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## Christmas and a Condescending God

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## CHRISTMAS AND A CONDESCENDING GOD

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Daniel C. Peterson

**Abstract:** *As religious holidays go, Christmas has been domesticated unusually well — and effectively commercialized — among people and even whole cultures that don't accept (or even care about) the central theological claim that Christmas asserts. After all, who doesn't like cute little babies, at least when they're not crying? But that theological claim is stunning. Radical. It's radical in the strictest sense of that word, because it goes down deep, to the very root (Latin radix). Beyond the pleasant and comfortable sentimentality of favorite holiday foods, scenes of carolers in snowy villages, and warm family gatherings, Christmas dramatically distinguishes Christianity from every other major world religion.*

Landing during the Christmas season at the international airport in Cairo, Egypt — the busy gateway to a city and a nation that are roughly 85%-90% Sunni Muslim — you will see Christmas decorations everywhere. And such decorations show up prominently in hotels and public spaces well beyond the airport and the city.

In Japan, where estimates put the number of Christians at somewhere between 1%–2% of the population or perhaps even lower, a quite secularized version of Christmas focused on Santa Claus and gift-giving is widely observed. Also prominent among Japanese Christmas traditions, by the way, is eating fried chicken from KFC, where the statues of Colonel Sanders that stand in front of KFC restaurants are dressed as Santa Claus during the holidays. Residents of Japan who don't pre-order their KFC Christmas dinners can end up waiting in long lines for them, and could miss out altogether.

“Why KFC?” you might ask.

In 1970, just a few months after Takeshi Okawara opened the first KFC restaurant in Japan — he would go on thereafter to become the CEO of Kentucky Fried Chicken Japan from 1984 to 2002 — he conceived

the idea of a Christmas “party barrel” containing not only chicken but, in some premium cases, also ribs and stuffing and cake and even wine. In 1974, the promotional campaign went national with the slogan “KurisumasuniwaKentakkii” (“Kentucky for Christmas”).<sup>1</sup> Since, in the 1970s, there were few if any traditional Japanese Christmas observances, KFC filled a void.

In the West, too, Christmas remains by far the dominant holiday, even among those indifferent to its theological underpinnings, including many non-Christians. In increasingly post-Christian Europe, for example, the colorful Christmas markets of such cities as Krakow, Dresden, Cordoba, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Amsterdam continue to flourish. In America, scores of virtually interchangeable Christmas-themed television movies celebrate “redemption through romance” nonstop throughout an elongated Christmas season, with little or (usually) no specific religious content at all.

What can explain the appeal of Christmas to people well beyond the community of committed Christian believers?

First of all, it must be recognized that a superficial view of Christmas can easily be rendered much less threatening, theologically speaking, than Easter. Everybody can accept and celebrate the birth of a baby, whereas the revivification and eventual ascent to heaven of a crucified dead man is difficult to reconcile with a secular or even merely non-Christian worldview.

It seems clear, though, that there is a very great deal, even in the most watered-down versions of Christmas (as illustrated in those television movies), which speaks to the deepest longings of human hearts around the world.

Whatever our culture or religious views, for instance, the message reported by the gospel of Luke as having been sung by the angels to the shepherds of Bethlehem two millennia ago resonates with all of us: “Peace on earth, good will toward men” (compare Luke 2:14). Every *Lifetime* or *Hallmark Channel* Christmas movie concludes with love and harmony, blessings for which we all yearn.

The practice of gift-giving reminds us of the generous, kind people we would like to be and among whom we would like to live. Think of the chastened and redeemed miser Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’s

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1. K. Annabelle Smith, “Why Japan Is Obsessed with Kentucky Fried Chicken on Christmas,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (December 14, 2012), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/why-japan-is-obsessed-with-kentucky-fried-chicken-on-christmas-1-161666960/>.

1843 novella *A Christmas Carol*, which, like the television movies that proliferate during the Christmas season, is not an explicitly Christian tale: The new Scrooge became both generous and beloved, and, as Dickens writes, “It was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

The birth of a baby — any baby — is a moment of hope and the inauguration of virtually boundless possibilities, and Christmas powerfully reminds us of these things once more each year.

But of course for Christian believers Christmas is about far more than merely the common event of the birth of an infant.

“Knowest thou the condescension of God?” (1 Nephi 11:16). We miss the significance of the question posed to Nephi if we think the verb *condescend* means “to patronize” or “to act in a smugly superior way.” As documented in Noah Webster’s great 1828 American dictionary, Joseph Smith’s contemporaries understood *condescension* to mean “to descend from the privileges of superior rank or dignity, to do some act to an inferior, which strict justice or the ordinary rules of civility do not require. Hence, to submit or yield, as to an inferior, implying an occasional relinquishment of distinction.”<sup>3</sup>

This perfectly captures the remarkable central claim of Christianity, that God himself — moved by love for his very often unlovely and ungrateful creatures — chose to live among mortals in hopes of redeeming us by his grace. “Mild he lays his glory by,” sings the Christmas carol,<sup>4</sup> in a line far too easily glossed over.

Nephi’s prophetic successors understood this well before Christ’s birth: “For behold,” declared King Benjamin in roughly 124 BC,

the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases.

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2. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: A Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46/46-h/46-h.htm>.

3. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “condescend,” (1828), <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/condescend>.

4. Charles Wesley, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 209.

And he shall cast out devils, or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men.

And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people. (Mosiah 3:5–7)

Why? Because, remarkably, he loves us.

