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CARDS, CAROLS, AND CLAUS: CHRISTMAS IN RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE...

It might be the first Sunday in Advent in the traditional Christian calendar,
but today I want to break the rules and jump ahead four weeks,
and talk about the next season - Christmas.

Following on from this time last year,
I want to briefly present some examples of Christmas popular culture.

I have chosen four:

- (i) the Christmas Card,
- (ii) the world's most popular Christmas Song,
- (iii) Christmas 'Carols by Candlelight',
- (iv) the artistic development of Santa Claus.

And then address a couple of common assumptions, such as:

- (i) I thought Christmas was about religion?
- (ii) Is there a role for popular culture in religion?
- (iii) What about the bloke we call Yeshu'a?

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1. The Christmas Card

The modern Christmas card has a history of little more than 160 years.
The first card which could be called a Christmas card,
was designed and printed in England in 1843.

Designed by John Calcott Horsley, an artist and member of the Royal Academy,
for civil servant Sir Henry Cole,
it was printed in lithography by Jobbins of Warwick Court, Holborn, London,
and hand-coloured by a professional 'colourer' named Mason. (*Buday 1954:6*)

Approximately 1,000 copies were printed on a single piece of stiff cardboard
measuring 5 1/8 by 3 1/4 inches and cost one shilling.

However, the card didn't prove immediately popular.
Neither did it escape criticism.

Artist Horsley was attacked by members of the Temperance Movement
because they saw its design as depicting drinking and
"encouraging drunkenness" (*Buday 1954:8*).

In the 1880s, just when the English Card was gaining in popularity,
Australian printer John Sands ran an art design competition,
offering fifty pounds as a prize for designs of
"thoroughly Australian cards." (*Stapleton & McDonald 1981:39*)

Nearly 700 entries were received.

The winning entry was called 'Little girl offering a Christmas pudding to a Swagman'.
All the designs were placed on public display in the Art Gallery of NSW,
attracting long queues of wide-eyed and appreciative viewers.

(Stapleton & McDonald 1981:39)

Within a few months the first of his new Australian designed
and printed Christmas cards were rolling off his presses.

They featured scenes, Australian flowers and foliage,
as well as pure fantasy. None had religious themes.

2. The World's Most Popular Christmas Song

It was Monday 8 January 1940, when former Tin Pan Alley performer
and prolific Siberian-born Jewish songwriter, Irvin Berlin,
strode into the offices of his midtown Manhattan headquarters
and handed over the manuscript of a new song.

The new song was 'White Christmas'...

"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
Just like the ones I used to know,
Where the treetops glisten
And children listen
To hear sleigh bells in the snow.
I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
With ev'ry Christmas card I write:
"May your days be merry and bright
And may all your Christmases be white."

'White Christmas' is the biggest-selling, most popular pop song of anytime, anywhere,
recorded for the 1942 black and white film 'Holiday Inn'.

At last count, according to *The Guinness Book of Records*,
a stupendous 170 million-plus copies of Bing Crosby's record had been sold
and the song had been recorded by more than 400 other artists.

In reality, the song itself is a tearjerker, filled with musical echoes of the past.
Often Berlin's haunted Christmas past.

It became a hit in the winter of 1942
when it was embraced by homesick American GIs. *(Rosen 2002:9)*

It is an oddity, especially its underlying sadness and its wistful ache for the bygone.

In contrast to "chirpy seasonal standards like 'Jingle Bells'
and 'Santa Claus is comin' to town'... 'White Christmas' is the
"darkest, bluest tune ever to masquerade as a Christmas carol." *(Rosen 2002:13)*

3. Christmas 'Carols by Candlelight'

Carols have the longest history of all the traditions practiced during the Christmas festival.
However, the word 'carol' seems also to have had an amorous song-dance origin
as they were sung in the Middle Ages as part of a circle dance
to celebrated the coming of Spring and thus pre-date their Christmas popularity.

Indeed, the contemporary popular meaning given to carols

as including 'religious' and 'Christmas' ignores the fact that it began as a dance.

The most popular Christmas music-inspired event in Australia, which attracts the most numbers of participants in one form or another, is the folk ritual 'Carols-by-candlelight'.

Tradition has it, as radio personality Norman Banks was going home from work one December evening in 1937, he

“saw a lonely old woman listening to Christmas carols on the radio while a lone candle burned forlornly in her window.” (*Holden 1998*)

and thought some kind of community carol singing event would be a good way to express the 'true spirit' of Christmas.

The following Christmas Eve (1938) he broadcast

“a great carol sing... from the Alexandra Gardens” in Melbourne.

What 'makes' this event? In the main:

- (i) it is conducted by community organisations rather than the church;
- (ii) seen to be something for the family rather than for the so-called 'faithful';
- (iii) promotes values consistent with folk attitudes rather than official church teaching, and
- (iv) preserves traditional symbols commonly accepted as community based rather than those promoted by religion. (*Habel 1980*)

In reality this public celebration has become an expression of a people's religion.

