solar customs of the time well knows that in fact a host of solar heroes were awarded a December 25-Winter Solstice birthday: Krishna, Dionysos, Horus, Attis, Tammuz, and Mithras. So the Christ, as *Sol Verus* (“the true Sun”) and *Sol Invictus* (“the invincible Sun”), fit in well in this company of solar divinities. And in medieval Europe, December 25, as the date for Winter Solstice (now of course it’s December 21), also marked the start of the new calendar year.

During a six day period around both the Winter and Summer Solstice, the Sun appears to rise and set at almost exactly the same places on the horizon. That’s why in Latin *Sol stetit* (the root of “solstice”) means literally “the Sun stood still.” Living in a cold climate in the Northern Hemisphere, we can take cheer in late December knowing that even though winter is unrelievedly still around us, spring has already begun, the days are lengthening, and the strength of the Sun is waxing towards a glorious summer. This meteorological perception segues easily into the more spiritually symbolic sense of the Winter Solstice as a pivotal time of world renewal, of rebirth for the potent solar hero, that is, of the almighty Sun in its deific light-filled personifications. You can imagine the sense of joyous release this turning point in the cycle of the year once produced in people.

A host of pre-Christian festivals took place during the time of the Winter Solstice. Notable among these was the Roman *Saturnalia*, held in honor of Saturn (the Greek Kronos) who had reigned over the world during its Golden Age and now lived near the North Pole. During *Saturnalia*, social customs and hierarchies were overturned by the Lord of Misrule. This publicly-elected mock king staged a grand burlesque of royalty, turning social conventions, secular and moral laws, topsy-turvy. Lavish presents were given away, great feasts and carnivals were staged, sexual liberties were allowed, and, curiously, evergreens were used for decorations. The dying Sun was buried while the reborn Sun was about to appear, invincible against the forces of misrule, chaos, and darkness, typified by *Saturnalia*. As one Greek commentator observed long ago: “Everywhere may be seen carousels and well-laden tables. The impulse to spend seizes everyone. People are not only generous to themselves but also towards their fellow men. A stream of presents pours itself out on all sides.” The Christmas spirit, in short.

Beginning sometime between December 17-25, *Saturnalia* raged on without any restrictions for 12 days. During this period, calendrical time was suspended; the old year had died and the new year was yet to be born. In 567 A.D., the Council of Trent adopted the Roman custom of the Twelve Days as a legitimate Christian festival. We now know this as the 12 Holy Days (or Nights) between Christmas and Twelfth Night, itself memorialized in the Shakespearean comedy and coinciding with Epiphany on January 6.

Meanwhile, other Old European folk customs were being grafted onto the December 25 Christmas observance. There was the Germanic Yuletide. Here Christmas was the “Log Evening,” in which cottagers burned a special Yule log in commemoration of the Fire Mother of the Sun God. Before burning, Scandinavians decorated their Yule Logs with bright ribbons, evergreens, and ivy, and carried them about the village in ceremonial procession. They believed that just as the Winter Solstice heralded a dramatic renewal of the world from the source of light—the invincible Sun—thereby overcoming the forces of chaos, so too did burning the Yule log symbolically drive off all malignant spirits and ghosts from the households of good men and women, the same spirits of Misrule in effect who cavorted without license during the old *Saturnalia*.

The Yule Log easily transformed itself into the festively-lit Christmas tree. The sacred pine may have become *the* Christmas tree in honor of the dying god Attis who was once ritually

killed under its boughs. In Germanic Europe, pine branches were festooned with streamers, gold and silver ornaments, and replicas of birds; gifts in honor of the gods were placed at its base and lights were strung on its boughs to symbolize the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars. This was meant to represent none other than the World Tree itself or perhaps the Tree of Life from the Garden of Eden. The Christians copied the arboreal symbolism but reinterpreted the lights to symbolize Christ as the Light of the World.

The legend is probably false, but it's said that the 8th century Benedictine missionary St. Boniface, after converting the Germans to Christianity, defied the power of the old pagan gods and their sacred oak which he fell. Pointing to a little fir tree at the base of the huge fallen oak tree, he said: this is the holy tree of the Christ child. In 1845, a highly popular children's book, *Kris Kringle's Christmas Tree* cemented the identification in the Western mind of Christmas with a decorated Christmas tree. Incidentally, the Saturnalian aspect of Christmas grew so outrageous in 17th century colonial Massachusetts that Cotton Mather once forbade all Christmas celebrations, citing the undue amount of "revelling, dicing, carding, masking, and mumming."

