



The Christmas Message Given At The Annual Dinner Of The Indian YMCA

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Unpublished

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I must first say how grateful I am for the honour you have done me in having me as a guest at this annual event. You have asked me to give a message, but Christmas is not a time for words, but for music and for silence. The music has echoed through the centuries from the song of the angels on that Christmas night, to the lovely music we have enjoyed this evening from the choir of ALL SOULS. But it is above all a time of silence, as we stand in awe and wonder before the mystery of God made man; How can we comprehend this mystery?

Lo! within a manger lies
He who built the starry skies.

Our words are utterly inadequate to speak of such a mystery. But you have asked me to speak, and I must try.

I think that all of us who belong to India, whether by birth or by adoption, are shocked when we see the secularization and commercialization of Christmas in this country. It is hard to recognize it as having anything to do with Jesus. It is a celebration of the Gods of food and drink and luxury. It is not so in India. The festivals of the religions which share the Indian sub-continent are, of course, times for feasting and for exchanging gifts. But I do not think that their religious meaning is lost in the way the meaning of Christmas is lost in this country.

India is officially a secular state, but a profoundly religious society. Britain is officially a Christian State, but a profoundly secular society. Admittedly the limitless commercialization of Christmas in this country is relatively recent – a product of the enormous increase in wealth during the past 40 years. But the belief that the trend towards secularization is an inevitable process has been widely accepted by European intellectuals for the past 100 years. The great German sociologist Max Weber taught us that the process of industrialization, combined with a strictly rational bureaucracy, must necessarily lead to the gradual disappearance of religion. This belief has held the field for a long time. Religion has been seen as a force that belongs to the past.

But Weber has been proved wrong. Few sociologists now accept the theory. All over the world religion is re-asserting its power. It is now a more potent force in politics than at any time in the past 250 years. It is manifesting itself in religious wars, and in the tragic events unfolding in India during this past week. It was the religious wars of the 17th century which sickened the

intellectual leadership of Europe and provided much of the impetus leading to the radical shift in the 18th century which gave birth to modern Europe.

Since then Europeans have fought and killed each other for land, wealth markets and prestige, but they have not thought that religion was a thing worth fighting for. How they rub their eyes in astonishment as they see violent religious conflict breaking out all over the world.

Why has this happened? the simple answer seems to be that human beings are so made that they cannot live forever without God, without ultimate meaning, without something worth dying for. Fifteen centuries ago the great Augustine opened his 'confessions' with the words: 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you'. It is the simple truth that human beings cannot live forever without God. I vividly remember my own experience when my wife and I finally left India in 1974 and settled in this country. In all my years in India, from 1936 onwards, there was always a great sense of purpose – first in the struggle for independence and then in the struggle to create a strong, free, democratic nation. There was always something to look forward to, something to hope for. What struck me most in England was the loss of that sense of purpose, of direction, of hope. It seemed as if the only ambition was to keep ourselves as comfortable as possible the days when we are wheeled off to the crematorium. But people cannot live forever in that state, without meaning, without direction, without something worth dying for. All over the world it is being shown that a secular society – whether in its Marxist or in its capitalist form cannot satisfy the human spirit. And do so we have the rise all over the world of religious fundamentalism.

Now I know, of course, that 'fundamentalism' is a boo word. We use it only for what we regard as horrible. But we cannot escape from facts by giving them bad names. We have to understand what religious fundamentalism is and why it arises. We cannot deal with the evils it produces unless we understand and tackle the factors which produce it. The rise of fundamentalism confronts us with one of the tragic but inescapable facts about human nature: We are so made that we cannot live forever without God, without some transcendent, without something that gives ultimate meaning to our lives; and yet (such is the fact of fallen human nature) we use the name of God to inflate our own corporate pride and love of power. Cynical politicians can only exploit religious fundamentalism for their own ends, because the material for exploitation is already there. So religion is something that we cannot for ever do without, and yet religion becomes the weapon with which we destroy one another. Can there be any escape from this tragic human situation?

Christmas is the time when we remember that Almighty God gave us the true secret of ultimate power and ultimate meaning in the presence among us of a babe, born to a refugee mother lodging for the night in a stable, in a man giving himself to die a shameful death on a cross for the sake of this fallen world. The tragic paradox which makes our supreme worship the occasion for our mutual destruction, is met and mastered by the greater paradox of God becoming the victim of our pride, the judge of all the earth becoming the victim of our injustice.

Here all our religion is humbled and we stand in silent awe in the presence of our infant king and saviour. All of us, Christians, Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, Buddhist – all of us have been guilty of using the supreme claims of religion to boost our own claims to superiority to wisdom to power. Here we are all humbled. Our pride and especially our religious pride, is shamed into silence. We can say nothing except: "O COME LET US ADORE HIM, CHRIST THE LORD".

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