

Impressum

Klaus Bung: The Spell of Christmas

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

The narrator, no longer a Christian, has been challenged by a **native** atheist: 'Christmas isn't Christmas for you'. He explores the meaning of that statement by relating his childhood memories of a Roman Catholic Christmas in the post-war Germany of 1945 to 1948. These merge with Lutheran Christmas memories, largely resting on Lutheran chorales and church music. He describes the lasting subliminal effects and benefits of these early memories and argues that they were beneficial, even though he no longer takes the Christian doctrines literally. Notwithstanding the scepticism of his later years, the early teaching, firmly asserting the truth of the Christian stories, was beneficial and desirable. There is an important subliminal message which can only be learnt if it is learnt in early childhood and on the basis of stories and practices which are, at least then, taken as absolute truth. It is not enough to give a child information about religion: only one religion should be taught, and it should be practised rather than talked about. As an adult, the narrator has Christmas experiences in many countries, none of which have the evocative power of those of his childhood.

The naïve Christmas of childhood is balanced by the philosophical Christmas in the rarefied atmosphere of a desolate Swiss mountain village, in which the adult narrator finds himself on Christmas Day. He hears a rather unorthodox sermon from a priest who has been posted there, out of harm's way, because of his progressive (or heretical) beliefs. The atheist narrator and the old priest warm to each other, both lonely in their own way. They discover that they share many of their views on God, on religions. The narrator knows many of the foreign places the priest has visited, and they find that they have been influenced by the same books and theologians. They agree that the old religious traditions must be kept alive, that lifestyle is more important than truth in practising and evaluating a religion, and that atheists and believers do not "come from different planets". Even from a religious point of view both are of equal value and both must exist.

"We, the atheists," says the narrator, "need the believers and the priests to keep the churches warm, the organs sounding and God alive. They need us to stop them from becoming too confident and overbearing. It is a symbiotic relationship. I thank God every day that not everybody is as smart as me. Otherwise who would pray for me, just in case? A God who is not worshipped dies, as happened to the gods of Egypt, Greece and Rome, who were once as real as God Father Son And Holy Ghost. A God-forsaken church building, however artistic, without prayers becomes a sight, and a pretty sad one too."

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Klaus Bung: The Spell of Christmas

CHRISTMAS ISN'T CHRISTMAS FOR YOU

"I know," my tender friend had written apologetically on her Christmas card, not knowing whether or not to send it, "that Christmas isn't Christmas for you," thinking that I had converted to Islam or Buddhism, an abomination in the eyes of a blue-blooded atheist.

I started wondering whether Christmas was Christmas for me, whatever that might mean. Could Christmas be anything but Christmas for anybody, Christian or not? So what was Christmas for me, so many decades after I left my native Germany? I started musing, and that's how this story came about.

I sent her an interim reply: "I like to follow the customs of the community in which I live. While I am in Europe, therefore, Christmas is Christmas for me, even though I do not believe in Father Christmas and hate 'Jingle Bells' and Christmas musac in department stores. During 'the festive season', I have to take refuge in the churches to escape from Father Christmas. They are islands of sanity in a world gone mad with jingle bells and silent nights. I like to go to church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, no matter what exactly I may or may not believe and no matter what exactly is meant by 'believing'. But if I lived in India, I would not miss Christmas. I would happily let the 25th of December pass without any acknowledgement but would join in the celebrations for Ram Naumi (God Rama's birthday) or Janmashtami (God Krishna's birthday). And if I lived in a Buddhist or a Muslim country I would likewise ignore Christmas but join in their festivals, and benefit from their lessons, as far as I am allowed to. To that extent Christmas is indeed not Christmas for me. But if you really want to understand my attitude, I have to tell you about my childhood and about a curious encounter I had as an adult."

Two months later I sent her my story, which contains more truth than fiction.

^Part One

HOME

THE HUNGER YEARS

The romance of Christmas starts with the first Sunday of Advent, four weeks before Christmas Day. I try to describe it mainly as I may have experienced it as a 13-year-old (1948), even though in my memory I am merging my experiences of many preceding and following years. There was no essential difference in what I considered, and do consider, important for my experience.

We were four children, my sister Hildegard, one year older than me, then I, then my sister Ina, five years younger than me, and Britta, eight years my junior. My mother and maternal grandmother were always part of the Advent scene, but I do not remember my father as an essential participant in the Advent singing. He might have been absent because of his war service (before 1945) or later because he had a job in a different town.

If I had chosen the Christmas when I was ten, 1945 A.D., the picture would have been different: there was a severe shortage of food, sawdust was baked into bread because there was not enough flour, money was worthless, the shops were empty of goods, one could not even buy books or electric torches or knives or toys, to say nothing of bicycles and other things we consider normal today, and I cannot imagine, how there could have been many or any presents in those years.

Since food was rationed, each of us received his supply of, say, butter or margarine (say an ounce) and of sausage (salami-type) and other scarce things at the beginning of the week, each of us had his own labelled containers for keeping these, and it was up to us, according to temperament, how we managed to make them last (if we wished to) to the end of the week. For sausage, there was a famous approach called 'Schiebewurst' (sliding sausage). To understand its significance, one has to consider the alternatives, all of which were practised in our family:

1. Eat the whole ration at the beginning of the week and have nothing for the rest: That was Britta's method.
2. Save the whole ration for the last day of the week, eat dry bread and water until then, and be comforted by the thought of joys to come on the seventh day: That was Ina's approach, thoroughly Christian in its way (die mit Tränen säen, werden mit Freuden ernten: They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. [Psalm 126:5]), should have made her ideal nunnery fodder, but, paradoxically, it was written otherwise.
3. Cut the little piece of sausage into seven exactly equal slices, so thin that you could look from Bonn to Berlin

through them, and have one slice every day: That was Hildegard's approach. She should have become an engineer or a Chancellor of the Exchequer later in life, but it was written otherwise.

4. Cut a goodly slice from the whole ration, put it on a dry slice of bread, open your mouth, let your teeth close in on the slice of bread but so as not to bite the slice of sausage. Have the teeth so close to the bread that, as you push the bread into your mouth and the sausage is under your nose so that you can enjoy its scent, the sausage slides along over the bread. Close your teeth, chew your first bite of dry bread while imagining that you are chewing bread with sausage. ("Think when you smell a sausage, that you eat it!") Eat the second bit of bread, ..., in a similar fashion, until the slice of bread is finished. Like in the 'pebble soup' or in the story of the Arab with 17 camels to be divided exactly among his three sons, the slice of sausage, having done its duty, will be left over and returned into its container till tomorrow. It will be eaten only when it has given off all its scent and flavour and is no longer enjoyable to eat. My gain was that I had bread with sausage, and lots of it (albeit imaginary) every day. That approach was called 'Schiebewurst' (sliding sausage). Today it would be called 'virtual sausage'.

In my ignorance it did not occur to me at the time that there was an even better solution, namely to become a vegetarian, eat only dry bread and be happy with it, and give my ration of sausage to my sisters to fight over. No doubt, the whole family would have agreed that vegetarianism is not a heresy after all and a very good life-style indeed, provided it is practised by others.

I do not remember any specific Christmas, especially no Christmas during the 'hunger years', and I remember all Christmases as the same, all equally pleasant for me. So let me be 13 or 14, after the currency reform of 1948, when goods had suddenly reappeared in the shops.

THE YEAR OF THE CHURCH

The illuminations in the street, if there were any at the time, Father Christmases, recorded Christmas carols and goods on offer in department stores (in those years when there was something to be bought), were irrelevant and indeed considered a secular irritant by us, and I still share that feeling.

