

Christmas, 9/11, & the Spirit of Religion

Three months ago, the Enemy of God strutted across the world's stage before millions of astonished TV viewers, and gave one of his most impressive performances. As he exited to stunned silence amid the blood and rubble, I could almost hear him turn to God and sneer, "Top that!"

How strange, how marvelous, that God's response—now, as ever—is a baby born in a barn, far not only from the comfortable inn out front, but also from the large urban centers of worldly power. It makes you wonder: Does God know something about war and victory that the powers of the world can't understand?

Shortly after 9/11, world champion middleweight boxer Anthony Mundine of Australia, a convert to Islam, was stripped of his title by the World Boxing Council for a public statement as profoundly revealing as it was offensive: "(Americans) call it an act of terrorism, but *if you can understand religion* and our way of life, it's not about terrorism. *It's about fighting for God's laws*, and Americans brought it upon themselves."

Nowhere amid countless editorials and interviews with politicians, military leaders, professors and other experts have I seen portrayed so clearly the battle Jesus came to win—and in that sense, the essence of Christmas: "God gave the Law through Moses," as John declared, "but *grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*" (John 1:17TEV) The "Joy to the World" which Christmas proclaims, is this: "He rules the world/ With truth and grace"—not with religion and shame.

Our Father is truthful because He wants us to stay on the course that's best for us. He's graceful because He made us unable in our own strength to do that. Nor are we capable of bearing the shame from not measuring up. So He sent His son Jesus not to cover up our shame, but to bear it for us (Romans 7:18-8:1), and His Spirit to empower us. Christmas is not about understanding religion, but about knowing your Father.

Here's how to "understand religion": Don't trust your Father. Grab your moral-achievements fig leaf and hide your shame from Him and other people. Don't give your shame to Jesus, but generate your own righteousness and bear it yourself. Soon, you'll either crumble under its weight--from depression to compulsive-addictive behaviors--or dump it onto others.

That's the root not only of religious sectarianism--found in many Christian groups as well--but also a host of other prejudices, from racism to sexism, all aimed at making me look good in comparison to someone else. Eventually, this desperation to cover your shame leads men to fear and hate women, as the Taliban, because women not only see through our male pretensions but--most frightening of all--femininity bears grace, which beckons trust. Ultimately, you become anxious instead to fight for "God's Laws," because you've never rested in your Father's grace and truth. Enter Osama bin Laden, a lost little boy among 52 siblings before his distant and strictly religious father.

It wasn't always this way in the Middle East. Amid the TV images of Afghani troops advancing on horseback, few realized, for example, that the ancient Arab culture was famed for its achievements in science. The world's number system today, Arabic numerals, freed mathematics from cumbersome Roman numerals and blew open the doorway for virtually all later scientific advance, including the computer I write this on.

With the coming of Islam, however, scientific study was seen as a threat to the religious authorities. “The study which took the place of the discarded sciences was not, however, theology,” as my old seminary textbook on Islam notes. “The master science of the Muslim world was Law.” Thus upon his capture, 20-year-old Californian convert to Islam and Taliban soldier John Walker Lindh explained, “The Taliban are the only government that actually provides Islamic law.”

This devotion to Law undergirds “the basis of all Muslim theology and ethics,” as my textbook continues, namely, a belief that “God is the omnipotent master and man His creature who is ever in danger of incurring His wrath.” The “characteristic sign of the Believer,” therefore, is “an ever-present fear of God, and its opposite is ‘heedlessness’ or frivolity’.” And so Mohammed stressed not only “the final retribution of the Judgment,” but also “the prospect of some awful calamity in the present life in punishment for their rejection of his warning.”

Now there’s someone who “understands religion.” Thus, 9/11.

The battle we face today is manifestly spiritual, and the ultimate victory belongs to Jesus. But as He declared, Satan cannot cast out Satan (Matt. 12:25-26). No matter how evil our enemy or how correct our doctrine, as long as Christians ourselves remain trapped in the seductive grip of Law, striving to do it right when we’ve never trusted our Father enough to confess we can’t, this all-too-familiar spirit of religion within us will sabotage our efforts to battle it in others.

For the Story—from dirty manger and nameless shepherds to conceiving apart from her husband--proclaims that Christmas is not about doing it right, but about being real. When Jesus is born in your heart, that is, you can go to your Father just as you are, broken and needy, like a child. You don’t have to burn yourself out any more trying to hide your shame from not measuring up to the Law. You can trust your Father and cry out “I can’t do it right!” like the Apostle in Romans 7:18-24. You can fall at Jesus’ feet, and surrender to Him. Then, you can go restored and open before your Father—like an excited child on Christmas morning, ready to receive the gifts you need to let Him do it right. (Luke 11:9-13).

Moses came to tell us *what* to do, but Jesus came to show us *Who* does it. Hint: It’s not you. (Ezek. 36:24ff; Phil. 2:13; Rom. 12:1-2). Christmas, therefore, is not about what we do for God, but what God has done for us (1 Jn 4:10). It’s not about *achieving* a standard of behavior, but about *receiving* your Father’s gift of son/daughter-ship. When the deceptive and destructive powers of the world have broken us open enough to confess at last we can’t save ourselves, our Father pours His Spirit into us. That’s how He makes us into His sons and daughters (Rom. 8:14-16), animated no longer by our misguided natural desires, but rather, by His supernatural desire to fulfill our created destiny (I Peter 1:23; John 1:13; John 3:6). Becoming a “real Jew”—that is, a true man or woman of God --is therefore “the work of God’s Spirit, not of the written Law” (Rom 2:28-29).

It’s a good thing. Because for 58 years I’ve tried, really hard, and I just can’t come up with enough discipline, talent, energy, and perseverance to overcome my thoughts and behaviors that God has clearly said separate me from Him and sabotage my destiny. In fact, at my age, the main ability I’m improving in is my ability to surrender and trust. I’m counting on my Father to take it from there. I must say, I’m impressed with how much better He does with my life than I ever did!

That’s why I get excited about Christmas. It’s an act that can’t be topped.