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Wednesday December 24, 2014

To an inferior god

By Jim Taylor

It started as just a casual e-mail chat among editorial colleagues, about the virtues of knowing other languages and cultures. Somehow, it morphed into a discussion about the relative merits of the gods of various cultures, and the way every religion felt that its god was superior to the god or gods of other religions.

And someone asked, "Who'd want to worship an inferior god?"

The concept intrigued me. An inferior god? Yet why not?

After all, aren't most of the criticisms levelled at organized religion based on the assumption of a superior god? You can't have a multitude of superior gods, because then they wouldn't be superior. So therefore your deity must be superior to other gods. Which forces you to reject any claims that other religions may make for their gods. Which leads to intolerance, bigotry, and prejudice. And sometimes to torture, war, and genocide.

A superior god has to be superior to everything. Nature. Chance. Fate. Probability. A superior God, in fact, has to be Almighty. (It feels like time to introduce capital letters.)

Belief in an Almighty God leads to some dangerous assumptions, which go something like this. Because God is Almighty, His will must prevail. Therefore those who act as agents of the Almighty have the right -- indeed, the responsibility -- to impose that will on inferior beings. Such as believers in other religions. Other races. Other genders. And the natural world.

The more rigidly orthodox the religion, it seems, the more this mindset applies.

And I wonder -- might belief in an inferior god alleviate these abuses?

The Christmas stories

Indeed, is this one reason why we cling so fervently to the Nativity stories, despite their improbability? The writers obviously intended to invoke supernatural elements that none of us have personally experienced. A virgin, giving birth. And to a male child, at that, with a Y chromosome. Massed choirs harmonizing Christmas carols in the sky. Stars circling overhead -- which have never, in our experience, come to a standstill so that a supernova, or even a comet, could single out one human dwelling here below.

Academic studies make it increasingly unlikely that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, or that pagan astrologers delivered gifts of unimaginable wealth to a penniless family far from home.

But these stories all affirm one thing -- whatever Jesus was, whatever Jesus became, he started life as a baby.

Human babies are exceptionally helpless. Newborn horses and goats can stand up. Fish and frogs can swim as soon as they emerge from their eggs. Seeds sprout without assistance from their parent plants.

But human infants cannot survive on their own. They are totally dependent on others to act on their behalf. They are the exact opposite of almighty.

To their credit, the biblical stories never imply that the baby Jesus already had encyclopedic comprehension of all knowledge. Or could command natural forces to obey. Or could help professional football teams win games.

But if, as all Christian creeds assert, God became a human infant, then -- for a while at least -- God was not superior.

For a while, the God I know qualified as an inferior god.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column was, as you all recognized, a thinly disguised rant against aggressive marketeers, especially the telephone ones.

Cliff Boldt got off a rant of his own: "I note that the number of emails and phone calls and letters asking for donations, plus campaigns on TV, have increased since Stephen Harper gained office. I put it down to his ideology of individualism over the collective. Collectively we used to do all kinds of things: health care, public education, electricity, car insurance, streets, roads, bridges, police and fire. Now all of these need fund raising campaigns of various sorts, like tolls on roads and bridges, increased MSP premium, huge fees parents have to pay for basics at a public school.

"The milk of human kindness in my family hasn't soured, but I do notice occasional curdles when I pick up the mail or answer the phone.

"Forgive me Father, for I too have sinned."

George Brigham shared his own suggestions: "A friend responds to nuisance phone calls by telling the caller that he's really glad they've called because he's been feeling low for weeks and today is especially bad; he hasn't spoken with anyone for several days. If he succeeds in engaging them in a lengthy conversation, he goes on seek advice on whether slashing wrists, or pills, or a hose from the car exhaust, etc. would be best. It doesn't stop the calls, of course, but gives him some satisfaction."

John Clinton had two responses: "Like you, we are frustrated by callers wanting to sell or convince me to send a freezer to a far outpost of Eskimo civilization. I try to get them off by using some variation of this:

(Caller) 'I want to talk with you about....'

(Me—interrupt caller) 'I'm sorry but I do not want or need your product. And I'm going to tell you that I am saying 'No' and I am now going to hang up.'

(Caller) 'But this is the best X since sliced bread....'

(Me – interrupt caller) 'Good Bye.'

"I also have a more harsh response. I can/will say: 'I'm sorry but Mr. Clinton passed away. We are working on his funeral service right now.' Usually the caller will gasp & say, 'Oh, I'm sorry. Good bye.'"

Charles Hill's family has developed its own solution to unwanted calls: "We have... turned off the land-line telephone and give out our cell phone number only to family and essential individuals like our doctors. Most of our family members have done the same. Sometimes we make an on-line purchase which asks for a cell phone number as well as land-line. We just leave it blank. We get the merchandise anyway."

Tom and Marg Forgrave had a novel solution: "While we're snowbirding in Arizona, it usually works to say that we're Canadians just here for the season. Those annoying callers often say 'Sorry' and they're gone. We still haven't figured out whether they're sorry we're Canadians, sorry that they've called a Canadian who they know won't be buying, or just sorry that they wasted their time."

Dean Helms sent me an article about food banks by Elaine Power of Queen's University. She wrote, in part, "Food banks have become a serious obstacle in the fight against poverty... It's time to close our food banks. I've reached this conclusion after 18 years of researching food, hunger, and poverty; volunteering at food banks; serving on a food bank board..."

"No one wants to see Canadians go hungry. This reaction led to the creation of food banks in the first place. That was in the early 1980s, when a deep recession pushed up unemployment. The good-hearted people who started them thought food banks would be a short-term response. Now they're a normal feature of our landscape..."

"Giving food to those who are hungry is a simple response that everyone supports. Tackling poverty means wrestling with diverse ideas about causes and solutions. It's time to begin that political conversation. But first we have to remove the obstacle that food banks have become."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

For the first Sunday after Christmas Day, the Revised Common Lectionary recommends Psalm 148. This paraphrase celebrates the fact that the days are growing longer again (if only by a second or two).

1 Come and join the joyful dance of life!
Celebrate each moment of increasing light!

2 When the sun comes out after the snow,
when the south wind blows the blizzards away,
all of creation creeps out of its caves
to soak up the welcome warmth.

3 All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,

4 All things wise and wonderful...

5 The Lord God made them all.

6 God created their characteristics and personalities;

8 The rain falls, the wind blows,
the frost forms its delicate traceries,
just as they should.
Rain does not rise, nor frost burst into flames--
they know their form and function;
The Lord God made them all.

7 So join the joyful dance of life.
The fish of the sea can shimmy;

9 Peaks and ridges march in royal ranks;
trees wave and grasses weave;

10 Cattle can stomp and marmots can whistle,
Chickens can cheep and porcupines bristle;

11, 12 The whole earth throbs with the pulse of life;
The drums of life pound their passionate rhythm.
Princes and popes, outlaws and outcasts,

all races, all colors, all ages, all species,
swirl together like galaxies glowing in a summer night.
13 In God's great dance of life, there are no wallflowers;
Every piece of creation has a part to play.
14 We humans live and die;
our communities come and go, our empires rise and fall;
But God's great dance of life goes on.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
