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SEASON AND SOLSTICE

A UNITARIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE MIDWINTER FESTIVAL

By Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett
Minister Emeritus, Unitarian Church of Vancouver

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info@cuc.ca

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by Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett

INTRODUCTION

Let me say by way of introduction to this edition that it is a lightly revised version of something I wrote more than thirty years ago in response to repeated inquiries from people new to a Unitarian congregation (and from some old-timers, too!) about Unitarian observance of what might seem at first sight to be a festival that did not fit well with a Unitarian stance in religion. Such inquiries continue, so I am glad to send what I then wrote into a new cycle of usefulness. The alterations I have made are an attempt to make it more timely, rather than any radical change of content.

For some people – devout Christians – the midwinter festival is primarily a celebration of the birth of Christ. The word Christmas itself is a contraction of ‘Christ’s Mass’. For some people – devout Jews – the midwinter festival is Chanukah (sometimes spelt Hanukkah), the Feast of Lights. For some people – Hindus – the festival to be celebrated as the solstice approaches is Divali, again the Feast of Lights.

For some people – shopkeepers and merchants – this is the busiest season of the year, when the cash registers ring most continuously. For some people – particularly those with small children – it is a time to focus on getting together as a family. For some people – those who feel out of harmony with all the conventional activities – it is a time to run away, to escape. For some people it is a time to get drunk. ("Drive carefully". he said... " It is the saviour's birthday. Practically everybody you see will be drunk." – Aldous Huxley: The Genius and the Goddess.) For some people – psychiatrists – this is also the busiest time of year, as they are called upon to treat the emotional casualties.

For most people this is, in one way or another, a time of stress. There is so much to be done within a limited time. And for most people, though the name Christmas is retained, the festival is far more secular than religious. A public opinion poll conducted in Germany some years ago indicated that 31% of the men and 28% of the women no longer regarded Christmas as a religious holiday at all. All the indications are that an honest response to the same question in the English-speaking world at the present time would produce substantially higher figures. The traditional name is kept and the traditional carols are sung, but they are sung in the same spirit as traditional folk songs.

What is the midwinter festival for Unitarians? Certainly they don't all see it in the same way. Some want to get as close to the traditional religious celebration of Christmas as they conscientiously can. Some want to stay outside all observances belonging to the

Christian tradition and simply celebrate the solstice. Some find it difficult or impossible to celebrate at all. "I start getting depressed about the beginning of October about this whole matter of Christmas", wrote one Vancouver Unitarian. "The sight of tables laden with more food than the folk around them can possibly need, and then remembering those in real need, spoils the whole holiday."

It is important that our celebration of the season should authentically express our own beliefs and lifestyle. Being a Unitarian has always entailed a greater or lesser degree of non-conformity, but not nonconformity for the sake of nonconformity. There is much in both the religious and the secular celebration of Christmas that most Unitarians can honestly and joyfully make their own. There is also much that most Unitarians will reject as inconsistent with what they want to be, and to do, and for which they will seek more positive alternatives. In one way or another, Unitarians do participate in the midwinter festivities. The seasonal services at our churches are among the best attended of the whole year.

The pages that follow represent one Unitarian's attempt to take a look at all aspects of the season – but not one Unitarian's alone, for I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to many others with whom I have discussed these issues over the years, or whose writings I have read with appreciation. Many of the ideas that I have made my own come from such sources, some of which I have now forgotten. In a very real sense I can echo Edwin Muir's words:

"I am debtor to all, to all I am bounden,
Fellowman and beast, season and solstice, darkness and light,
And life and death."

At this season, above all, I recognize and respond to that indebtedness, as I participate in a universal celebration with so many varied strands.

A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

I well remember the first Christmas after I became a Unitarian – or perhaps I should say, after I knew I was a Unitarian and acknowledged that fact. It was a time of strangely conflicting feelings. On the one hand, here was a time of festivity, well-nigh-universal festivity. One could hardly take kindly to assuming the role of Scrooge in his unregenerate days and declaring all this to be "humbug". One wanted to join in, to be caught up in the spirit of the season. And yet, at the same time, there were the demands of intellectual integrity to be met. The conventional celebrations of Christmas were bound up with theological schemes and pseudo-historical events to which one could no longer give one's assent.

How could one sing about "God and sinners reconciled" if one did not believe in the scheme of thought that presented Jesus Christ as a unique mediator and saviour? How could one sing about "yon virgin mother and child" if one did not believe the traditional teaching that Jesus had indeed been born of a virgin? How could one sing about choirs of angels if one didn't really believe in angels at all? How could one avoid being a hypocrite without being a spoilsport? These were very real questions; I was not very old at the time and was, in any case, passing through the teenage stage of rebellion against the established and traditional way of looking at things.

And so I was a little unhappy and bewildered, perhaps also a little cynical. I made uneasy compromises and got through the season as best I could. I was not very impressed by the efforts of some Unitarians I had met to make the observance a satisfactory one from their point of view by altering a word here and there in the traditional songs and affirmations. However liberal-minded they may have been, they were also literal-minded, "The word made flesh is here made word again," wrote Edwin Muir of his Calvinistic forebears, and some Unitarians had not altogether outgrown this aspect of their movement's Calvinistic ancestry. I myself had certainly not outgrown literal-mindedness at this stage of my religious evolution, but it was still more than one or two particular words that I took issue with. It was the whole pattern of thought they expressed. To the question asked by friends and relatives, "How can Unitarians celebrate Christmas?" I could find no satisfactory answer. Perhaps it was true that Unitarians should join with Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians in refusing to mark Christmas at all.

