

The Theology of Christmas Presents

by G.K. Chesterton

THOSE MODERN theologians who insist that Christianity is not in doctrines, but in spirit, commonly fail to notice that they are exposing themselves to a test more abrupt and severe than that of doctrine itself. Some legal preliminaries at least are necessary before a man can be burned for his opinions; but without any preliminaries at all a man can be a shot for his tone of voice. The old-fashioned Christian may be even more rapid in his decision that they are unorthodox. It is much easier to detect and dislike the smell of a heresy than to trace it to its chemical ingredients. And when the new theologian throws over history and exact metaphysics, and simply says: "Stripped of its formalities, this is Christianity," he lies more open than the old theologian to the purely personal answer of the man in the street, "If that is Christianity, take it away."

One may consider gunpowder as a thing composed of charcoal, sulphur and saltpetre; or one may consider gunpowder (as does the more direct intellect of the maiden aunt) as a thing that ends in a bang. But if the philosopher of innovation boasts of bringing no salt, sulphur or charcoal, we do expect at least a bang, and a good one. If he can blow up Parliament with milk, salad oil and fine sawdust, let him. But Parliament must be blown up; that, we shall all agree, is the essential. Now Christianity, whatever else it is, is an explosion. Whether or no it consists of the Fall, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, it does certainly consist of thunder, of prodigy, and of fire. Unless it is sensational there is simply no sense in it. Unless the Gospel sounds like a gun going off it has not been uttered at all. And if the new theologies sound like steam slowly escaping from a leaky kettle, then even the untrained ear of the ordinary layman (who knows neither chemistry nor theology) can detect the difference between that sound and an explosion. It is vain for such reformers to say that they go, not by the letter, but by the spirit. For they are even more plainly opposed to the spirit than they are to the letter.

Let us take one instance out of many of this principle in operation; the case of Christmas presents. A little while ago I saw a statement by Mrs. Eddy on this subject, in which she said that she did not give presents in a gross, sensuous, terrestrial sense, but sat still and thought about Truth and Purity till all her friends were much better for it. Now I do not say that this plan is either superstitious or impossible, and no doubt it has an economic

charm. I say it is un-Christian in the same solid and prosaic sense that playing a tune backwards is unmusical or saying “ain’t” is ungrammatical. I do not know that there is any Scriptural text or Church Council that condemns Mrs. Eddy’s theory of Christmas presents: but Christianity condemns it, as soldiering condemns running away. The two attitudes are antagonistic not only in their theology, not only in their thought, but in their state of soul before they ever begin to think. The idea of embodying goodwill—that is, of putting it into a body—is the huge and primal idea of the Incarnation. A gift of God that can be seen and touched is the whole point of the epigram of the creed. Christ Himself was a Christmas present. The note of material Christmas is struck even before He is born in the first movements of the sages and the star. The Three Kings came to Bethlehem bringing gold and frankincense and myrrh. If they had only brought Truth and Purity and Love there would have been no Christian art and no Christian civilization.

Many sermons must have been preached upon those three gifts; but there is one aspect of them that has hardly received due attention. It is odd that our European sceptics, while borrowing from Oriental philosophers so much of their determinism and their despair, are perpetually sneering at the one Oriental element which Christianity eagerly incorporated, the one Oriental element which is really simple and delightful. I mean the Oriental love of gay colours and an infantile excitement about luxury. Sceptic after sceptic has called the New Jerusalem of Saint John a lump of vulgar jewellery. Sceptic after sceptic has denounced the rites of the Church as parades of sensual purple and tawdry gold. But in this selection, indeed, the Church was wiser than either Europe or Asia. She saw that the Eastern appetite for scarlet and silver and gold and green was in itself innocent and ardent, though wasted by the lower civilizations upon the pampering of idleness and tyranny. She saw that the stoic plainness of the Roman had in it a peril of stiffness and pride, though this was allied with the equality and public spirit of the highest civilization then the extant. The Church took all the labyrinthine gold and crawling colours which had adorned so many erotic poems and cruel romances in the East, and she lit those motley flames to illuminate gigantic humility and the greater intensities of innocence. She took the colours from the serpent’s back; but she left the serpent. The European peoples have, upon the whole, followed in this the lead of Christian instinct and Christian art. Nothing is healthier in our popular tradition than the fact that we regard the East as a mass of quaint shapes and colours rather than a rival philosophical system. Though it is in fact a temple of hoary cosmologies, we treat it as a big bazaar—that is, as enormous toy-

