

Two Wars on Christmas

Amanda Udis-Kessler, presented at a panel on “The War on Christmas”, December 9, 2012

I'd like to take a different tack from the other speakers and talk about two wars on Christmas currently promulgated both by secularists and, sadly, many Christians. Possibly most Christians.

The first war on Christmas is economic. What, after all, is Christmas as a cultural phenomenon in this society? An opportunity to buy stuff, so that we can listen to Silent Night play in the background as we trample people in line on Black Friday, which, by the way, started a day early this year. If memory serves, they called it Black Thursday, which we used to call Thanksgiving. What is Christmas? An opportunity to encourage greed in our children. The New York Times recently reported that the class divide has entered toy stores. If you come from a wealthy background, you will be able to get more interesting and intellectually stimulating toys than if you don't. Christmas is about money, stuff, and consumerism in our society. Kind of different from the early communities of Jesus followers, who, according to the book of Acts, lived together, held things in common, and sold their possessions to have money to take care of those in need. Sounds practically Marxist, if you ask me.

Why would I call consumerism a war on Christmas? Because according to the Gospels, the Jesus whose birth is supposedly celebrated by Christmas didn't have a lot of kind words for wealth or the rich. Here's some of what Jesus may have said about the wealthy. I'm using only those Synoptic Gospel passages that the Jesus Seminar agrees are or probably are authentic to Jesus.

- How difficult it is for those who have money to enter God's domain. It's easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye than for a wealthy person to get into God's domain.
- Give to the one who begs from you and don't turn away the one who tries to borrow from you.
- No one can be a slave to two masters... You can't be enslaved to both God and a bank account!
- Congratulations, you [destitute]! God's domain belongs to you.
- Finally, there's the parable of the vineyard proprietor who hired workers for his vineyard and paid them all the same regardless of how long they worked. Doesn't sound very capitalist to me.

If that is the perspective of the Christ who is supposedly missing from Christmas, I agree. There's a war on Christmas. Just not quite the war we've been arguing over.

But that's not all. Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue that the stories of the first Christmas are strongly anti-imperial. To proclaim that Jesus is the son of God meant at the time of the writings to proclaim that Caesar was not the son of God. In Roman imperial theology, Caesar was defined as the Lord, savior of the people, and the one who brings peace. The Christmas stories are pretty clear that this describes Jesus, not Caesar. Both the Christmas stories and the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem contrast Jesus and his way of justice and peace with Rome and its approach of oppression and violence. So, which do we pick: the Kingdom of Rome or the Kingdom of God? Strength through military might or strength through love,

vulnerability, and trust? A God in human form who exploits the poor or a God in human form who loves and blesses the poor?

I am not myself a doctrinal Christian, but the stakes seem pretty clear to me. Rome had overwhelming military, economic, political, and ideological power. Does this sound like any country you know? Today, we, the United States of America, are arguably as close to an empire as any country on the planet. Are we using our overwhelming military, economic, political, and ideological power for the global good or for our own benefit? More importantly for this talk, are we waging a political war on Christmas with every military war we wage around the world? The first question is complicated to answer, but if we take Borg and Crossan's analysis of the Christmas stories seriously, the answer to the second question is yes, our willingness to trust in Caesar rather than God is itself a war on Christmas.

How, then, shall we keep Christ in Christmas or put Christ back in Christmas? From this perspective we need to reexamine our economic and military practices as a nation with a probing and discerning eye, ask some hard questions, and perhaps make some difficult decisions. Of course, none of this is necessary. We are not, after all, a Christian nation. But if we are going to take Christmas seriously, we'd better take seriously both the perspective of the person whose birth we are celebrating and the perspective of the Gospel writers who understood this particular birth to be a protest against all that was wrong with society.