All that now seems a long time ago. I can honestly say that each Christmas since then has meant more to me than the one before. And I am sure that they have meant more to me than ever they could have done had I tried to remain within the bounds laid down in the church of my upbringing. It may seem strange that Christmas can mean more to someone not bound down to an exclusive dependence upon the Christian tradition. Yet this is exactly what I do claim.

Why? Because the response of a Unitarian to the season can include the whole wide range of its meaning, not confining itself to the one narrow emphasis to be found in traditional churches. A universal religious festival such as this must appeal to anyone who wants to be inclusive in outlook and sympathy.

THE HISTORY OF THE FESTIVAL

Is Christmas then a universal festival, in spite of the attempts to give it an exclusively Christian character? A brief look at its evolution gives the answer.

From the dimmest dawning of history, the days around the winter solstice, which in the old Julian calendar fell precisely on December 25, were regarded as a time of very special

significance. The great midwinter festival was observed by people who had no more than the rudiments of civilization, but who had learned to become acute observers of the natural world around them. It is not difficult to picture their feelings as summer gave place to harvest, as the leaves began to fall from the trees, as the first snows of winter began to sprinkle the earth. They knew that winter would in the same way eventually yield to spring. At least, it had always done so in the past. But in the absence of exact knowledge as to why the seasons changed as they did, there was always some room for doubt. Perhaps it wouldn't happen this time. Perhaps the days would go on getting shorter and shorter, colder and colder, until the world was swallowed up in a perpetual Arctic night.

So the approach of the winter solstice was marked with growing apprehension. Elaborate ceremonies took place. As the critical moment approached, huge fires were kindled on the hilltops to imitate the light and warmth of the retreating sun, and to lure it back again by magical means. When it began to be apparent that the magic was succeeding, that the days were lengthening instead of shortening, that the sun was returning, the feelings of relief and rejoicing were expressed in the greatest celebration of the year. All normal business came to an end; wars were suspended by common consent, there was dancing and feasting and singing. Kings and peasants, lords and serfs even exchanged places for a day, as all rejoiced in the rebirth of the year.

The period of festivities among most early peoples in the Northern Hemisphere lasted from December 25 to January 6, and it is no coincidence that these dates mark the traditional "Twelve Days of Christmas". The ancient Celtic and Germanic tribes celebrated these days as far back as their history can be traced; the Norsemen too believed that their gods were in some special sense present among them on earth at this time. A mysterious and awe-inspiring significance thus attached itself to the twelve days, as well as the air of rejoicing. Shakespeare echoed this ancient spirit when he wrote:

"And then...no spirit dares stir abroad;
the nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time."

In most parts of northern Europe the houses were decorated with greenery during this season. The symbolism here is the same as that of the fire or the Yule log. Just as the light and heat were supposed to attract the sun back, so the display of evergreens was designed to encourage the rebirth of the rest of nature, now lying stark in the chill of apparent death. In Britain, long before the earliest Christian missionaries arrived, the Angli celebrated December 25 as the beginning of the New Year. It was known to them as "Mother's Night." In ancient Babylon this season was the feast of Zagmuk; in the earliest days of Rome it was the Saturnalia.

But the most significant date in the emergence of Christmas as we know it now was 46 BCE, when Julius Caesar introduced the Babylonian calendar into Rome, making it the so-called Julian calendar. "From that day onward", wrote Arnold Toynbee, "December 25 was *Natalis Invicti*, the birthday of the Unconquered God, for all the inhabitants of the Roman world; and the festival already had, for them, part of the meaning it has today for Christians." The Unconquered God was generally identified with Mithra, a being both human and divine who came originally from Persia. His festival at the darkest season of the year marked the crowning triumph in a great cosmic drama. In the midst of seeming defeat, suddenly there came victory; in the place darkness, light. The powers of darkness and evil had seemed to be in the ascendancy; no mortal force could throw them back; but now through some miraculous and fearfully potent means salvation had been wrought, the battle had been won, and the path to the renewal of the world had begun.

The symbol of the Unconquered God, naturally enough, was the sun itself, the giver of life to all on earth. It was portrayed as a flaming disc, sometimes with human features inscribed upon it. For several centuries this symbol and the festival of *Natalis Invicti* continued to play a very great part in the life of the Roman Empire. It was not until the fourth century of our era that there came the first attempt to put Christ into Christmas. The first mention of a celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25 dates from the year 336.

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

In the earliest Christian church there had been no concern at all over the date of Jesus' birth. No one knew when it had taken place, but this was not the main reason that deterred people from deciding upon a date. The fact was that the celebration of birthdays – all birthdays – was looked upon as a pagan and undesirable custom. The great Christian leader Origen pointed out that only the bad characters in the Bible, like Pharaoh and Herod, celebrated their birthdays.

It was not until this attitude faded that Christians felt any compulsion to do the same as the other people among whom they lived; that is to celebrate the birthday of the one they worshipped. But, in due course the need was felt, and then there arose the necessity of fixing a date. In determining it, they depended mostly upon numerology and astrology, again following the usual practice of their time. March 28, April 2, April 19, May 20 were all dates which found their support during this period, partly at least because the rebirth of nature in the spring seemed to provide an appropriate setting for the coming of the one who would redeem the world. A spring season was also, it would seem, in the mind of the person who first set down the story of the shepherds and the angels. In the area around Bethlehem the shepherds are in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night from

about mid-March to mid-November. They are never out during the cold midwinter season.

But later tradition began to transfer the birth of Christ to the winter. The date now decided upon was January 6. A number of causes appear to have been at work in producing this change. The feast of Dionysus, observed in Greece as part of the celebration of the lengthening of the days, was held on January 6; so too in Alexandria was the birth of Aeon to the virgin Kore. References in ancient writings suggest that there were festivities elsewhere associated with other deities as well; at any rate, the date was one which already had a special significance for the people of the eastern Mediterranean, and it was therefore appropriately seized upon and accepted as a Christian festival.

