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# While people focus on Christmas, the Nativity was just the beginning

Stain glass image of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in a manger.

JOHN CARROLL THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 23, 2017

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, argued in the 1840s that Christianity was turning into religion for children. Although his specific reference was to Catholicism, recent history would seem to bear him out in a more general way. Only the nativity survives in the culture at large from the story of the life and death of Jesus. The one place that has retained a capacity to enchant, to intimate some sacred possibility, is a crib in a manger, in wonder at new birth — re-enacted in tens of thousands of local spots around the Western world.

The scene is accompanied by the magic of a night star, wandering shepherds, domestic animals, three exotic wise men bringing gifts from the East, a proud father, and a reverent mother veiled in blue. The communal singing of carols bathes the scene in ethereal resonances. The haunting tune of *Silent Night* perhaps best catches the sense of the moment, that something of fateful significance has occurred.

Today the founding Jesus story is like an abandoned ruin set in a garden rank with impenetrable overgrowth and weeds. “The birth of who?” many may ask. For 2000 years he was the Saviour and Messiah, the chosen one who redeems human life, making it of value.

“Christ” comes from Christos, the Greek word for the Hebrew “messiah”, meaning anointed one, whom it was believed in his time was going to come to free the Jews from Roman servitude. It is as if, in our increasingly secular world, Christ has been suppressed, with Christmas turning into Xmas, Santa no longer called Father Christmas and widespread ignorance of the main stretch of the Jesus story. In some schools and kindergartens there is more focus on Chinese New Year than Christmas or Easter. Moreover, the nativity as narrative today leads nowhere, except as an opaque symbol for all new human life.

The prominence of the birth story is odd, not the least in that the nativity is marginal to the life of Jesus, given there is no reference to it in either of what are the most powerfully written of the four Gospel biographies, those of Mark and John. So why has it remained the one vital reference point?

Without children, the nativity, too, probably would die out, as might even the Christmas festival itself. The presence of children somehow awakens a deep primordial desire in parents, impelling them to conjure up some annual enchantment, as a prelude to December 25, the prelude reaching its finale in the fantastic concoction of a burly Santa descending a narrow chimney, often itself only a pretend reality.

Here may lie the clue to the popularity of the scene in the Bethlehem cattle shed 2000 years ago. The worship of Jesus has been partly replaced in the modern West by devotion to children. They have become the sacred focus for most modern parents. The child is the new redeemer. In a world in which strong belief, in anything, is almost entirely absent, it has become the solitary focus of profound hope and faith.

Hence, a ritual that celebrates the magic of a baby, and is accompanied by the bringing of rich gifts, drawing on a wider community for supporting reverence, stands as an idealised projection and reflection of the parental dream. The showering of presents on the child, who will have to be more than it likely is, gains some anchoring authority from the archetypal nativity story, and the gifts of three Eastern wise men.

Lifting the event to a higher plane than profane suburban reality, there is music — carols drive the nativity, providing its vital energy, climaxing in images of the transcendent candlelit glow on eager young faces. Also, it is the better part of ourselves that is imagined in the innocence and exuberance of our children.

Nevertheless, there is a balancing out, in counterpoint. The season is at risk of being dragged down, turned into a profane chore. Christmas is preceded by a frenzy of shopping, the most extreme annual mania of consumerist excess. The profusion of presents, typically cheap, mass-produced plastic toys, can trigger an aftermath of guilt in adults, disgust at the extravagance and the waste. The spoiling of children lurks as a symptom of the excessive hopes projected on to them by their parents and relatives.

By contrast to the nativity prelude, Christmas Day passes today, for almost all, without Christian trace. The person whose birth the day originally celebrated is gone. The day has become the annual reunion when most Australian families come together, the one time of the year at which members of the wider tribe catch up, before dispersing back to another 12 months of their separate lives. The day, while profanely secular, does for many, certainly not for all, have ritual elements, orbiting around a spectacular lunchtime feast — perhaps turkey and ham, prawns sometimes added for a local touch, fruit pudding, paper hats, Xmas crackers, followed by a distribution of presents.