For Christmas is for me and was for us an exclusively religious festival that provided enough joy of its own, especially when its customs were strictly and intelligently observed.

For the experience to be real and effective, the Christmas story and its interpretation has to be taken seriously by the family,

at least for a time, and only then can, for some people with the right disposition, a certain amount of scepticism set in. If they have enough understanding, they can 'go through the motions' of a literal believer and attach private, more liberal, interpretations ('mental reservations') to the customs which can bind a family and a community together and which continue to give real joy to all, irrespective of the exact nature of their beliefs. The symbols are the same for all.

The year of the church is an annual drama. It ends with Eternity Sunday (Ewigkeitssonntag), the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, the 23rd Sunday after Trinity, the Sunday before the first Sunday of Advent, when the gospel of the destruction and the horrors at the end of time is read (Matthew 24:15-35), doomsday, das Ende der Welt, the sign that the second coming of Christ is nigh: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

During the weeks and months that follow, the birth of Jesus, his appearance to the world at large, his life as a youth, his first miracles, his preaching, his passion, execution and resurrection, his ascension to heaven, his sending of the holy spirit at Pentecost, his work on earth through the holy spirit will be mapped, presented, retold, in historical sequence, until Eternity Sunday arrives again, foretelling his second coming. Thus, the year of the church begins on the first Sunday of Advent.

Each new event, even though well-known in advance, is taken note of and rejoiced or wept over, as if it were announced for the first time in the newspapers. That is the important thing about our celebration of Advent. We looked forward to Christmas, but Christmas had not yet arrived. We took our hymns seriously and did not sing that 'Christ was born in Bethlehem' when evidently he was still in his mother's womb. We had of course celebrated the feast of the Annunciation (conception of Jesus by the Virgin Mary) on 25 March, exactly nine months before Christmas Day. So this was Advent, a distinct period and a distinct joy, intelligently celebrated in an intelligent family.

ADVENT

Of course we went to church every Sunday, as we did during the rest of the year. I was a loner and would always have preferred to go on my own and derived my own pleasure from this. During Advent, on weekdays I believe, special services (masses) were held, the Rorate-masses, because they contained the chant of 'Tuet, Himmel, den Gerechten':

Rorate, coeli, desuper et nubes pluant iustum, aperiatur terra et germinet salvatorem (Isaiah 45:8)	Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds pour down the righteous one, let the earth open, and let it bring forth the saviour.
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Thus went the prayer asking for Jesus to be sent to save the world.

Advent was a time of waiting and preparation. A quiet time, and not yet time for rejoicing. I loved the Advent chorales, knew all their tunes and many of their texts by heart and played them in four-part harmonies on the piano at home. Later in life I added the more ancient Lutheran Advent chorales (e.g. Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland; Wie soll ich dich empfangen), to the Catholic ones (e.g. 'O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf' by the liberal 16th century Jesuit Friedrich von Spee, rational defender of women during the witch hunts), in my repertoire, and I still love and know them both, which is to say that I can respond to them emotionally. They spell Advent tide to me.

I would, like our sensible parents, have rejected singing and listening to Christmas carols during that time, carols talking about Christ having been born, for Christ had not yet been born: we were still waiting for his arrival and birth, and the joy of waiting, of anticipation, would have been spoilt if we had mixed it all up into some vague, non-specific 'seasonal' emotion or merriment. We had emotion heightened by reason and precision.

Advent is marked by the Adventskranz, a reef made of spruce, spiked with four candles. Large reefs are hung horizontally in churches, smaller reefs sit on tables or sideboards in homes. During the first week of Advent one candle will be lit, during the second two, until during the fourth week, with all candles burning, we know that there will soon be a whole Christmas tree radiating candle-light.

Many evenings and perhaps all, the family would sit around the Advent reef for fifteen minutes or half an hour to sing Advent carols, the room lit only by its candles, and I would certainly have been eagerly asking for it. Sometimes I or my sisters would play along on our recorders, and I knew how to improvise a second part so we would have at least two-part singing on these occasions.

I think that during the better years biscuits with special Christmas spices (coriander seed, cinnamon and cloves) were released on some of these occasions, but very sparingly, for it was still Advent, the subdued time of anxious waiting and hoping, and handing out sweets too generously would have destroyed the long-awaited pleasure of having them on Christmas Eve, and not an hour before then, together with the tree, the presents, and the Christmas carols (Hodie Christus natus est: Christ is born today), which were meticulously avoided before then.

One of the "good rooms" in the house was designated the 'Christmas room'. Its door was locked about five days before Christmas, a sheet was hung to cover its frosted glass, and the children were not allowed to enter. Sometimes lights were on inside, sometimes our parents silently entered and left, mysterious preparations were going on which we did not question.

We knew that the Christ child, the Christkind (not Father Christmas, the pathetic bumbling clown in his ridiculous garb, who had no religious tradition and sanction) was bringing the Christmas presents. The child was God's present to the world and he gave us additional presents to make sure even simple-minded children enjoyed his arrival, whose significance they could not yet understand.

Even when we knew that it was not really the Christ child who brought the presents and when we had presents of our own for other members of the family and gave them to our parents to place them in the Christmas room or give them to the Christ child to pass on, the fiction that presents come from the Christ child was upheld.

Such suspension of disbelief is a good thing, it gives real joy and allows the old customs to be maintained and passed on. Once the tradition has been interrupted by one generation, it is difficult to re-connect. Suspension of disbelief is as important to religion, especially for intelligent people, as it is when we go to a film, read a novel or listen to a fairytale. We do not want our pleasure spoilt by saying or hearing incessantly: 'It is not true, it is only fiction.' It is even important in love and in love-making, when sometimes it is good not to look too closely, to have the lights low, and not to put the beloved under the microscope -- at least not under the electron microscope.

Ernest Renan wrote:

L'homme fait la beauté de ce qu'il aime et la sainteté de ce qu'il croit.	It is man who infuses with beauty that which he loves and with holiness that in which he believes.
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In other words:

Let us not complain about religion
because it is as it is:
Religion is not what it is,
but what we make it.

CHRISTMAS EVE

So the 24th of December, Christmas Eve, arrives, the day when the light of Christ came into a dark world:

"Das Volk, das im Finstern wandelt, sieht ein großes Licht, The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). He "was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." (John 1:9)

The Christmas celebration starts after nightfall, at 6 or 7 p.m.: then the light of the Christmas tree will be more powerful. But first we have to say goodbye to Advent -- one last round of Advent carol singing.

At half past five we sit around the Adventskranz on the kitchen table. All four candles have been lit. We sing three or four Advent, not Christmas, carols. Somehow Father has left the room, nobody has noticed, or if he has, he says nothing in order not to spoil the effect for which we all wish, for Father's task is to act as a locum for the Christ child, light the many thin candles on the Christmas tree and the five big candles in front of the crib (or 'creche', as the Americans, or 'presepio', as the Portuguese say) and the four candles on the candelabra attached to the piano.

When everything is ready, he will, in the hall, hit the gong we had in one house or ring the big Alpine cowbell we had in the other. Mother, who is sitting with us by the Advent reef, will say: "I think, I've heard the Christ child," and we all have heard him/her too, everything is ready, and we all would like to storm into the Christmas room, but we also know that we must first sing the last of the Advent carols, always the same at this point of the proceedings, and all its stanzas too, we have our hymn books on the table.