4. The Artistic Development of Santa Claus

There are many precursors to the modern Santa Claus.

'Father Christmas' can be traced back to England's contact with the Vikings.

While 'Santa Claus' was taken to America in the 1770s

by Dutch and German immigrants and adapted and exported over time.

An artistic development of Santa Claus came with German immigrant Thomas Nast's drawings, which appeared in the New York *Harper's Weekly* between 1863 and 1886. (*Belk 1993:79*)

However, Nast's vision of Santa did not become the Santa archetype.

During the 1930s the American soft drink manufacturer Coca Cola Company, who had adopted Santa Claus

“as a salesman for the idea that 'thirst knows no season'” (*Mooney 1997:5*) employed artist Haddon Hubbard Sundblom (1899-1976) to paint a redesigned Santa Claus for their popular outdoor billboard advertising campaigns.

From 1931 Sundblom created at least one Santa Claus painting annually for Coca Cola. His vision of Santa Claus:

“a lavish use of fur and leather (belt, boots, and gloves were all massive), a billowing beard, and a waistline so ample it required a belt and suspenders” (*Charles & Taylor 1997:15*) — and a suit of red and white.

His model for Santa Claus was a friend, Lou Prentice, who was a retired salesman. However after Prentice's death Sundblom found his Santa model in the mirror.

Father Christmas, as he was then called, first appeared in Australia around 1864. His first appearance, according to *The Illustrated Sydney News*, was as:

“the traditional figure bearing gifts, dressed like a druid in a long gown.”

Over the years colonial artists presented him in various garbs: a druid, or a jolly old English squire, or an Indian raja

“riding a kangaroo escorted by six ladies-in-waiting riding emus and flanked by a young ‘new year’ (complete with 1883 headband) riding of the wings of a cockatoo.”

One year later, there had been a dramatic change. Gone were the English touches.

In their place were such things as a buggy with its buck-board filled with toys and possibly balloons, and drawn by 14 kangaroos through the sparse Australian bush towards a lonely house.

And Santa's garb had changed. Dressed in what appears to be ordinary clothes he looked very much like a country squatter, complete with wide-brimmed hat, coming home from a day's shopping in town.

This Australianised Santa Claus has now gone.

The popular media have largely reinforced the so-called traditional images of Santa as an obese, Caucasian, white-bearded, jolly, dressed in a ‘Coca Cola’ red suit trimmed with white fur, male, and as the bearer of gifts of toys for children. (*Belk 1987:87*)
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Now, those additional questions I raised at the beginning of this Address:

(i) About Christmas and Religion:

Limiting ‘religion’ to only ‘Christianity’

the Nativity stories of the anonymous storytellers we now call Matthew and Luke, come rather late in the biblical tradition.

Both stories are very different from each other in general shape, atmosphere and content. Of these two stories, one, Luke's birth story of Yesu'a, has had an enormous influence on the Christian imagination.

The establishment of Christmas as a religious Festival first appears on the liturgical calendar in Rome in 336 CE.

Prior to that Epiphany (celebrated on 6 January) was seen as more important than Nativity (celebrated on 25 December).

The conflict was finally smoothed over with a decision to combine Christmas with Epiphany, which liturgically became known as the ‘Twelve days of Christmas’.

I'll say a bit more around the ‘religion’ bit in a moment...

(ii) About a Role for Popular Culture in Religion:

Yes, there is a role as there always has been.

There always has been a boundless world

“of humorous forms and manifestations opposed [to] the official and serious tone of ecclesiastical culture... Besides ‘Easter laughter’ there was also ‘Christmas laughter’... expressed in gay songs. These songs of an extremely worldly content were heard in churches; some religious hymns were sung to worldly, even street tunes.” (*Bakhtin 1984:4, 79*)

Both the pre-Christian folk-festivals and modern popular culture celebrations are essentially life-affirming. They say ‘yes’ to life.

For life is not a great ready-made thing out there.

Life is ourselves and what we make it.

Life is a buzz that we generate around ourselves.

It includes everything and excludes nothing.

Such a view stands in sharp contrast to much evangelical/fundamentalist Christianity with its unchanging sky god, and which still is

“pessimistic as regards this earth, and value[s] it only as a place of discipline for the life to come.” (*Miles 1912/76:25*)

No wonder popular culture wins out all the time!

(iii) About the bloke we call Yeshu’a:

Scholars suggest that to account for Yeshu’a’s life and noble death that enhance his comparison with other famous people,

the nativity stories mimic the pattern of Hellenistic biography.

On the other hand, judging from what little firm knowledge we have of him, for everything about Yeshu’a is derived from what others wrote about him,

he is remembered as undermining popular religious wisdom

and cultural/social traditions, forcing his hearers to directly take a second look

at what helped or hindered them make their way in the world.