In taking over an already established occasion in this way, the Christian leaders showed a fine perception of the way in which the human mind works. Revolutions, whether political, social or religious, never destroy the past entirely. Old ways of thought and practice inevitably find their way back. The wisest innovators have always tried to preserve as much continuity as they could consistently do without impairing their own purposes.

The choice of January 6 was therefore a natural one so far as the eastern part of the Roman Empire was concerned. But when Christianity became the official religion of the empire, its most important centre inevitably became Rome itself. And so the Roman observances rather than the Greek ones came to weigh heaviest in the minds of those who were setting the dates for the Christian festivals. Another change was called for. What could provide a more auspicious setting for the celebration of the birth of Christ than the great Roman festival of *Natalis Invicti* on December 25? The devotion of the people could be transferred without too much protest from the sun itself to the one who was symbolically called the Sun of Righteousness. Sir James Frazer uncovered the words of a Syrian Christian of the time who explained the reasons for the change thus:

"The reason why the fathers transferred the celebration of the sixth of January to the twenty-fifth of December was this. It was a custom of the heathen to celebrate on the same twenty-fifth of December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and festivities the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true nativity should be solemnized on that day and the festival of the Epiphany on the sixth of January. Accordingly, along with this custom, the practice has prevailed of kindling fires till the sixth."

So the festival was moved, and before long Augustine was summoning the people not to worship the sun on December 25, but rather the one who created the sun. In the same

way Pope Leo the Great rebuked those who still celebrated Christmas as the birthday of the sun rather than the birthday of Christ.

THE CHRISTIAN BATTLE AGAINST CHRISTMAS

But many people in the churches were as resistant to change then as at any later period. Most of the eastern churches fought stubbornly against the efforts from Rome to move Christmas Day to December 25. It took fifty years for Constantinople to accept the change, and another fifty years after that to convince Egypt. In Jerusalem opposition was even stiffer, since the Christians there, living in the same country as Jesus himself, supposed themselves to be a better authority on when he was born than the imperial power in Rome. It took two hundred years for them to yield. But the church even farther east, the Armenian Church, was never converted at all, and it continues to this day to celebrate Christmas on January 6. The western Christians eventually gave up trying to win them over, contenting themselves with calling the Armenians "men with hardened heads and stiff necks".

But throughout the west the festival of *Natalis Invicti*, the rebirth of the Unconquered Sun on December 25, became Christmas Day. It retained many of the features of the earlier festivals: the lights, the giving of presents (which had been a prominent feature of the Saturnalia) and the decorating of houses and churches with greenery. The process went ahead very successfully. The origins of the old pre-Christian customs were largely forgotten, and they were all given a new Christian interpretation. Wherever Christianity spread the same process was encouraged. So Pope Gregory wrote to Augustine of Canterbury after the conversion of England, advising him to allow the Christians to continue their former custom of killing and roasting large numbers of oxen at this season of the year, "to the glory of God" rather than, as before, "to the Devil". The traditional mid-winter festivities of all parts of Europe were incorporated into the Christian observances, and some, such as the various ceremonies associated in many places with the Yule log, continue to this day.

But the battle among Christians over Christmas continued. The Armenians were not the only nonconformists. After the Reformation a great many Protestants, who were well aware of the pagan origins of the occasion, tried to abolish Christmas. Religion was for them a very serious affair, not to be associated with popular festivities. They tried to reintroduce the term "Lord's Day" in place of Sunday, because Sunday means the day of the Sun God, and Sunday, like Christmas, had originally been devoted to his worship. In England the Puritans denounced Christmas as a "wanton Bacchanalian feast", and celebrations were at one time forbidden by Act of Parliament. The same happened in the early days in New England. The first pilgrims, with all their stern insistence on the keeping of the Sabbath, worked as usual on Christmas Day, neglecting it completely.

Later in the century the General Court of Massachusetts passed a law which ran as follows: "...anybody who is found observing, by abstinence from labour, feasting or any other way, any such days as Christmas day, shall pay for every such offence five shillings."

This non-observance of Christmas was turned to good account during the Revolutionary wars. In 1776 Washington's army crossed the Delaware river on the night December 25 to surprise and rout the Hessian troops, who in blissful ignorance of local custom had supposed that there could be no fighting on Christmas Day, and had given themselves over to revelry.

SOME TRADITIONAL SYMBOLS

But in spite of this opposition on the part of many Christians, Christmas continued to grow in popularity as a midwinter festival. By the time Clement Moore wrote *The Night Before Christmas* and Charles Dickens wrote his *Christmas Carol* the full tide of popular support was swinging back to the old observances. Many of the ancient customs, songs and symbols that had been half-forgotten were now rediscovered, prominent among them the Christmas tree and Santa Claus. Both have a history running back through many centuries, but have only come into their own in English-speaking countries during the past hundred years.

There can be little doubt that the Christmas tree itself is simply a form of the ancient Yggdrasil, the World Tree that figures so prominently in the Norse Eddas, though it is to be found in various forms throughout the world. It is a symbol of life itself, and appears appropriately enough at the season of the beginning of life's renewal out of apparently triumphing death. Individuals may come and go, but life goes on. The decorations on the tree represent its fruits, and are intended as a symbol of the endless variety of the gifts of life. Significantly, many of these decorations are themselves presents.