<p>1. Macht hoch die Tür, die Tor' macht weit, Es kommt der Herr der Herrlichkeit, Ein König aller Königreich', Ein Heiland aller Welt zugleich, Der Heil und Leben mit sich bringt; Derhalben jauchzt, mit Freuden singt: Gelobet sei mein Gott, Mein Schöpfer, reich von Rat!</p>	<p>1. Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates! Behold, the King of Glory waits; The King of kings is drawing near, The Savior of the world is here. Life and salvation He doth bring, Wherefore rejoice and gladly sing: We praise Thee, Father, now, Creator, wise art Thou!</p>
<p>2. Er ist gerecht, ein Helfer wert, Sanftmütigkeit ist sein Gefährt, Sein Königs-kron' ist Heiligkeit, Sein Zepter ist Barmherzigkeit. All unsre Not zum End' er bringt. Derhalben jauchzt, mit Freuden singt: Gelobet sei mein Gott, Mein Heiland, groß von Tat!</p>	<p>2. A Helper just He comes to thee, His chariot is humility, His kingly crown is holiness, His scepter, pity in distress, The end of all our woe He brings; Wherefore the earth is glad and sings: We praise Thee, Savior, now, Mighty in deed art Thou!</p>
<p>3. O wohl dem Land, o wohl der Stadt, So diesen König bei sich hat! Wohl allen Herzen insgemein, Da dieser König ziehet ein! Er ist die rechte Freudensonn', Bringt mit sich lauter Freud' und Wonn'. Gelobet sei mein Gott, Mein Tröster, früh und spat!</p>	<p>3. O blest the land, the city blest, Where Christ the Ruler is confessed! O happy hearts and happy homes To whom this King in triumph comes! The cloudless Sun of joy He is, Who bringeth pure delight and bliss. We praise Thee, Spirit, now, Our Comforter art Thou!</p>
<p>4. Macht hoch die Tür, die Tor' macht weit, Eu'r Herz zum Tempel zubereit't! Die Zweiglein der Gottseligkeit Steckt auf mit Andacht, Lust und Freud'! So kommt der König auch zu euch, Ja Heil und Leben mit zugleich. Gelobet sei mein Gott, Voll Rat, voll Tat, voll Gnad'!</p>	<p>4. Fling wide the portals of your heart; Make it a temple set apart From earthly use for Heaven's employ, Adorned with prayer and love and joy. So shall your Sovereign enter in And new and nobler life begin. To Thee, O God, be praise For word and deed and grace!</p>
<p>5. Komm, o mein Heiland Jesu Christ, Mein's Herzens Tür dir offen ist! Ach zeuch mit deiner Gnade ein, Dein Freundlichkeit auch uns erschein. Dein Heil'ger Geist uns führ' und leit' Den Weg zur ew'gen Seligkeit! Dem Namen dein, o Herr, Sei ewig Preis und Ehr'!</p>	<p>5. Redeemer, come! I open wide My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide! Let me Thy inner presence feel, Thy grace and love in me reveal; Thy Holy Spirit guide us on Until our glorious goal is won. Eternal praise and fame We offer to Thy name.</p>
<p>(Text by Georg Weissel, 1590-1635)</p>	<p>(Translated by Catherine Winkworth, 1829-1878)</p>

The seed of this carol is Psalm 24:7: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in," enriched by references to the prophet Isaiah and the attributes that are given to Jesus.

I must not conceal the fact that my dictation program transforms 'ein Helfer wert' into 'ideal for Fiat' (Sanftmütigkeit ist sein Gefährt!), 'Jesus' into 'cheeses' (un-pastorised, of course) (sic!) and 'prophet' into 'profit' (prophet forecast). That is the modern age knocking at the door and clamouring 'Macht hoch die Tür', et nubes pluent injustum. (pluent: sic!) It reinforces my desire to write all this down before it is forgotten and becomes entirely incomprehensible to future generations.

Father has meanwhile discreetly rejoined us. We get up and leave the Advent room. We are in the dark hall which separates the Advent room from the Christmas room. The sheet that has covered the door of the Christmas room for the last week has been removed. A flood of warm candlelight comes through the frosted glass of the door, and we smell the scent of burning wax.

But it is still too soon to enter that longed-for room. All the scenes of the drama have to be played out. We are like the shepherds guarding their flocks at night. How can we know what is to be seen and where to go? The angel of the Lord has to tell us.

1. "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her. Ich bring' euch gute neue Mär, Der guten Mär bring' ich so viel, Davon ich sing'n und sagen will.	"From Heaven above to earth I come To bear good news to every home; Glad tidings of great joy I bring Whereof I now will say and sing:
We know many of his words in the verses of Luther's Christmas carol by heart, and we have our hymn books handy too.	
2. Euch ist ein Kindlein heut' gebor'n Von einer Jungfrau auserkor'n, Ein Kindelein, so zart und fein, Das soll eur' Freud' und Wonne sein.	To you this night is born a child Of Mary, chosen mother mild; This little child, of lowly birth, Shall be the joy of all your earth.
To be realistic one of us should sing the words of the angel, but according to custom we sing them all together.	
3. Es ist der Herr Christ, unser Gott, Der will euch führ'n aus aller Not, Er will eu'r Heiland selber sein, Von allen Sünden machen rein.	'Tis Christ our God who far on high Hath heard your sad and bitter cry; Himself will your Salvation be, Himself from sin will make you free.
4. Er bringt euch alle Seligkeit, Die Gott der Vater hat bereit, Daß ihr mit uns im Himmelreich Sollt leben nun und ewiglich.	He brings those blessings, long ago Prepared by God for all below; Henceforth His kingdom open stands To you, as to the angel bands.
This carol has fifteen wonderful stanzas, and we sing eight of them.	
5. So merket nun das Zeichen recht, Die Krippe, Windelein so schlecht, Da findet ihr das Kind gelegt, Das alle Welt erhält und trägt."	These are the tokens ye shall mark, The swaddling clothes and manger dark; There shall ye find the young child laid, By whom the heavens and earth were made."
The angel has spoken. We take over. In the sixth stanza, we identify ourselves with the shepherds outside the stable who will see God's Christmas present to mankind, namely his own son as a little baby. Or the shepherds identify with us outside the Christmas room in which we will see the presents which are tokens of the gift that God, in this sacred night, has given to the world. The Christmas room now merges with the stable.	
6. Des laßt uns alle fröhlich sein Und mit den Hirten gehn hinein, Zu sehn, was Gott uns hat beschert, Mit seinem lieben Sohn verehrt.	Now let us all with gladsome cheer Follow the shepherds, and draw near To see this wondrous gift of God Who hath His only Son bestowed.

The door opens, we slowly enter the Christmas room and stand in front of the Christmas tree and the crib underneath, and see everything as it is described in the carol.	
7. Ach, mein herzliebes Jesulein, Mach dir ein rein, sanft Bettelein, Zu ruhen in mein's Herzens Schrein, Daß ich nimmer vergesse dein!	Ah! dearest Jesus, Holy Child, Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled, Within my heart, that it may be A quiet chamber kept for Thee.
While we chant the doxology (minus the Holy Ghost), we see the Christmas tree decorated with two or three dozen live wax candles, they warm the room as if there were a big open fire, we smell the wax and the spruce. And one of my sisters once truly saw the angels of Bethlehem hovering around the Christmas tree. "Cross my heart!" But one has to be very young and bright-eyed to be able to see that!	
8. Lob, Ehr' sei Gott im höchsten Thron, Der uns schenkt seinen ein'gen Sohn! Des freuen sich der Engel Schar Und singen uns solch neues Jahr.	Glory to God in highest Heaven, Who unto man His Son hath given! While angels sing with pious mirth A glad New Year to all the earth.
Text by Martin Luther, 1483-1546, based on a secular popular song "Aus fernen Landen komm ich her" [I come from strange exotic lands]	Translated by Catherine Winkworth, 1829-1878

In our family, 'lametta' (aluminium tinsel) was 'verpönt', was considered to be in bad taste, too modern, artificial or smacking of industry. The tree was mainly decorated with edibles, apples (usually coxes), Christmas biscuits (spekulatius), coloured fondant sugar rings, and a few glass globes, in dark red, blue and green, and on the highest tip of the tree stood the star of Bethlehem, made of straw.