So in a roundabout way, we're back with Kris Kringle, the plump, genial, bearded patriarch who has marvellous gifts for everybody with no strings, credit terms, or layaway plans attached. Kris Kringle of course is but another name for Santa Claus, from Saint Klaus, the German equivalent of Saint Nicholas, or from the Dutch version, San Nicolaas, Whatever the name, it's our culture's most popular name for Father Christmas, who himself seems a highly secularized and wildly transformed expression of the infant Jesus or Epiphany Christ. There once was in fact a Saint Nicholas, the 4th century Turkish Bishop of Myra; he was well known for his generosity, particularly to young people. Later, the festivities of St. Nicholas' Day, which had been December 6, were moved forward three weeks, to coincide with Christmas on December 25.

Then there was another Santa Claus candidate, a German philanthropist named Knecht Ruprecht. He was said to travel among the villages on Christmas testing children on their knowledge of prayers. If they passed his examination, he gave them fruits, nuts, and gingerbread from out of a bulging sack. It may surprise many to learn that it was one of America's own, the 18th century Washington Irving, who fleshed out Santa Claus in his 1809 work, *Father Knickerbocker's History of New York*. Here we see the rotundly cheery Santa riding over the colonial rooftops of New York State in his reindeer sleigh, handing out gifts to children as if he owned all the Toys-R-Us in the world. From Washington Irving's 1809, it was an easy sleigh ride to Hollywood's 1947 (and 1994) when the legendary Kris Kringle went on trial at Macy's to prove he wasn't a fake.

So in the last 2000 years our celebrations have shifted from Epiphany to the Winter Solstice to Christmas, from the cosmic Christ to the infant Jesus to the portly Santa Claus. But what on Earth does it all mean, this fascinating, confusing conflation of myth, folktale, and religious ideals? Might there be some value for us today in reconsidering Epiphany as the original and perhaps spiritually correct date for Christ-mass and what can it show us?

An old Norwegian text called *The Dream Song of Olaf Asteson* shows us one way of doing this. Olaf Asteson, "a wonderful youth," falls asleep on Christmas Eve and sleeps through the 12 Holy Nights waking up only on Epiphany, January 6. But while he sleeps he dreams, which is to say, he walks awake with visions of the celestial realms. As Rudolf Steiner explains in his commentary on the *Dream Song*. "These Nights are the time during which the powers of seership in the human soul discern and perceive what man must undergo through his life in the incarnations from Adam and Eve to the Mystery of Golgotha."

In his long sleep, Olaf Asteson lives through "all the terrors the human being must experience" in the time between the Fall and "the intervention of the Christ Spirit in humanity" as marked by the Crucifixion at Golgotha. During his 12 nights of "dream-filled sleep" and "visions astounding," Olaf Asteson witnesses the mighty panorama of human life since its Edenic beginning, culminating in a vivid imagination of the Archangel Michael riding white-horsed and

bearing the Scales of Justice for Jesus Christ, the golden Sun-being riding at his side as the new Judge of the World. Olaf woke on Epiphany day and recalled all he had seen.

Olaf Asteson's *Dream Song* is a long visionary incubation, like a seed planted at the Winter Solstice, ripening after twelve dream-filled holy nights on Epiphany into a stunning tableau of celestial forces at work on our behalf. The *Dream Song* is really a snippet from the Mystery schools of ancient Europe, a glimpse of the kind of initiation into the mystery of the Sun that men and women once experienced long before the Christ came to Earth. Great secrets of the cosmos were revealed to them during their Mystery training. Foremost among these was knowledge of the Sun—the real, inner spiritual Sun—as the Logos, or Word, of the universe. One of its names was Christ.

In a metaphysical sense, long before Golgotha men and women beheld the Christ as the preëminent Sun-Being and the fruit of their Mystery initiations during the 12 Holy Nights of inner meditation. Long before any single church had appropriated this cosmic story as their own ideological property, the Christ-Logos was instructing souls—showing forth. Momentous things were revealed to them about the past, present, and future of the Earth. The Christ Sun-Being itself was the revelation, a majestic manifestation of cosmic light that in an instant revealed the *coherency* of the stars, the true astrology, the magnetic center point around which all of Creation revolved—the *Word* that both made the world and made it make sense. Is it so far-fetched as to see in Santa Claus, the Christmas tree, and the pile of gifts a simplified fairy-tale memory of the same truth?

Eastern Orthodox churches today still observe Epiphany on January 6 as the true Mass for Christ. Certain esoteric groups maintain that the Christ as a cosmic being actually remembers the Earth on this day, transmitting an extra measure of its spiritual potency to the planet through the Earth's etheric energy web as a kind of rarified moxabustion.

Perhaps in this City of Holy Faith—Faith representing one of the three Theological Virtues, along with Hope and Charity—on this coming Epiphany we may be favored with rays of the Sun, with a glimpse through the starry veil of our fortunate future and the countenance of faith in a positive outcome rewarded. That would be the true Miracle on 34th Street—not to know that Kris Kringle is Santa Claus but that the Christ as a free cosmic being truly has something to show the world this Epiphany.