In line with their attitude towards Christmas as a whole, the Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries denounced the Christmas tree without mincing words. A German church leader of that time spoke scornfully of what he called the "Christmas or fir tree which people set up in their houses, hang with dolls and sweets and afterwards shake and deflower; whence comes the custom," he added, "I know not. It is child's play...far better were it to point the children to the spiritual cedar tree, Jesus Christ."

But the more general attitude had been to incorporate the tree, like other ancient symbols, into new Christian observances. The World tree was already well known from the creation story in the book of Genesis. Another significance was also obvious. In the early legends from the Northland, Odin had been portrayed as hanging for nine days from the World Tree, pierced with a spear, offering himself to himself as he sought the victory

which would enable him to enter upon his divine powers. Frequently enough in the hymns and rituals of Christianity the Holy Rood or Cross was figured under the form of a tree, only here its fruit was the God who would die and rise again, bringing new life to all. This fitted exactly into the place prepared for it by existing ideas and practices, which are still today very thinly veiled in some places. In the popular religion of some remote areas of Mexico, the Cross still retains its original character as a sacred Tree, festooned with gifts from the people at the beginning of the year to implore a good harvest, and thereby the renewal of their own lives during the days to come.

Little of this history may be in the minds of those who buy evergreen trees to place in their homes today. Yet deep within them stirs the same response to the renewal of life that from time immemorial took the dwellers in the northern forests out at the season of the winter solstice, to bring in the coniferous boughs to set amid their blazing fires and festive tables.

As for Santa Claus, he too has appeared in many forms during his long life. Originally, he was an historical personage, Nicholas, bishop of Myra in Asia Minor during the fourth century. No one knows very much about him, except that he became a saint in due course, and for some reason or other, became more and more popular as the patron saint of children, of travellers and eventually of Russia under the imperial regime. Presumably it was his Russian associations that have made him so much a figure from the frozen north, for his original home was certainly far removed from Arctic snows and reindeer. And his association with children brought him his reputation as a bearer of gifts, which were distributed at the time of his feast on December 6, as they still are in some European countries.

The same process that led Christmas to draw into itself all the other features of winter festivals was at work here too. The Saturnalia had long since made Christmas the time of giving presents, so it was only natural that the feast of Nicholas should be drawn into the general festivities, the good saint's name changing from its original Sanctus Nicolaus to the new York Dutch corruption of Santaklaus. His enormous present-day popularity dates from the publication in 1823 of Clement Moore's *The Night Before Christmas*. Few of the features of our Christmas festivities owe as much to the inventiveness of one person.

These are only some of the components of the richly varied midwinter celebration. They belong to the season as completely as does the legend of the Christ-child and the theology that has grown up around that legend. With this wide range of meanings in mind, it is now possible to place the specifically Christian interpretations of Christmas in a true perspective.

THE CHRISTIAN STORY

It is here that Unitarians begin to feel uneasy, because of the influence of a theology that we cannot share. Yet even the theology of Christmas, in its essential nature, is not as foreign to us as it might first sight appear.

Once again, it is necessary to appeal to history for an understanding of the real situation. We go back to an age when the real and the fabulous were not as sharply separated as they are today, at least in the more sophisticated parts of the world.

The people among whom Christianity arose would certainly have understood the way in which William Blake expressed himself:

"What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun arises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly Host crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."

This power of the imagination was more frequently found in the ancient world than in Blake's day or our own. It gave rise spontaneously to myths and legends, which attached themselves to the figures of those who made an impact upon the lives of their fellows. Today we find miracles an obstacle to our acceptance of a story; in the ancient world, before the birth of science, the reverse was true. There were plenty of people who could testify to first-hand experiences of miracles, just as there are in simpler cultures today.

Early Christianity, it has also to be remembered, was persecuted and on the defensive – conditions which were psychologically right for fantasy and wishful inventiveness. The credentials of Jesus as Messiah and Saviour had to be established, first of all in the eyes of Jews whose expectations were that he would be a mighty ruler of the house and lineage of David, not a carpenter's son from the unpromising territory of Galilee.

The logic of the day could easily meet the situation. Christians argued thus: Jesus was the promised Messiah. The Messiah, it had been foretold, was to be a descendant of David (the ancestry was traced through his father, for this was before the idea a virgin birth arose). Again, it had been foretold that the Messiah would be born in the city of David, Bethlehem. Therefore Jesus was born in Bethlehem. No factual evidence was necessary: it was proved by pure logic. But to convince the sceptical, more and more detail came to be added to the story, until it gave a colourful picture of the way Jesus' parents had to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census, and gave a complete family tree of Jesus' descent from David. (Two of these family trees are recorded, one in the Gospel of Luke and the other in Gospel of Matthew. They are quite different.)

Again, it had been foretold by the prophets that the Messiah would come out of Egypt. So the infant Jesus was taken to Egypt. The legend continued to grow.

But it was not only Jewish logic that had to be satisfied, Christianity came to birth in a world dominated by Greek thought. The one whom Christians worshipped could not be inferior to those worshipped by other religions. The heroes and saviours of the mystery religions of the day had all been supernaturally born as descendants of the gods. Even Plato, who was no saviour but only a philosopher, was reputed to have been born of a virgin.

So again, imagination began to work. After all, no one knew that Jesus had not been supernaturally born. He may well have been. Once again they looked at what the prophets had said about the Messiah. There was a passage in Isaiah that read, "A young woman shall conceive and bear a son." As the context shows (Isaiah, Chapter 7), this referred to something which was taking place in the prophet's own time, but in popular interpretation it had come to be applied to a future Messiah. Furthermore, the Greek translation of the original Hebrew had narrowed the interpretation of "young woman" to "virgin". What more was needed? The Messiah would be born of a virgin. Jesus was the Messiah. Therefore Jesus had been born of a virgin.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MYTHS

We do not have to stand in condemnation of those who proceeded to spell out the story in detail. Even today there are those who write history in terms of "this is the way it must surely have been". Miraculous births were commonplace among stories of great men in the ancient world. Several of the Roman Emperors were hailed as sons of a God. So were figures in the history of Greece, Egypt, and the Middle East. Among the greatest names in the history of religion, Confucius, Zoroaster and the Buddha were all said to have been miraculously born.