Two semi-religious accompaniments are indirect. One is the hope that the gathering together of family will bring a kind of communal blessing, the whole rising above itself into something more than a social event. The other is that the day, although not explicitly acknowledged as such, stands as the entry point for summer holidays, the signal to begin several weeks of enjoyment of the season, liberated from work and school. An epicurean glow of the leisurely pleasures ahead invests the anticipation of the holidays with a kind of benediction.

It fits that Christmas Day is casual and relaxed, without the strictures of church service, formal dress or the demands of other duties. And that it is Dionysian in its invitation to indulgent drinking and overeating: rashly gorging on rich foods in the sweltering heat.

The indulgence, however, may give way to indigestion, and not just of the stomach, for without the religious enchantment revulsion at excess is never far away, nor apathy, and a sense of futility in temporary sensual pleasure. The post-Christmas hangover may also be because of the sense of some missing follow-up in the story itself: “Is that all there is?”

Christmas Day also signals implicitly, via anticipation of summer holidays, to that major site of Australian worship: the beach. The reverent prelude of *Silent Night* will give way to a quite different communing with the beyond.

But is family reunion and worship conducted on the Australian beach merely religion for children? Kierkegaard’s warning is, I think, both wrong and right.

Summer holidays do seem restorative for many, and not just for children. There may be an instinctive honesty in not having Christmas Day itself pretend to religious depth. After all, the inspiration may come later, if at all, on the beach. An intimation of redemption, under the heavens, sun glistening on water, surrounded by expanses of beautiful nature, this is as religious as it gets these days.

The hope that the family gathering at Christmas may be touched by a magic wand is often fanciful, and is heavily dependent on the presence of children. Further, the beach experience is one-dimensional. Serious religions focus on death, providing stories that strive to give it meaning.

More diffusely, they take on suffering and tragedy, and attempt to provide human lives with sense, taking account of the shadow that hangs over them all. The most powerful and enduring symbol of Christianity is the cross — a death symbol. Comparatively, all the beach can offer is a dead fish, a profane and dispiriting sight and smell.

Christianity does continue to have another input into Christmas, minor compared with the nativity but nonetheless significant. Countering consumerist excess, Christmas is a time for charity, for good works. Charles Dickens’s fable about the redeeming power of giving, *A Christmas Carol*, retains popularity. Likewise, the film classic *It’s a Wonderful Life*, celebrating a good man as the saviour of a small town, retains its charm. Both works endow good works with a religious aura, one dependent on the central presence of children and family, and the infusion of - enchantment from the Christmas moment.

Charity as an ideal in the West is largely Christian, via the image of Jesus the good shepherd, exemplified in the parable of the good Samaritan: a man of a despised ethnic group who stops to help a Jew by the roadside who has been robbed, beaten and left half dead, a man who has been spurned by two of his own people, who crossed the road to avoid him. Jesus, the suffering servant who commands “Love thy neighbour as thyself”, has the mission of tending to the poor and needy. Following this path, Christian churches continue to do exemplary work through their welfare institutions: retirement villages, nursing homes, drug rehabilitation centres and refuges for the homeless.

Despite the immense communal value of those institutions, an important distinction needs to be made. Jesus’ central teaching was about truth or meaning, not morals. His own story illustrates this, climaxing in the crucifixion — posing the question of how can such a cruel death make any sense. This is a metaphysical question.

The Christian churches have proved a major force in the history of the West for teaching the moral law and sanctioning it — they have served as arguably the most important of all civilising agents. Yet they did that job so well that they have made themselves superfluous as ethical institutions. The wider culture, especially in its more popular forms, has taken over the role of moral guardian. From television soap opera and radio talkback to tabloid features, there is a constant rehearsing of good and bad behaviour — keeping up the moral temperature in relation to the protection of children, expressing outrage at corrupt banking practices, dodgy builders and drunken louts.