A Christmas photograph showing my mother and her sister (Tante Hilde, Aunt Hildegard) when they were about five (circa 1915) underneath the Christmas tree of my grandparents, shows that tree completely covered in tinsel. What I call "our family tradition" was therefore not as old as it appeared to us children but merely reflected the ideals of my parents, perhaps especially of our father. In his youth he would have been strongly influenced by the Jugendbewegung [Young Awakening] (ca. 1895-1930), a rebellion against lifestyle and tastes of the bourgeoisie (in England it would be called 'Victorian values'). These youngsters and their leaders praised youth versus age and decay, the simple life, strove back to nature (against industry), revived the old folk songs, loved hiking and camping, undertook all-night hikes ending

on a mountain to admire the rising of the sun, they slept in barns, tried to be tough and healthy, Tame and pure by our standards, these youngsters were considered as quite disgraceful by many of their elders. This movement was later absorbed by the Nazis, but its, denazified and unpolitical, ideals, customs and music, re-emerged after the war (1945) and were important until modern pop culture (hippies, Elvis, the Beatles, drugs, liberal sex &c) came along and could compete with it.

Now follows the recitation of the Christmas gospel (Luke, ch. 2) which I quote in German, because only in that language does it conjure up, for me, the associations, the spell, I wish to recall:

Und doch, an diesen Klang von Jugend auf gewöhnt, Ruft er auch jetzt zurück mich in das Leben. (Goethe, Faust)	Used to this sound from the days of my youth, it now calls me back to life.
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I think when we were very young, one of us would have memorised the gospel, but there would also be the missal handy for prompting if necessary. Strangely enough, the older one gets and the easier it gets, the less trouble one takes (e.g. with memorising a short text).

Es begab sich aber zu der Zeit, daß ein Gebot von dem Kaiser Augustus ausging, daß alle Welt geschätzt würde.	And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.
Und diese Schätzung war die allererste und geschah zu der Zeit, da Cyrenius Landpfleger von Syrien war. Und jedermann ging, daß er sich schätzen ließe, ein jeglicher in seine Stadt.	(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.
Da machte sich auch auf Joseph aus Galiläa, aus der Stadt Nazareth, in das jüdische Land zur Stadt Davids, die da heißt Bethlehem, darum daß er von dem Hause und Geschlechte Davids war, auf daß er sich schätzen ließe mit Maria, seinem vertrauten Weibe, die war schwanger.	And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.
Und als sie daselbst waren, kam die Zeit, da sie gebären sollte.	And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.
Und sie gebar ihren ersten Sohn und wickelte ihn in Windeln und legte ihn in eine Krippe; denn sie hatten sonst keinen Raum in der Herberge.	And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.
Und es waren Hirten in derselben Gegend auf dem Felde bei den Hürden, die hüteten des Nachts ihre Herde.	And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.
Und siehe, des Herrn Engel trat zu ihnen, und die Klarheit des Herrn leuchtete um sie; und sie fürchteten sich sehr.	And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.
Und der Engel sprach zu ihnen: Fürchtet euch nicht! siehe, ich verkündige euch große Freude, die allem Volk widerfahren wird;	And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.
denn euch ist heute der Heiland geboren, welcher ist Christus, der Herr, in der Stadt Davids.	For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.
Und das habt zum Zeichen: ihr werdet finden das Kind in Windeln gewickelt und in einer Krippe liegen.	And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Und alsbald war da bei dem Engel die Menge der himmlischen Heerscharen, die lobten Gott und sprachen: Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe und Frieden auf Erden und den Menschen ein Wohlgefallen.	And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.
Und da die Engel von ihnen gen Himmel fuhren, sprachen die Hirten untereinander: Lasset uns nun gehen gen Bethlehem und die Geschichte sehen, die da geschehen ist, die uns der Herr kundgetan hat.	And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.
Und sie kamen eilend und fanden beide, Maria und Joseph, dazu das Kind in der Krippe liegen.	And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.
Da sie es aber gesehen hatten, breiteten sie das Wort aus, welches zu ihnen von diesem Kinde gesagt war.	And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.
Und alle, vor die es kam, wunderten sich der Rede, die ihnen die Hirten gesagt hatten.	And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.
Maria aber behielt alle diese Worte und bewegte sie in ihrem Herzen.	But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.
Und die Hirten kehrten wieder um, priesen und lobten Gott um alles, was sie gehört und gesehen hatten, wie denn zu ihnen gesagt war.	And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Note: The text of the Christmas gospel does not have to be published in full, and especially not in both languages. The first few paragraphs in English would suffice. However, considering ever fewer people know anything about Christian traditions, it would be better to publish the full text, and since in this story so much is made of the exact words which bring back childhood memories, there is an argument for publishing the German text as well.

We all sing 'Silent Night', which is de rigueur.

When we were very young, 'Ihr Kinderlein, kommet' (Come, children, to the manger) also had to be sung. The text is by the once popular 18th century Bavarian priest and children's writer Christoph von Schmid, whose pious sentimentality was ridiculed by Gottfried Keller in 'Die drei gerechten Kammacher'. Christoph von Schmid could perhaps not have foreseen that even his simple verses could be misinterpreted by children, for there was a time when we sang, in all earnestness,

instead of (below)	we sang (below)
'hoch oben singt jubelnd der Engelein Chor' (in heaven, the choir of angels is singing in jubilation), jubelnd = joyfully	'hoch oben schwimmen Juden den Engeln was vor' (in heaven, Jews are putting on a swimming demonstration for the angels) Juden = Jews

instead of (below)	we sang (below)
'da liegt es, ach Kinder , auf Heu und auf Stroh' (there, oh children, he lies on hay and on straw), ach Kinder = oh children	'da liegen acht Kinder auf Heu und auf Stroh' (eight children are lying on hay and on straw) acht Kinder = eight children

The present pope would no doubt have been delighted with the eight children, unlike Friedrich Engels (nomen est omen), who called this ironically 'The Holy Family'.

In the Cologne Christmas carol 'Menschen, die ihr wart verloren', we managed to turn left text into right text, thus:

instead of (below)	we sang (below)
'Laßt uns vor ihm nieder fallen ' (Let's bend our knees before him)	'Laßt uns vor ihm nieder knallen ' (Let's bang down before him).

We have heard the official news and can be sure that Christmas has really started. But the Christmas presents are not yet to be touched or, strictly speaking, even to be looked at, even though, during all these proceedings, our eyes of course wonder curiously all over the room where for each member of the family there will be a little pile of presents, on a chair, a table, sideboard, on the floor. The presents were never wrapped.

We have only sung one Christmas carol so far, there must be a few more.

"What shall we sing?"

"In dulci jubilo," someone suggests.