The historical Jesus dropped out of sight very rapidly as this process continued. The attempt to remember him at Christmas and to celebrate it as his birthday is a modern development on the part of liberal Protestants. Some Unitarians have adopted this interpretation of the season, but there is a lot to be said for taking stock of the teachings and permanent significance of Jesus at some time of the year when there is less pressure to confuse fact with fiction, history with myth. The life and teachings of Jesus are worthy of study in a different atmosphere altogether.

The disappearance of Jesus from the celebration of Christmas was masked by the fact that for orthodox Christians Jesus was swallowed up in Christ as one composite being, Jesus-Christ, both human and in some sense divine. Jesus is a figure of history, Christ is a figure of myth, and the two are really quite different, although they have been fused thus in Christian theology.

What is myth? It is a product of the imagination. It is poetry or drama in which those who tell or portray the story themselves participate. Its function is to uncover in symbolic terms the deeper levels of human life and give us new insight into our condition and into ourselves. It brings up the archetypal figures of the mother and child, shepherds and angels, and kings following a star across the desert. In the Christmas myth is celebrated the coming of the Christ.

And what is the Christ? Essentially a spirit or influence, personified over and over again in human form, an influence to help save humanity from lower levels of being and raise it higher. The Christian interpretation of this spirit has usually been exclusive, claiming that it became incarnate in only one man, Jesus Christ. But there has been and is a broader tradition, which sees this as the spirit of all who have shown the way to more abundant living.

Surely this expresses a real insight which Unitarians too can share. Some people's lives do exude a spirit that helps their fellows rise higher in wisdom and love. It can be called the Christ-spirit or the Buddha-spirit, or the Krishna-spirit, or by any other name. The label is not important, but the reality remains.

INCARNATION

It is of this reality summed up in the traditional term INCARNATION that Christmas stands as a symbol. The great Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita, puts it thus:

"When goodness grows weak, when evil increases, I make myself a body.
In every age, I come back
to deliver the holy, to destroy the sin of the sinner, to establish righteousness."

The same theme recurs in the Buddhist Scriptures:

"Know that from time to time a Tathagata is born into the world, a fully Enlightened One, blessed and worthy, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy with knowledge of the world, unsurpassed as a guide to erring souls, a teacher of gods and mortals, a blessed Buddha. The truth doth he proclaim both in its letter and in its spirit ~ lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, lovely in its consummation. The higher life doth he make known, in all its purity ... and in all its perfectness." (Tevigga Sutta)

Nor is such an idea entirely unheard of in the west. In the words of E.G. Cheyne:

"Some despise saviours, and are content with themselves and with things as they are. Some adore the saviours of the past, and ignore those of the present. Many will not heed the saviours of the present, but look to the saviours of the future. Nevertheless, it is impossible for the world to go on without its successive saviours."

Whatever theological interpretations some people might want to place upon such utterances, those who take a Unitarian position would not be willing to accept that the difference between such outstanding figures and ourselves is in any sense a difference of kind. It is a difference of degree, and every one of us is to some degree able to be a vehicle of this spirit in the world, to be to that extent a Christ – to be able to say, as Angelus Silesius said:

"Should Christ be born a thousand times anew,
Despair, my friend, unless he's born in you."

This is one of the most significant of all of the meanings of Christmas, and it is one we are in danger of missing if we leave out the specifically Christian contribution to the festival, for the specifically Christian contribution is that of incarnation. Expressed and symbolized in picturesque legend, what it says is the same as the Stoic writer Epictetus was saying at the time when the legend was growing:

"You are a distinct portion of the essence of God, and contain a certain part of God in yourself. Why then are you so ignorant of your noble birth?"

In other words, there is that in each one of us through which we transcend the narrow bounds of individual selfhood and by the power of which we can raise our own lives and the lives of others to higher levels. Different persons realize this process to a different extent, and there are some persons who realize it in so high a degree that around them the myths and legends crystallize, and they come to be hailed as saviours.

We can best look at this process through the eyes of poets – for, after all, only a poet can give satisfactory expression to it. That is why we find the poetry of Christmas so largely satisfying and the theology of Christmas so largely unsatisfying. John Masefield wrote:

"Might not the birth of everyone be hailed
As a divine appearance come to lead
Us to the living comradeship we need?
Each brings a person hitherto unknown,
For want of whom we travail and have ailed."

In other words – everyone is potentially Christ. The celebration of the birth of Christ is the celebration of the birth of Everyone. Here are the moving words of the Russian novelist Turgenev:

"All at once some man came up from behind and stood beside me. I did not turn towards him; but at once I felt that this man was Christ. Emotion, curiosity, awe overmastered me suddenly. I made an effort...and looked at my neighbour. A face like everyone's, a face like all faces. The eyes looked a little upwards, quietly and

intently. The lips closed, but not compressed, the upper lip, as it were, resting on the lower; a small beard parted in two. The hands folded and still. And the clothes on him like everyone's. 'What sort of Christ is this?' I thought. 'Such an ordinary, ordinary person! It can't be!' I turned away. But I had hardly averted my eyes from this ordinary person when I felt again that it really was none other than Christ standing beside me. Again I made an effort over myself.... And again the same face, like all faces, the same everyday though unknown features. And suddenly my heart sank, and I came to myself. Only then I realized that just such a face – a face like all faces – is the face of Christ." (from *Dream Tales and Prose Poems*)

Christ is everyone – he is you and me – yet he is ourselves transposed, as it were, into a higher key, to save us into deeper wisdom and larger love, and manifested supremely in those persons who have done most to lift the whole human race towards higher levels of life.