New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering is much more pointed:

“Once we remove from the gospels the sayings that the gospel writers created and put into the mouth of Jesus, we find that like the sages before him, Jesus did not say much about religion. Indeed his mode of discourse was secular, ‘this worldly.’ He talked about daily life, the need to care for one another, and the problems that bring divisiveness and hurt into personal relationships.”

Now whatever conclusion one might end up with about him,

and the so-called ‘festivals’ that have both surrounded him and institutionalised him,

it must be a plausible Yeshu’a and not an incredible one. (*Galston 2012:50-52*)

And a plausible Jesus is a lower-class Palestinian Jesus

situated in his historical circumstances, in the north-west corner of the Galilee,

in the Roman Province of Judea, sometime between the years 26-36 CE,

and who did things and said things that a real person

could have reasonably believed or done at that time.

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Back to the rather heady 'religion' bit...

It is always tempting to attempt to define what religion essentially is by offering some one-line definition.

Religion is far more complex and variable than that.

So my two suggestions or areas of comment are tentative and barely scratch the surface of a huge subject. Nevertheless...

(i) Religion is the 'mother' of all the great cultural interests of human life.

And it is shaped by a myth or myths that integrate cosmology with morality...

"a narrative integrating ideas about how things ultimately are and which things ultimately matter." (*Rue 2006:143*)

(ii) Religion is not about the god G-o-d. It is about us.

A bold assertion, I know. But as one has suggested:

"It is about manipulating our brains so that we might think, feel, and act in ways that are good for us, both individually and collectively." (*Rue 2006:1*)

If that sounds all too philosophical or theological, let me share a few comments of another when studying what some Australian writers/poets in the 1890s thought of religion:

"True religion... was a matter of right action and not right belief. Religion was a matter of doing the right thing - of providing succour and food for a starving mate, of helping a neighbour fight a bush fire, of sharing a beer on a hot day, of comforting a mate's widow, of finding pasture for one's bullocks and of sharing a windfall. It was a matter of being a true mate." (*Zaunbrecher 1979:112*)

Christianity was in the main rejected by the convicts and only slightly embraced by the free settlers in latter years.

This has led some in recent years to conclude that in Australia, Christianity has always been rather a casual affair.

At best, the nation was only ever superficially christianised.

Religions have done great good and great harm.

They have joined together and they have divided.

But religion lives only while we are making it up.

While our imaginations and creative juices are firing and we are crafting new angles, new narratives, new metaphors within the particular context of the moment, because these things are liberating.

The question remains: how adaptive to change are the current religious traditions? Looking at Christmas through the eyes of popular culture, there has already been a dramatic change.

- It originated as a new year festival celebrating the passing of the shortest (northern hemisphere) day.
- Taken over by Christianity it became a celebration of the birthday of the supposed Saviour of the world.
- Reclaiming it, secular culture now celebrates it as a festival of life itself... our relationship to the natural world and everything

“we have come to value in human existence, such as the importance of healthy human relationships and the rich inheritance of human culture.”

(Geering 1998:46)

So, in its essential nature religion is a mythical and aesthetic experience of profound proportion. Its meaning and value, therefore,

“will best be understood and cherished when it is taken with the arts to be an appreciative response to reality; when its concepts are viewed as aesthetic forms, not as science; its words, poetry, not prose; its chief end appreciation and devotion, not inquiry, industry, or control.” (Meland 1946/2013)

Because religion is about how wisdom plays out in life.

And we still need religion to awaken such ‘poetic’ acts in the struggle to live now.

But we are currently in transition to a new kind of society, global society, and it will need its own new and appropriate religion.

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Notes...

Christmas Card - Its triptych design featured:

“[a] rustic trellis frame... encloses the main centre scene and two narrower panels on each side of it. The main panel shows a homely family party in progress, including three generations, in true Victorian fashion...”

“They are toasting the health of an absent friend, the addressee, with red wine... The greeting text, ‘A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You’ is placed on a pink curtain draped beneath the central panel in the foreground of the composition. The side panels represent the spirit of Christmas charity... The reverse side of the card is left blank.” (*Buday 1954:10*)

The **Christmas Carols** of the 13th and 14th centuries are said to have begun the era of modern music, as they offered songs “in the everyday language of the people replacing the language of the church”, usually Latin, “as the medium for composition of carols.” (*Studwell 1995:2*)

Carols are the peoples’ songs equally at home “in ale-house, in hall, in market place, or in cloister” to tunes “both religious and secular”. (*Dearmer et.al 1964:ix*). As such they were a significant movement away from traditional church music in general, and hymns in particular. Traditionally, a hymn is essentially solemn, a carol is familiar, playful, or festive, and always simple.

As an event in **Australian society**, **Christmas** in the early days of the colony held little importance. Unless Christmas Day fell on a Sunday a holiday was not declared. And the day was usually celebrated with a compulsory Anglican church parade or, if punishment had to be administered to a convict, perhaps a reduction in the sentence was ordered.

Later in the 1880s, when Christmas did begin to influence the social and religious life of the colony, it was mostly through secular ‘nostalgia’ rather than religious leanings.