We know that one by heart, and I sit already on the piano stool to accompany the chant: '... unsers Herzens Wonne, leit in praesepio, und leuchtet als die Sonne, matris in gremio' (our heart's joy lies in the manger and shines like the sun on his mother's lap).

RECITATIONS

When we were very young, three of us, Hildegard, Ina and myself must have put on a very short nativity play, or perhaps it was only a tableau vivant. I have seen some photographs of these performances, me or Hildegard with cardboard wings to represent the angel, or me as St Joseph with a painted moustache, Hildegard as the Virgin Mary, and Ina less than a year old lying in a laundry basket to present baby Jesus.

As we grew older, recitations of poems, psalms, stories, Christmas poems ('Die Nacht vor dem heiligen Abend', and the like), lesser-known Christmas carols, became part of the proceedings at this stage. We have memorised and rehearsed them throughout Advent.

The recitations were presents of us children to our parents and especially to our maternal grandmother, Paula Faßbender (known as 'Mütterchen' or briefly 'Mütter'). She, who knew dozens of long classical German ballads (Schiller, Goethe, Mörike, ...) by heart, and who, after having tucked us in, sent us to sleep at night not by telling bedside stories but by reciting our favourite ballads or singing one of the Lutheran evening chorales (Breit aus die Flügel beide, o Jesu, meine Freude, und nimm dein Küchlein ein: spread out both your wings, o Jesu, my joy, and let your chicks shelter under them) she loved so much from her Lutheran childhood before she converted to Roman Catholicism at the age of thirty.

Mütterchen appreciated it as a personal gift if we had memorised some text or other in her honour. It was our effort in memorising the poem, rather than the recitation itself, that made the present valuable for her, and she knew, of course, that **we** would benefit, as we did, later in life from having learnt so many beautiful texts by heart. The benefit arises decades later when it is far too late to make up for whatever one has failed to do during one's childhood.

This was the kind of Christmas present which money could not buy and for which money was not needed. As children we had no money.

We did not feel that we had to give Christmas presents to our elders, but we may have made some presents of our own for our parents, for example, plywood figures cut with the fretsaw, knitted garments, painted some watercolour pictures or done some calligraphic work.

Part of the recitations was a musical performance, usually a Baroque trio sonata or other pieces by composers like Corelli, Vivaldi, Händel, Telemann (1681-1767, not only a prolific composer and in his time more popular than his contemporary, Bach, 1685-1750, but also the first virtual husband [Tele-Mann]), Johann Rosenmüller (c.1619-1684), and other pre-Bach composers,

played by Hildegard and Ina on the violins and me on the piano, all rehearsed and practised throughout Advent.

PRESENTS

Then at last the great release: having done our duty to God and man, we are allowed to see our pile of presents. Ina says they were always modest, by modern standards or those of richer families, or families with fewer children, for we were poor (a budding lawyer is worth nothing in times of a barter economy, a farmer or a doctor is), but we were always happy with what we received and did not feel that we had had a scarce Christmas.

I must insert here the Christmas letter my father wrote to me in 1943 when I was eight and he was a soldier at the Russian front, because it refers to the scarcity of Christmas presents which, in a way, persisted after the end of the war.

A WAR-TIME CHRISTMAS LETTER FROM FATHER TO SON

<p>Feldpost</p> <p>Herrn Klaus Bung Gut Angenrod bei Alsfeld, Oberhessen</p> <p>Von: Stabsintendant Bung Feldpost-Nr. 38462</p> <p>O.U., den 10. Dezember 1943</p>	<p>Feldpost - Military Mail Service</p> <p>10 December 1943</p>
<p>Mein lieber Klaus!</p> <p>Ich bin so froh darüber, daß Du in Godesberg bei den Großeltern so lieb und artig warst. Zwar weiß ich nicht, ob Dir das Christkind im fünften Kriegsjahr viel schenken kann. Aber ich denke mir, Du wirst schon Deine Freude daran haben, daß Vater und Mutter und alle Großeltern Dich lieb haben.</p>	<p>My dear Klaus!</p> <p>I am so happy that you were so sweet and well-behaved when staying in Godesberg with your grandparents. I do not know whether the Christchild can bring you many presents in this fifth year of the war. But I think you will be happy knowing that father and mother and all your grandparents love you.</p>
<p>So sehr möchte ich Weihnachten bei Euch sein. Aber es geht nicht, weil ich wie so viele andere Soldaten in Rußland auch aufpassen muß, daß die Russen nicht in die deutsche Heimat kommen und alle Häuser verbrennen und die Menschen totmachen. Aber weil hier so viele Soldaten sind und im Schnee stehen und aufpassen, dadurch können die Russen nicht nach Deutschland kommen, und Ihr könnt in Ruhe beim Weihnachtsbaum sitzen und die schönen Lieder singen und Euch freuen, daß es mitten im Winter eine so schöne Zeit gibt wie Weihnachten. Der Vater wird am heiligen Abend viel an Euch denken.</p>	<p>I would so much love to spend Christmas with all of you. But it is not possible because, like so many other soldiers in Russia, I too must watch out and ensure that the Russians do not come into our German home land and burn the houses and kill the people. But because there are so many soldiers here who stand in the snow and are on guard, that's why the Russians cannot come to Germany, and you can sit in peace underneath the Christmas tree and sing beautiful carols and be happy that in the middle of winter there is such a beautiful time as Christmas. On Christmas Eve your father will think of you a lot.</p>
<p>Er hat sich schön in die Erde vergraben in ein ganz großes Loch, fast so groß wie ein kleines Zimmer. Da wird er sich am Weihnachtsabend ein großes Holzfeuer anmachen, daß das Erdloch ganz warm wird. Und außerdem wachsen in Rußland so viele Weihnachtsbäume, daß ihm wohl das Christkind auch einen kleinen hinstellen wird.</p>	<p>He has dug himself nicely into the ground, into a very big hole, almost as big as a small room. That's where he will make a big wooden fire on Christmas Eve so that his earth hole will become very warm. Moreover so many Christmas trees grow in Russia that he is sure that the Christchild will also set up a little Christmas tree for him.</p>
<p>Wenn dann die Kerzen brennen, dann wird der Vater sich davor setzen und gar nichts tun und nur an Euch denken, wie Ihr in Angenrod oder Godesberg, wo Ihr vielleicht gerade seid, auch am Weihnachtsbaum sitzt, wie der Kerzenschein auf Euren</p>	<p>Then, when the candles are lit, your father will sit down and do nothing except think of you and imagine how all of you, in Angenrod or Godesberg, where you might be spending Christmas, are also sitting around the Christmas tree, how the</p>

Gesichtern leuchtet, und wie Ihr alle glücklich seid, daß alles so schön ist.	light of the candles is shining on your faces and how you are all happy that everything is so beautiful.
Wenn Du groß bist, mein lieber Klaus, dann wirst Du auch merken, wie schön das Leben ist, wenn es auch nicht immer was zu lachen gibt. Am schönsten ist es aber zu Weihnachten. Und Weihnachten kommt jedes Jahr wieder. Wenn Du erst einmal richtig gespürt hast, wie schön das Leben ist, dann kannst Du nie mehr wirklich unglücklich sein. Und Dir, lieber Klaus, wünsche ich alles Glück im Leben.	When you are big, my dear Klaus, then you will learn that life is so beautiful, even if it is not always fun. But it is most beautiful at Christmas. And Christmas returns every year. If you have once experienced properly how beautiful life is, then you can never again be truly unhappy. And to you, my dear Klaus, I wish all happiness in life.
o Dein (Vater)	o (= kisses) Your father

Re-reading Father's letter today, I wonder whether, when talking about the Russian danger, he was aware of cause and effect (who had invaded whose territory first, what were German soldiers doing in Russian Christmas tree plantations?), but I presume that, whatever his state of awareness, in those years, only 18 months before what was for many people and in historical, moral and human terms Germany's liberation (Befreiung) (by the Allies), but in Nazi perception and in military terms the "collapse" (Zusammenbruch), it would not have been wise for him to write anything else. He had to explain his absence at Christmas to his young son in simple terms. There was censorship of mail, and "defeatism" was a crime that has been punished with death as the war came to a close. Writing anything else would, at that time, have served no useful purpose.