shop. The real people remember the Near East, not by the Arabian prophet, but by the “Arabian Nights.” Constantinople was captured by a Saracen culture scarce inferior, at the time, to ours. But we do not trouble about Turkish culture, but rather about Turkey carpets. The Celestial Empire has been filled for ages with an ironical agnosticism. But we Europeans do not ask for Chinese enigmas, but rather for Chinese puzzles. We regard the East as a great Gamage’s: and we do well. This is the heartiest and most human thing in the East, what is called the violence of its colouring and the vulgarity of its gems. How evil are other Eastern things, the wheels of mental destiny and the wastes of mental doubt, we can only know from the modern skeptics themselves, who give us the dreary Eastern attitude combined with the Western costume. Schopenhauer shows us the poison of the snake without its glitter, as the early Church showed us the glitter without the poison. It was the glitter that Christendom took out of the tangle of Eastern things. Gold ran like fire in a forest round every script and statue, and clung to the head of every king and saint. But it all came from the one lump of gold that Melchior bore in his hand when he went across the deserts of Bethlehem.

The other two gifts are marked even more by the great Christian note—the note of the sensuous and the material. There is even something brazenly carnal about the appeal to the sense of smell in frankincense and myrrh. The nose is not left out of the divine human body. An organ to which the modern mind seems as comic as an elephant’s trunk is familiarly recognized in such Oriental imagery. But, to insist on the other side in turn, this Asiatic luxury is in the Christian mystery only admitted in order to be subordinate to a higher simplicity and sanity. The gold is brought to a stable; the kings go seeking a carpenter. The wise men are on the march, not to find wisdom, but rather a strong and sacred ignorance. The wise men came from the East, but they went Westward to find God.

Besides this bodily and incarnate quality which makes Christmas presents so Christian, there is another element with a similar spiritual effect: I mean what may be called their particularism. On this, again, the new theories (of which Christian science is the largest and most lucid) strike a note startlingly dissimilar and opposite. Modern theology will tell us the Child of Bethlehem is only an abstraction of all children; that the mother from Nazareth is a metaphysical symbol of motherhood. The truth is that it is only because the Nativity is a narrative of one lonely and literal mother and child that it is universal to all. If Bethlehem were not particular it would not be popular. In the same way a love-song to a scornful woman might be so piercing and mortal that all men sang it morn and eve, the hind at the plough and the

prince in the saddle. But they would all stop singing suddenly if you told them that the some was not made about one woman, but only about women in the abstract. Christmas, down to its most homely and even comic observances of stockings and boxes, is penetrated with this personal idea of a secret between God and man—a divine cap that fits the particular human head. The cosmos is conceived as a central and celestial post-office. The postal system is, indeed, vast and rapid, but the parcels are all addressed, sealed and inviolate. A pillar-box is only public in order that a letter might be private. Christmas presents are a standing protest on behalf of giving as distinct from that mere sharing that modern moralities offer as equivalent or superior. Christmas cards stand for this superb and sacred paradox: that it is a higher spiritual transaction for Tommy and Molly to give each other sixpence than for both equally sharing a shilling. Christmas is something better than a thing for all; it is a thing for everybody. And if anyone finds such phrases aimless or fantastic, or thinks the distinction has no existence except in a refinement of words, the only test s that I have indicated already—the permanent test of the populace. Take any hundred girls from a board school and see whether they do not make a distinction between a flower for each and a garden for all. If therefore new spiritual schools were concerned to prove that they have the spirit and secret of the Christian festival, they must prove it, not by abstract affirmations, but by things that have a special and unmistakable smack, by hitting one pungent tinge of taste, by being able to write a Christmas carol, or even make a Christmas pie. ❧