And lo, he cometh unto his own, that salvation might come unto the children of men even through faith on his name; and even after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil, and shall scourge him, and shall crucify him. (Mosiah 3:9)

“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person,” wrote the apostle Paul, “though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7–8, NIV). “Herein is love,” says 1 John 4:10, “not that we loved God, but that he loved us.”

The world’s most important acts and events rarely make the newspapers; its most truly interesting people seldom appear on magazine covers. “Out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33). Jesus’s birth to an obscure young woman in a minor village in a backwater province of the Roman Empire was entirely fitting. The Lord seems to prefer doing things that way.

And one reason for his preference seems fairly easy to discern: If God were to reveal himself fully, grandly, and openly, the revelation would overwhelm us and destroy our freedom.

In his *Philosophical Fragments*, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard uses a parable about a king and a maiden to make this point: How can the king reveal his love to a maiden of humble parentage — given the huge disparity of rank, status, and wealth between them — without coercing and crushing her? “Not to reveal oneself is the death of love, to reveal oneself is the death of the beloved!”<sup>5</sup> The only real choice open to the king is to court his beloved indirectly, by descending to her

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5. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Portable Kierkegaard*, ed. Simon Yee, trans. David F. Swenson (Vancouver, BC: Vintage Kierkegaard, 2009), 130, <https://books.google.com/books?id=t1IfAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA130&lpg=PA130#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

station, by taking on the character of a servant. But it's no mere costume change. In order to be a convincing servant, he must really act as one.

The Savior wants us to freely choose to love him, not because he's powerful or terrifying but because we come to know him as lovable. And we have abundant reason to do that. "We love him," testified one of the ancient apostles who knew him intimately, "because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). As a well-known Silesian folk hymn says,

Fair is the sunshine,  
Fairer the moonlight  
And all the stars in heav'n above;  
Jesus shines brighter,  
Jesus shines purer  
And brings to all the world his love.

Fair are the meadows,  
Fairer the woodlands,  
Robed in the flowers of blooming spring;  
Jesus is fairer,  
Jesus is purer.  
He makes the sorrowing spirit sing.<sup>6</sup>

However, in properly thinking of Christmas, in thinking of it in a fully Christian way, we must avoid not only the error of sentimentalizing Jesus as a mere baby but the equal and opposite error of thinking him "merely" divine.

The first verse of the popular late-nineteenth-century Christmas carol "Away in a Manger" (often mistakenly attributed to Martin Luther) ends peacefully with "the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay." Unfortunately, though, not without disturbance: "The cattle are lowing; the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes."<sup>7</sup>

Richard Mouw, the prominent Calvinist theologian who also served for two decades as president of California's Fuller Theological Seminary and who has been involved over many years in respectful dialogue with scholars belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, spoke a few years ago at the Latter-day Saint Institute of Religion adjacent to Utah Valley University.

I was in the audience to hear him. At one point in his remarks, he pronounced the carol's portrayal of an uncrying infant Jesus "heresy."

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6. "Beautiful Savior (Crusader's Hymn)," *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 62.

7. "Away in a Manger," *Hymns*, 206.



I'm sure that at least some in attendance were somewhat startled at the charge — which, I should say, Professor Mouw delivered with a smile, not harshly.

“Jesus was a real baby,” he reminded his large Latter-day Saint audience. “That baby cried. ... There was no Superman suit under those swaddling clothes.” Furthermore, Mouw said, the baby had no divine checklist that he was working through. (“Let’s see. Wise men? Check. Shepherds? Check. Hmm. Could have designed that camel a bit better.”) So, said Professor Mouw, when you come to this particular verse, “You should sing those words with your fingers crossed.”

He spoke humorously, but he was entirely serious.

Among the perpetual temptations in the history of Christianity has been the false doctrine of “docetism.” (The term is derived from the Greek verb *dokeo*, meaning “to seem.”) It is, simply put, that Jesus Christ was fully God but not, not *really*, fully man. He only *seemed* human. He merely appeared to be subject to human limitations, pains, and weaknesses.

But this would be worrisome, for, if Jesus only *pretended* to take upon himself our nature, it’s not obvious how he could fully take upon himself our sins. If he didn’t really suffer, he didn’t really atone. He had to assume our human nature completely, or he wouldn’t be completely able to redeem it — and us.

“God became man,” declares the common ancient Christian formula, “so that man might become God.” St. Athanasius the Great, fourth-century bishop of Alexandria and a principal figure at the Nicene Council, put it this way: “The Word was made flesh in order that we might be enabled to be made gods. ... Just as the Lord, putting on the body, became a man, so also we men are both deified through his flesh, and henceforth inherit everlasting life.”<sup>8</sup>

Continuing, Mouw cited the Book of Mormon. And, although frankly acknowledging he doesn’t share the Latter-day Saint view of its origin and doesn’t consider it scripture, he cited Alma 7:11-12 with approval:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

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8. Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 1.39, 3.39.

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

Quoting further, Professor Mouw spoke of our common “faith on the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness” (Alma 7:14). Latter-day Saints and other Christians are on the same page here. “When it comes to the redemptive work of Christ,” he concluded, “we say the same things.”

But all of this depends upon the truth of the shared conviction that

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. ... He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:1–5, 10–12).

On the basis of this common faith, Latter-day Saints join the great Christian chorus that extends across two millennia and around the globe, rejoicing in the advent of Christ, knowing that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), “that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail th’ incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus our Immanuel.<sup>9</sup>

It’s appropriate that, in many national traditions, Christmas is marked by multitudes of brilliant lights. The fact that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16) is, quite simply, dazzling.

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9. Charles Wesley, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/84>.

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