Ina tells me of floppy dolls which Mother made for the girls out of old "silk" stockings, embroidered with coloured wool for eyes and mouth. Even Father once made dolls out of pieces of wood. These were the luxuries.

Necessities, like clothes and shoes, were also concentrated on Christmas and given as Christmas presents, to make the Christmas pile richer and higher. Dresses were repeatedly recycled. Mother would take one child's dress carefully apart, piece by piece, turn it around to the side which was not yet threadbare, and make other dresses, perhaps for the younger children, out of the material. She was a qualified lawyer but, having become a mother, never practised her profession.

This shows what we could expect to find as presents when singing and recitations were over. Each of us would inspect his own pile first, enjoy what was there, sometimes a surprise, sometimes a wish fulfilled, (how in heaven did the Christ child know our wishes! Was he a mind-reader? Or even omniscient?). Then we would settle down, each in his corner, start reading our books and eat our sweets. Sometimes the radio was on, which on Christmas Eve was always saturated with Christmas carols, nicely orchestrated

and sung by excellent choirs, and by baroque music. Once, I remember, the music was repeatedly interrupted by sad news from the Korean War. When I was tired of reading, I might go to the piano to play Christmas carols and sometimes the others would sing along.

CHURCH SERVICES

At about 11 p.m., having had our fill of Christmas romance, we would leave, muffled up in warm clothes to attend the Christmette, midnight mass, a wonderful occasion because lots of carols would be sung, there was the festive organ, a choir, sometimes even an orchestra, the church bells would be ringing for a long time, unusually late, in the silence of this dark hour, and the church would be packed. To get a seat, we had to arrive at least an hour before the start of the mass, which I happily did, having, even then, enough things to ponder ... I don't know whether the others were equally patient.

I cannot say much about Christmas Day. It was pleasant but not really important. We would sleep longer. It was a spacious day on which everybody could do what he liked, but there were no special ceremonies. We could read and enjoy our presents, go for walks in the snow, talk, sing, make music. There was no obligation to go to church again, since the midnight mass of Christmas Eve counted for Christmas Day (25 December). However, I would often go again, on my own bat, for each mass is different.

At the time, there were three masses prescribed for Christmas Day, each with its own gospel and prayers. The first was the Missa in nocte, the mass at night-time, which provided the skeleton for 'midnight mass' (carol mass), and its gospel (Luke 2:1-14) told the story of Mary and Joseph having to travel to Bethlehem to be registered for the census, the birth of the baby in the stable and of the angels appearing to the shepherds, ending with the Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all men, blessed by his kindness.

The second mass was the Missa in aurora, the mass to be said at dawn, whose gospel (Luke 2:15-20) tells of the shepherds visiting the child in the stable.

The third mass was the Missa in die, the mass to be said in full daylight, whose gospel (John 1:1-14) (In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, ... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, ... full of grace and truth) tells of the 'spiritual' significance of Christ.

This custom has now sadly been replaced by something shorter, simpler and more popular. But going to church several times a day was not necessarily boring then, no less boring than going to the cinema several times or watching, for the n-th time, several well-known television films (The African Queen, The Guns of

Navarrone, Casablanca, and the like) in succession, part of the more modern ritual of Christmas nostalgia.

A special attraction of Christmas Day would have been the music. In many churches in the Roman Catholic Rhineland and in Bavaria, high mass (Hochamt, solemn sung mass) will be celebrated with great pomp and incorporate not only Gregorian chant and à capella masses by Palestrina (c.1525-1594), Tomas Luis de Victoria (c.1548-1611), Josquin des Prez (1445-1521), Orlando di Lasso (1530-1594), ..., but also performances of large orchestral masses by Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Bruckner, Bach, in which a large orchestra was employed, with kettle drums and trumpets, and professional soloists.

While a spoken Gloria might take just over 45 seconds without becoming undignified, the simplest Gregorian sung Gloria just over 90 seconds, the Gloria of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis 17, that of the Petite Messe Solennelle by Rossini 30 and that of Bach's b-minor mass 40 minutes, during all of which time the priests have to sit patiently on their red velvet-lined stools by the side of the altar to let the musicians finish their version. Such a mass, including a rather cursory sermon (as is the Catholic tradition) might take as long as two hours or more. That was a great attraction provided free of charge by God at the expense of the church.

NEW YEAR

New Year, in our house, was never a big affair, since it has no religious significance. On this day the Church celebrates the circumcision and naming ceremony for little Jesus, but this is considered a minor matter, and, after all, we have attended church so enthusiastically during the preceding days and weeks, that we do perhaps deserve a break.

The year of the church begins on the first Sunday of Advent, and that's when we should pray for the year passed and the year coming. The secular New Year is a merely administrative matter, required by the State, and since the separation of church and state, the Catholic church no longer dominates the state. What the state does is therefore neither relevant nor is there any of the romance and emotion attached to it which only religion with its deep, ancient and irrational roots can supply. Religion does this in the story I tell, and it can easily continue to do so, even for so-called unbelievers. But they have to find ways of understanding not only religious traditions but also the nature of their own disbelief or scepticism. More clarity on both issues can enable them to drink from the religious sources with as much right and pleasure as any believer. That's what I learnt much later in life.

The Protestants have for historical reasons, since the time of the Reformation, subjected themselves to the (German) state or states in their need to get support in the fight against Rome.

They take state occasions much more seriously and superimpose religious significance onto them. For them New Year is important and special services are held on New Year's Eve praying for God's blessing during the coming year and thanking him for the past. (In more recent years, the Roman Catholic Church has followed suite, and it now provides New Year services of its own.)

1. Nun laßt uns gehn und treten Mit Singen und mit Beten Zum Herrn, der unserm Leben Bis hierher Kraft gegeben.	Now let us come before Him, With song and prayer adore Him, Who to our life hath given All needed strength from heaven.
2. Wir gehn dahin und wandern Von einem Jahr zum andern, Wir leben und gedeihen Vom alten zu dem neuen.	The stream of years is flowing, And we are onward going, From old to new surviving And by His mercy thriving.
3. Durch so viel Angst und Plagen, Durch Zittern und durch Zagen, Durch Krieg und große Schrecken, Die alle Welt bedecken.	In woe we often languish And pass through times of anguish, Of wars and trepidation Alarming every nation.

I can best give a flavour of the Lutheran New Year sentiments, to which I became closely attached later in life, by quoting Paul Gerhardt's (1607-1676) New Year chorale, which will inevitably be sung at Lutheran New Year services.

4. Denn wie von treuen Müttern In schweren Ungewittern Die Kindlein hier auf Erden Mit Fleiß bewahret werden:	As mothers watch are keeping O'er children who are sleeping, Their fear and grief assuaging When angry storms are raging:
5. Also auch und nicht minder Läßt Gott sich seine Kinder, Wenn Not und Trübsal blitzen, In seinem Schoße sitzen.	So God His own is shielding And help to them is yielding. When need and woe distress them, His loving arms caress them.