This universal truth is the innermost core of the meaning of Christmas, and it is one in which Unitarians can fully share. In fact, it was a great Unitarian, James Martineau, who said in memorable words more than a century ago; "The Incarnation is true not of Christ exclusively, but of Humankind universally." In celebration of this deep reality Unitarians join, and it gives meaning to all that is said at Christmas about peace and goodwill. For it is upon these potentialities within humanity that peace and goodwill ultimately depend.

FOR ONE SEASON ONLY?

There are those who say that this is a spirit that, if it means anything at all, should be evident throughout the year, and not just at one season. Of course, the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier had a valid point when he had the nonconforming monk say to his brothers:

"The outward symbols disappear
From him whose inward sight is clear;
And small must be the choice of days
To him who fills them all with praise.
Keep, while you need it, brothers mine
With honest zeal your Christmas sign;
But judge not him who every morn
Feels in his heart the Lord Christ born."

But how many people do in fact live at this level all the time? The great value of seasons and celebrations is that they come as continuing reminders of the need to raise ourselves out of the rut into which we can so easily slip, and start once again to experience life more fully and deeply. W.H. Auden expressed the other side of the picture when he wrote in *For the Time Being*:

"Music and sudden light
 Have interrupted our routine tonight,
 And swept the filth of habit from our hearts.
 O here and now our endless journey starts."

So Christmas can come for Unitarians, no less than for others, as a time when we can "sweep the filth of habit from our hearts", and enrich our lives from many-sided brilliance of the season. Those who belong to religious bodies which impose a theological straitjacket upon their adherents will look at only one facet of Christmas, but even from that they can uncover deep insights. More fortunate are those who can, if they choose to do so, look at all the facets, and experience the flashes of fire from the jewel as it turns in their hands. They can join in the songs and festivity and legendry and poetry of the season without any feeling that it all has to be taken literally and desiccated into the forms of any one theology. With Edwin Muir they can say:

"I am debtor to all, to all am I bounden.
 Fellow-man and beast, season and solstice, darkness and light,
 And life and death ... forgotten prayers
 To gods forgotten bring blessings upon me....
 The dead in their silences keep me in memory,
 Have me in hold, to all I am bounden."

LOPSIDED CELEBRATIONS

But we Unitarians at the beginning of the 21st century have more than the limitations of traditional theologies to overcome. The deeper meaning of this season is threatened today as strongly as ever it was by the Puritans. It is threatened by powerful forces with the life of modern Western society.

The fact of the matter is that our Christmas celebrations are lopsided. The full story of Christmas is never told, and this is surely significant. It's not simply that many church people gloss over all the non-Christian elements in the festival, and try to pretend that it's solely Christian. Even if you take the Christian festival of Christmas and that alone, still you find our present-day celebrations have this lopsided character. The Christian celebration of Christmas was once a full-blooded one, bringing in all the elements that go to the making of a symbolic and legendary portrayal of the facts of real life.

Take the medieval mystery plays, for instance. Their purpose was to parade in picturesque symbolism an interpretation of the significant facts of life and death. When they portrayed the Christian story of Christmas, not only did you see Joseph and Mary and the baby in the manger, not only the angels and the friendly beasts, not only the

shepherds and the wise men: you saw also Herod and his soldiers and the wailing of the women and the massacre of innocent infants. This was built into the very celebration of Christmas. December 28, the fourth day of Christmas, is set down in the ancient liturgical calendar as Holy Innocents' Day.

What part does all this play in our modern celebration of Christmas? None at all, on the surface at any rate. We hear all about the shepherds and the wise men and the angels. Modern plays and stories even let the imagination rove around other shepherds or wise men or angels who didn't get to Bethlehem. But we don't say much about those other characters that, according to the ancient legend, did get there. Where are Herod's soldiers, their swords running with blood, and the weeping mothers, in the tasteful tableaux and creches erected in churches and thoughtful stores nowadays? The only slight mention they get is when the Coventry Carol is sung – coincidentally named after one of the many cities in which there was a slaughter of innocents during World War II.

The fact is that Herod and the innocents are too close to our real world for us to want to think about them at this time. So we push them out of sight. Even we Unitarians, who pride ourselves on down-to-earth realism, usually push them out of sight. British Unitarians seventy years ago produced a Golden Treasury of the Bible, in which the rest of the nativity story is reproduced unaltered, but the massacre of the innocents and the flight into Egypt find no place in its pages.

Our present-day society has been called fun-oriented; even supposedly serious subjects like religion have to be fun. And Herod and the Holy Innocents are manifestly not funny, unless you could find them a place in that species of humour called "sick". They are a little too painful; too close to realities we want to forget about at the season to be jolly. So let's make merry and bask in our lopsided celebrations, we say. We try to escape, not from the world of facts to the world of imagination (for that can be wholesome enough) but to a world that distorts both fact and imagination.

What are the real facts? Joy never exists without sorrow as well. Life never exists without death as well. You can't have all light with no darkness, and if you believe you can, you are dooming yourself to frustration. That's the end product of the lopsided celebration of Christmas so typical today – frustration. If you have unrealistic expectations of life, then you are going to be disappointed.