In any realistic historical terms, we live in a very orderly society with low levels of violent crime. Almost everybody, with the exception of psychopaths, knows the important moral laws: thou shalt not kill; thou shalt protect the innocent; thou shalt not harm another person without due cause; and thou shalt not betray trust. Those laws no longer need much teaching. The vital problem facing those who live in a contemporary society such as Australia is over meaning, not morals.

A lot is at stake in the loss of Jesus for he is the most significant figure in the history of the West. He stands as the focus of its religious experience, as its leading moral teacher and as the man whose life provides tropes for much of the most important Western literature, art, music and architecture. Whether this loss matters is an important question.

In the story of the life of Jesus, Easter rather than Christmas is the pivot. All that precedes the final week in Jerusalem — miracles, teaching and encounters — serve as a setting of the scene, and preamble, for what is known as the Passion. “Passion” comes from the Greek verb *paschein*, meaning to experience or to suffer. Built into the word is the teaching that in order to experience, humans have to suffer. The two are indissoluble. Such modern mantras instructing that the best life involves one in living to the full — live your life, seize the day — are predicated on dark times. The words pathos and apathy come from the same Greek root, the latter implying that a life without passion — *a-pathos* — will have no energy or animation. It will be a kind of depressed, living death.

Here lies the rub to the loss of the Christian narrative. Humans make sense of their lives through stories. This starts with their own, those of their families and those of whom they know.

Hamlet’s dying words were: “Tell my story!” Those stories, however mundane, inevitably draw on archetypes provided by the wider culture — such as depictions of the hero, the villain, the good mother, the virtuoso artist, the weak leader, harsh fate, courageous resilience, and so forth. The principal archetypes come down from a long time ago in the form of the foundation stories of the culture. Australia’s Aborigines call this the Dreaming — every culture has its Dreaming. In the case of the West, the forms were set by Homer, Greek tragedy and the Jesus story.

Raphael is typical of the old masters of Western culture in his respect for the Dreaming forms. He uses the Jesus story as a meditative device, a means for reflecting on the essence of the human condition. For instance, in his last work, *The Transfiguration*, a huge painting (4m x 3m) hanging in the Vatican, he takes up the story of the mad boy from Mark, chapter 9 — a quite different take on childhood to the nativity. An epileptic boy is frothing at the mouth, suffering from convulsions and seizures that have tried to destroy him by flinging him into fire and into water. The distraught parents bring their son to the disciples of Jesus, who consult books of medical knowledge seeking a cure. Such books prove useless. Normal human knowledge is not the way. The boy, whose semi-naked body is taut, rigid in the form of a cross, looks upwards with rolling mad eyes and he sees in the top half of the painting an image of Jesus transfigured.

Raphael's The Transfiguration.

In the preceding episode, Jesus has taken his favourite three followers up a mountain, where they witness him metamorphosed, bathed in iridescent white light — his baptism of fire. He then descends the mountain, while still shining, and heals the boy. Raphael has conjoined the two stories. It is unclear whether what the boy sees is the actual transfiguration or a vision. Whichever the case, it is illumination by the redemptive truth that restores his sanity.

The painting reflects on what this may mean, partly by studying the varying reactions of different figures to the high drama that is taking place in their midst. The viewer enters the scene through a large, beautiful woman kneeling in the centre foreground, classically dressed and coiffured. She has just realised that, in relation to gaining the vital truth, the clue is not with the male followers of Jesus but the mad boy, at whom she points with authoritative vigour. In some way that is obscure to her, he is the one who has found the key.

A century ago TS Eliot could use the Jesus story for reflection and teaching. Yet it is inconceivable that a poet today could produce a powerful Christian line such as: “In the juvencence of the year, came Christ the tiger.” Or Gerald Manley Hopkins’s:

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

In neither case are the poets alluding to the children’s little Lord Jesus who lays down his sweet head.