LUTHERAN MEMORIES

In later years, I absorbed the Lutheran cultural, poetic, musical and religious tradition so profoundly that I am now able to respond to it as, or even more, instinctively as to my earlier childhood memories. This tradition is, of course, at least as typically German, if not specifically more so, than the German version of Roman Catholicism, and no description of what Christmas means in Germany as a whole can be complete without it.

But this memoir has my childhood family celebrations at its core, whereas my Lutheran memories, impressions and loves stem from families other than my own, but even more so from the churches, from singing in Lutheran church choirs, from choir get-togethers during holiday periods, usually in the company of very skilled musical youngsters, close friends, associated with first loves, good instrumentalists and singers, some of them professionals, fond especially of the baroque and pre-baroque music and of what was then called 'modern music'.

'Modern' Protestant church music has remained virtually unchanged over 70 years. It was the musical language of young composers (some neo-baroque) who were, between 1912 and 1930 and beyond, reacting against the 'romantic music' of the preceding century. Most prominent among them, and much sung by us, were Ernst Pepping (1901-1981), Hans Friedrich Micheelsen (1902-1973), Hugo Distler (1908-1942; he committed suicide distressed by the Nazi activities), Kurt Hessenberg (1908-1994), Albert Thate (1903-1982, composer of the canon 'Herr, bleibe bei uns', which has become accepted as a folksong: 'nobody' knows that the composer is Albert Thate).

Unlike today, at that time we, like our musical teachers, despised the rich harmonies (chromaticism, crescendi and decrescendi reeking of 'sentimentality') of 'romantic' music, of Mendelssohn, Bruckner, and Brahms. The old men of that time, our musical leaders, who have survived are outraged and disgusted when they witness us singing now also romantic motets with gusto. Our tastes have become more catholic and tolerant.

No reader who has not been soaked in that tradition could respond to my reeling off lists of composers, like Isaac (c.1450-1517), Eccard (1553-1611), Sweelinck (1562-1621), Schütz (1585-1672), Scheidt (1587-1654), Buxtehude (1637-1707), etc etc etc, well-known to us singers but unknown by name to everybody else, to pieces like Eccard's 'Übers Gebirg Maria geht / zu ihrer Bas' Elisabeth' (Mary wanders over the mountains to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who calls her Mother of the Lord...), or Bach's 'Uns ist ein Kindlein heut geboren' or Sweelinck's 'Hodie, hodie, Christus natus est, noël, noël', or Bach's 'Virga Jesse floruit', etc etc etc., and the whole Christmas section of the Lutheran hymn book. I remember also taking part in performances of Bach's Christmas Oratorio, his Christmas Magnificat in E-flat major and Christmas cantatas by Schütz and by Buxtehude.

6. Ach Hüter unsers Lebens, Fürwahr, es ist vergebens Mit unserm Tun und Machen, Wo nicht dein' Augen wachen.	O Thou who dost not slumber, Remove what would encumber Our work, which prospers never Unless Thou bless it ever.
7. Laß ferner dich erbitten, O Vater, und bleib mitten In unserm Kreuz und Leiden Ein Brunnen unsrer Freuden.	O God of Mercy, hear us; Our Father, be Thou near us; Mid crosses and in sadness Be Thou our Fount of gladness.
8. Gib mir und allen denen, Die sich von Herzen sehnen Nach dir und deiner Hulde, Ein Herz, das sich gedulde!	To all who bow before Thee And for Thy grace implore Thee, Oh, grant Thy benediction And patience in affliction.

All these experiences also have left their traces. They are 'indescribable', because they are not attached to the visible, 'spectacular', childhood drama and ritual, and reside only in their music and in their texts, such as they are. Today for me they are even stronger and more alive than my Roman Catholic memories, which form the bulk of this story. This goes to show that profound impressions can, exceptionally, still be acquired after the age of ten (or whatever), if there is enough desire and dedication.

9. Sei der Verlaßnen Vater, Der Irrenden Berater, Der Unversorgten Gabe, Der Armen Gut und Habe!	Be Thou a Helper speedy To all the poor and needy, To all forlorn a Father; Thy erring children gather.
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CHRISTMAS STORIES

I return to our Catholic family at the time when I was not much older than ten. In the evenings of the Christmas period, our family would assemble again round the Christmas tree and the crib, less solemnly of course than on Christmas Eve, to sing carols, or just to sit and read or talk. On these occasions only the thick candles of the crib and a few of the candles on the tree would be lit.

Gradually the sweets on our dishes would be finished. Begging Mother for a few more might or might not be successful. The apples adorning the Christmas tree were usually safest. They shrivelled as days went by and became increasingly less tempting -- almost human. But mysteriously the sweets and biscuits hanging from the tree would become fewer, even though there were no storms to shake them to the ground, and the 'invisible' rear of

the tree was disproportionately affected by the gradual thinning out. Did our parents not notice, or were they too wise or compassionate to say?

There are many romantic stories, legends and poems which go with German Christmas, but there is a Russian one which was a treasure specific to our family, and I am not aware of anyone else knowing it. This was Nikolai Lesskow's (Ljeskov's) novella 'Das Tier' (The Beast), a favourite of our Father's (who had all nine volumes of Lesskow's collected works in German in his library) and of all the family.

I am not sure if 'The Beast' was ever read aloud to us. I think with its 7,000 words it was too long for that. But I must have read it frequently during the Christmas period for it to have left its indelible impression. Lesskow is now so little known, and the story was so important for us that I must give here at least a synopsis.

THE BEAST: DAS TIER: SYNOPSIS

Five-year-old Nikolai Lesskow spends Christmas without his parents on the large estate of his uncle, who is renowned for his cruelty, the harsh punishments he inflicts on his serfs and the fact that he has never ever forgiven any transgressions.

It is the custom that captured bear pups are raised on the estate, looked after by 25-year-old Ferapont, who has a close relationship with them. At any one time one of the bear pups, selected because he seems easiest to teach and is the best behaved, is allowed to live outside the cage and move freely in the farmyard and the park, his special task being to stand guard at the entrance of the farm. He keeps this privilege as long as his animal nature does not appear, i.e. as long as he does not harm any of the animals or humans who live on the estate. As soon as he commits a transgression, he is irretrievably condemned to death, through an elaborately designed hunt procedure from which he cannot possibly escape.

The condemned bear will be kept in a den until the day of execution, which is to provide entertainment for the estate owner ('Uncle') and his guests. On this day, a strong beam will be lowered at an angle into the den, and the bear will immediately come out of his prison. He will then be set upon by young bloodhounds, trained to cling to the bear like leeches and not to let go as long as they are alive. If the bear manages to escape the bloodhounds in training, two hunters with experienced hounds will attack him. If he manages to survive these as well and is about to get away into the forest, a marksman is waiting for him. No bear has ever managed to overcome all these dangers, and should it ever happen, the persons responsible will meet with a terrible punishment.

The bear currently enjoying these privileges is Sganarell, and surprisingly he has already lived in this freedom for five years without committing a transgression. He has become a huge animal, very strong, beautiful, intelligent and dexterous. He can walk on his hindlegs, put on a paper hat, and parade like a soldier. A very close friendship has developed between him and Ferapont.