But we do have unrealistic hopes and expectations. We expect some sort of magic to occur at Christmas. We expect peace to be conjured out of strife, love out of hate. But these are not conjured into being. They have to be worked for and sacrificed for. We say that the infant in the manger symbolizes a new spirit in the world which will make of it a better place, but we forget that according to the full story, that infant began his life to the accompaniment of Herod's massacre of the infants and ended his life in hours of torture

and agony, at a public execution. There's not much in that story to be sentimental about. The Mediterranean world of two thousand years ago was not a quiet and peaceful place full of angels and kings following stars. It was a place of hideous squalor and suffering, where slaves lived out their lives at a level lower than that of domestic animals, where the march of Caesar's legions struck fear into the hearts of people in all corners of the empire, where plagues and epidemics carried thousands to an early grave, where cruel gods were worshipped with crueller rituals. Multitudes of families starved to death while a favoured few enjoyed a life of luxury.

All these features of human life are with us still. But these are not the things we think about at Christmas.

The fact that we do not think about these things at Christmas, that we banish Herod and the Innocents from our minds, brings its inescapable consequences. You can't fool around with real facts forever. If you refuse to accept them they take their revenge in subtle ways. You may gush with sentiment about joy and goodwill and merriment, but how does it all work out in practice? All the millions of dollars' worth of war toys that are bought at Christmas aren't marketed by sheer pressure of commercial propaganda. People buy them for their children because subconsciously they have a deep resentment against all this talk of peace and goodwill at the very time of year when they are harassed by the weather and by all the things that have to be done. There are deep hostilities engendered, which have to find expression somehow. You can get drunk and start a fight. Some people do. You can express your vindictiveness towards people associated with some other nation or race or ideology or religion. Some people do. You can take it out on your children or business associates, or even kick the cat. Some people do. But a socially acceptable way of doing it is to buy realistic models of weapons of mass destruction for your children.

Whatever form the hostility takes, it is there. Sometimes it takes some rather striking forms. A few years ago, the press carried the following news item:

BETHLEHEM. — Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests fought with sticks and bottles on Christmas Eve in the Church of the Nativity here. Orthodox priests tried to prevent the Catholic ones from standing on the church roof, which the Orthodox sect claims belongs to them. Authorities stepped in at once to stop the clash at the church, believed to be built over the grotto where Mary gave birth to the infant Jesus.

Another item from the press similarly describes expressions of hostility in a religious setting. It is headed "Santa Effigy burned before Cathedral", and continues...

Two hundred and fifty children of Dijon last night watched a red-robed effigy of Santa Claus burned on the square in front of the cathedral of Saint Benigne. The local Catholic

Youth Association issued a statement declaring: "Desirous of fighting lies and deceitful fables, we have burned this Santa Claus. It is not intended as a sporting or commercial show, but to proclaim loudly that lies cannot arouse the religious sentiment of a child and are in no way a method of education for life."

But if we can't take it out on members of other religions or on Santa Claus, we take it out somewhere. Maybe we take it out by poking other people in the crowd with our elbows, or as in one recent case, by throwing the television set downstairs. Or, worse, we get drunk and mow someone down with a car. Or again, we express our hostility by writing letters to the editor damning the commercialization of Christmas or the lack of real concern that people have.

THE HOLIDAY SYNDROME

Psychologists and psychiatrists have paid increasing attention in recent years to the varied aspects of this phenomenon. In an article published a few years ago in Maclean's, June Callwood wrote:

"Comparing notes, doctors discovered that many their psychiatric patients suffered severe setbacks during the Christmas season. Succeeding studies of normal people revealed a vast, sub-surface ocean of unrest, a distress that seems so ill-timed that its victims usually hide it under a pseudo-enthusiastic and trying kind of gaiety...

"One of the world's most distinguished psychoanalysts, Ernest Jones, once wrote that Christmas represents psychologically "the ideal of resolving all family discord in happy reunion." It's an excruciatingly vulnerable ideal, since distance, divorce and death can shatter it, while old grievances within the family can make success chancy.

"There is a sharp rap of despair when the family can't be together, or when it can and the gathering tends to stir up old irritations rather than erase them. The disappointment can be so acute that rage breaks out readily – murders are not uncommon at Christmas, or accidents involving a violent mood and family dissension on a monumental scale. In some countries...the suicide rate climbs at this season."

These symptoms of a deep-seated malaise have been reported over and over in many independent studies. In one, it was stated that as many as 90% of varied groups of people showed "adverse emotional reactions to Christmas pressures." Physical symptoms such as coronaries, strokes, and other conditions aggravated by emotional stress multiply.

At a more personal level, I once received a long letter from a woman in my congregation which ran in part as follows:

"You must be intensely aware, as I have become increasingly conscious lately, of the widespread sadness and depression that seems to grip so many people just before and during the Christmas season. I have thought about it a lot this year, partly because the intensity of my own feelings nearly cracked me -- but mostly because it seemed that on every side I kept running into individuals who were either dreading the coming of Christmas, or facing it with grim determination, or (afterwards) relieved and rather incredulous that they'd made it. People spoke to me of being ashamed of being so cranky with those they love, of almost uncontrollable weeping spells, of the agony of holding back tears and breakdown when they felt they shouldn't spoil other people's pleasure, of the anxiety of drowning children in their own pain, of the physical ache of loneliness, of the hopeless knowledge that this had been going on for years in some cases at this season and would perhaps continue on and on.

For many women, the triggering off, if not the cause, is extreme physical and emotional fatigue caused by trying to accomplish a lot more than usual in a short period of time, together with the feeling that a lot of people are depending on you to 'do it'. I certainly acknowledge membership in this group, although I have learned a little to choose which dependencies I will allow. But it is not only that, of course. Men know this low time too. There is, I believe, a seasonal low for many people at the dark of the year, and perhaps we should pay more than lip service to this, do more than talk about primitive man in his innocence and ignorance lighting up fires to brighten the darkness and entice back the sun.