The churches have been derelict in their primary duty: they have failed to retell their constitutive and defining story in meaningful contemporary terms — just what Raphael was striving to do. They have inherited the richest cultural treasure in the Western tradition, yet they turn their backs on it and wonder why their pews are empty. They compensate by taking up social justice and political causes.

However, once they have become indistinguishable from social workers and political activists, why should anyone take their religious pretensions seriously?

So back in the metaphysical domain, what does Jesus provide that we couldn’t get elsewhere? The nativity conjures up the enchantment of new life and legitimises parents who express devotion, bordering on worship, for their own children. At the other end of life, the crucifixion provides a peerless collection of episodes and characters orbiting around the death question. Raphael reworked this. Through many years of teaching profoundly secular undergraduates, I have found that what most engaged them was showing classical artworks by the old masters — a good half of those paintings and sculptures, like *The Transfiguration*, drawing on themes from the Jesus story. Students were not interested in becoming Christian; they were interested in deep reflection on vital meaning questions and found that reflection most engaging through episodes from the Gospels.

Kierkegaard, in referring to religion for children, was making a theological point. He observed that, in the modern world, punishment works only for children. It remains the case that when children do something naughty, get caught and feel bad, then suffer punishment at the hands of their parents, they are fully absolved from sin, free to run off and play their next game.

Adults are more complex, anxious and guilt-ridden — for them, confession and penance do not fundamentally ease a troubled conscience. Anxiety is their prevailing condition. Hence, in the modern world, Kierkegaard shrewdly foresaw, the doctor replaces the priest; the hospital replaces the church.

Kierkegaard argued that faith is no longer possible and the only avenue to a kind of modern redemption is through individuals on their own experiencing a dark night of the soul, in a condition of severe inwardness, centring on paradox and dread — religion for adults is tortured, verging on unattainability. He speculated on how dreadful it would have been to be Mary, the mother of Jesus. Whatever one makes of this speculation, it is interesting. And the link is to the crucifixion, not the nativity.

Yet Kierkegaard was wrong that the experience of dread, and its meditative potential, depended on the Jesus story.

The modern world continues to produce tragic works of art that are not explicitly Christian, including some of deep significance, such as *The Sopranos*. The Harry Potter books lead inexorably into a focus on death, which becomes their climactic preoccupation. And the yearning for a saviour does recur in secular modern guises — as for instance in *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club* — although that messiah usually turns out to be an antiChrist. Further, we have now had 150 years of gloomy prediction that the death of God would lead to political anarchy and the moral collapse of the West. That has simply not eventuated.

In conclusion, as evocative and magical as the Christmas birth story may be, stripping it of the life that was to follow is at risk of leaving a culture part fixated in childhood, feeling a kind of hollow despair when the children grow up into ordinary people.

The nativity does celebrate the juvencence of the year, and the potential of children, yet nothing comes after. It opens a door, yet no one enters the expectant room — Samuel Beckett predicted exactly this to be the modern condition, in *Waiting for Godot*. Where is the “immortal diamond”?

For us to give up the Christian tragedy, imagining we don't need it any more, is charged with cultural hazard. For the beach does shine and, yes, it is sublime — relaxing and even uplifting. But it has no gravity.

John Carroll is professor emeritus of sociology at La Trobe University. He recently has published *Land of the Golden Cities, Australia's Exceptional Prosperity & the Culture that Made It* (Connor Court).

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### Koalas in free fall

GRAHAM LLOYD

The argument is on whether Australia should be doing more to protect its koalas or whether this national symbol is a forest pest.

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### Snowy 2.0 doesn't stack up

JUDITH SLOAN

The billions of dollars that the new stage of the hydro-electric scheme requires would be better spent on clean coal.

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