As I look back for myself and realize for the first time clearly the rhythmic and recurring nature of my negative psychic states at this time of the year, I am aware that for me there has always come the angel's song -- sometimes disguised in some pretty funny ways but always recognizable afterwards if not at the time of happening, always unexpected and at different times: sometimes before Christmas and sometimes not until the turn of the year. But whether another year I will have faith to just wait for the miracle in whatever guise, I don't know.

Partly it is the general joyousness of the season, the feeling that one shouldn't feel so sad or low, or at least shouldn't let it show. Our culture and society lay this on us, and it is reinforced by individuals saying things like "You shouldn't feel like that", or "your feelings are irrational (immature, ridiculous, etc.)!" So we make ourselves feel worse by trying not to show how we feel, by trying to pretend that we too are happy and gay. I sometimes wonder how much of the expressed jollity of Christmas is of this nature, or just plain escape.

What I am really writing about, apart from to share some of myself with you, is to suggest that you might consider really facing this with us all in a service well before Christmas. Don't wait till it is almost upon us, but make us all think about it and

somehow prepare ourselves consciously, so that when the darkness comes upon us, we may recognize it for what it is. (The way a woman can recognize her monthly low and can say 'Oh, so that's what it's all about!') And also we may become aware of the importance of looking for the light – recognizing the angel voices when they come. And for the ones who never feel like this, it won't hurt them to be aware of how it is for others."

My response to this letter was not only to speak from the pulpit on the subject, but also to convene a subsequent meeting to which fifty people came, to compare notes and seek solutions. Before proceeding to proposed solutions, however one further aspect of the problem needs to be considered.

The commercialization of Christmas is regularly deplored in many circles, including churches. The pressure from advertisers to spend is inescapable, and people respond on a scale that is almost unbelievable, often putting themselves into debt for many months in order to buy things that neither they nor the recipients of them as gifts really need. Billions of dollars are squandered in a great spending spree. At the same time we are conscious of the poverty, misery and starvation that stalk the face of our earth. Feelings of guilt may well be suppressed, but they are still present and still potent.

A further dimension to the problem is identified in a report issued by the Science Council of Canada under the heading "'Tis the Season to Consume":

"Christmas ... has over the years become distorted into a festival of consumption ... A growing number of people are reacting to a society where love and friendship, traditionally associated with the Holiday Season, have become unconvincing unless accompanied by the tangible evidence of market purchases.... No one can really quarrel with the desirability of a festive occasion now and then, be it religious or secular. From a conserver standpoint we can, however, question the desirability of primarily associating the holiday season with material consumption.... High material consumption requires a high rate of throughput of non-renewable resources and a concomitant environmental impact. In the light of increasing awareness of the finiteness of natural resources and of disparities in wealth distribution across nations, dedicating our major holiday season to material consumption puts us in a moral contradiction."

Many of our current practices, then, bring undesirable consequences in at least three different dimensions. First, they divert our purchasing power away from patterns that can be of real help to the dispossessed and underprivileged, and thus conflict with the basic religious value that we are members one of another – a value of which this season is supposed to remind us. Second, they use the non-renewable resources of our planet in a wasteful and reckless manner. And third, they bring in their train emotional upsets, frustrations and unhappiness for ourselves and those close to us.

The pressures are powerful. But they are not irresistible, and in recent years, more and more people have been actively looking for a better alternative. Churches and other organizations have been looking for ways to make our celebrations more productive and meaningful. The positive aspects of our midwinter celebration can be accentuated and the negative ones avoided as far as is possible without contracting out of the wider culture altogether (which is a forlorn hope in this world of interdependence).

The goal is to get away from an emphasis upon material goods and away from an emphasis on a narrow interpretation of the self. One Unitarian perceptively commented: "Are the generous ever lonely?" The most meaningful gift, both for the receiver and for the giver, is the gift of ourselves. As long as we focus on how much we are going to get (whether of material things or of recognition as a giver of them), how much we are going to eat, how much we are going to drink, what further titillation we can give our jaded senses, we remain part of the problem. When we transcend our more limited self-centredness and become part of the onward flow of life itself, one with the life of others, one with the life of the earth, then we will move in the true spirit of celebration that will lift our lives out of the rut of tedium and the gnawing sense of purposelessness and desperation.

OUR OWN CELEBRATIONS

How can we celebrate? How can we maintain our principles unimpaired, not compromise our own authentic beliefs, not squander the earth's limited resources, not be oblivious to the suffering of our fellow human beings – and yet not squeeze all the joy and spontaneity out of life? It can be done, but it isn't always easy, and we need to pool our thinking and experience as to how to do this most effectively. A great deal of such pooling has gone on, both in Unitarian circles and elsewhere, in recent years.

Harvey Cox pointed out in his provocative book, The Feast of Fools that "festivity and fantasy are not only worthwhile in themselves, they are absolutely vital to human life. This is because they link us to past and future, incorporating into our lives 'the generations'." But in recent years, he continued, the emphasis upon the role of the worker and of the thinker have caused our celebrative and imaginative faculties to atrophy. "We have so few festivals left, and the ones we have are so stunted in their ritual and celebrative power.... This may account in part for the malaise and tedium of our time. Celebration requires, in short, what is usually thought of as a religion."

Such a religion can be practised by individuals, within families, in church rituals and in the community at large. It can draw upon a rich variety of resources from many traditions, as we rediscover the true spirit of the season.