Just before the arrival of the boy, Sganarell had committed several misdemeanours, torn off the wing of a goose, put his paw on the back of a foal and broken his spine, and rolled a blind beggar and his guide in the snow, badly bruising their limbs in the process. Now he is in the

den waiting for his execution, which will be the entertainment Uncle plans to offer his guests on Christmas Day (6 January: Epiphany, in the Russian Orthodox church). Uncle hears that Ferapont, who suffers for his imprisoned friend Sganarell and dreads his impending cruel fate, has said to his sister: 'Thank God, it is not me who has to shoot him if he escapes. I'd rather suffer the cruellest punishment than carry out such an order.' Uncle hears about this remark and immediately orders that Ferapont, his serf, be positioned in a hideout opposite that where the marksman of last resort waits and that he be ordered to shoot Sganarell before the marksman backs him up, if necessary.

At 2 p.m. on Christmas Day, all the spectators are lined up in their sledges in sight of the den, the bloodhounds, hunters and the marksmen are ready. Elaborate preparations have been made. The beam is lowered into the den, but the bear refuses to come out. Snowballs are thrown into the den, he is poked with lances, burning straw is thrown into the den, blank shots are fired into it: the bear roars loudly, in anger, fear and pain, he has been singed but has flattened himself on the ground, pressed against the wall away from the fire and refuses to budge. They fetch Ferapont. He must lead his friend to the execution. He tightly ties a strong rope to the top end of the beam and climbs into the den. The bear can be seen to embrace Ferapont and to lick his face. After a while, Ferapont re-emerges in tight embrace with the bear, Sganarell's paw resting on Ferapont's shoulder. Ferapont is driven back to his hideout, the bear left outside the den. One end of the rope with whose aid Ferapont climbed into the den has accidentally formed a loop round Sganarell's paw. As Sganarell tries desperately to pull his paw out of the loop which becomes ever tighter, the beam at the other end of the rope jumps out of the den and circles like a centrifuge round Sganarell, threatening to kill and destroy anything that enters its orbit. The bear keeps up the centrifugal motion. Two bloodhounds have already attacked Sganarell, and he has killed them with his paws. The beam shatters a whole pack of hounds at a blow. Turning slowly around himself, Sganarell walks on his hind legs, towards the forest where Ferapont and the marksman are hidden, all the time circling the beam around him, and nobody can attack him. All spectators are in grave danger: if the rope should break or Sganarell should let go of it and send the beam in their direction, anyone in its path would be killed. The spectators and the huntsmen with their dogs race away in panic. Sganarell is now between the two snow walls behind which Ferapont and the marksman are waiting, the rope breaks, the beam flies off, demolishes the marksman's snow wall and the wooden support for his heavy rifle before it comes to rest in the snow far behind the marksman. Sganarell tumbles backwards, makes several somersaults, and lands behind the other snow wall, where Ferapont is hiding. He licks Ferapont's face and embraces him. Ferapont is expected to kill his friend with his hunting knife but fails to do so, a grave offence. The marksman shoots without support for his rifle, only grazes the bear but hits Ferapont in his arm, Ferapont faints, Sganarell escapes into the forest, it is too dark to pursue him.

The guests and the children in the dining hall are waiting for the entry of Uncle and are discussing the terrible fate that will inevitably meet Ferapont for having failed to kill the bear, and hope against hope that Uncle will spare him, something which he has never done before. At this moment Uncle enters, there is embarrassed silence in the hall, which surely will make the distrustful man even angrier and even more cruel. To break the silence, the old village priest Alexej asks the children, who surround him, if they understand the deeper meaning of the Christmas hymn "Christ is born". Neither the children, nor the adults for that matter, really understand. The priest explains the deeper meaning of the words 'praise him' and 'lift up your hearts' and as he does so his own heart is lifted by the spirit, and everybody understands that while appearing to talk to all, it is really one heart he is trying to reach, and all pray silently that he may succeed. It was not only in ancient times that the wise men brought their gifts to the child in the manger

but even today even the poorest man can bring a gift which is greater than those of the wise men, namely his own heart purified by the teaching that we should love, and forgive, and do good to all, friends as well as enemies.

Uncle is moved by these words, he drops his stick, which is the symbol of the cruelty with which his suffering and embittered heart defends itself against 'the world', which he can see only as his enemy. Now a message of love has reached his ear, he has seen a selfless person, Ferapont, showing love towards the beast, he sees that love is possible and that he too can expect love from others and that it is therefore not dangerous to love them, that he no longer needs to protect himself. He forgives Ferapont and sets him free, offers him money so that he can go away whenever he wishes. Ferapont accepts his freedom, but refuses to leave his master. He wants to continue to serve him as a free man with even more dedication than before as a serf. They become close friends, and the uncle nicknames him 'The Tamer of the Beast'.

The Uncle is not a converted sinner who has learned that it is his duty to do good rather than evil, but his heart has been melted, he has seen that the world is not essentially hostile and that he therefore need not defend himself through cruelty, but that he can afford to follow his natural, i.e. loving, inclinations.

This is not a case of conversion (sinner to saint) but a case of liberation (cure) from suffering (which induces fear and anger). Once suffering has come to an end, the works of love, deeply buried permanent instincts, flow on their own accord. Like Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Tony Blair, George Bush, Ian Paisley and the Pope (aka The Anti-Christ), i.e. like all of us, Uncle was not "evil" (there is no such thing): he has been 'good' all along but he has not been able, has not dared, to show it.

It is not a conversion, but a resolution of his grudging and embittered soul.

EPIPHANY: ERSCHENUNG DES HERRN

In the church calendar, the Christmas period ends 40 days after the birth of Jesus, on the second day of February, with the feast of the "Purification of the Virgin Mary" (Mariä Lichtmess, the Churching of Mary). That is the day when the Christmas tree and the crib are removed from the churches, and Mary returns to her normal rights and duties as a housewife.

But the domestic Christmas period ends earlier, on Twelfth Night, i.e. on the sixth of January, the feast of Epiphany, or of the three kings, or of the three wise men, the magi, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, when Jesus 'came out', manifested himself as a future king and ruler, to the world at large (his first state visit, or rather, official audience, so to speak) and was recognised by the three kings who pledged their loyalty and brought him presents on behalf of the world.

<p>Ab Oriente venerunt Magi in Bethleem adorare Dominum, et apertis thesauris suis pretiosa munera obtulerunt, aurum sicut Regi magno, tus sicut Deo vero, myrrham sepulturi eius, alleluia.</p>	<p>Wise men from the East came to Bethlehem in order to worship the Lord, and having opened their treasures, they brought him precious gifts, gold as to a great king, incense as to the true God, and myrrh for his burial, alleluia.</p>
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This ancient antiphon and its interpretation of the gifts is reflected in the English carol 'We three kings of Orient are':

- **Gold** we bring to crown Him again; ...
- **Incense** owns a Deity nigh; ...
- **Myrrh** is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Seal'd in the stone-cold tomb.

Since Father, being better informed than the faithful masses, not blindly followed accepted customs, was conservative and therefore liked things Spanish, he did not respect the traditional German Christmas quite as much as it might appear to be. He knew that 25 December was not in any way a historical date for the birth of Jesus (which is quite unknown, even if it ever took place) but was assigned to Jesus as his "official birthday" comparatively late in the history of the church (5th century?), to combat pagan worship of the sun god associated with that day of solstice.

He argued that the really important festival of the season was Epiphany (as it still is in the Eastern Orthodox Church), that Christ's manifestation to the world is more important than his physical birth (which more sentimental minds prefer to worship).

Therefore he preferred the festival of Reyes (Kings) as the Spaniards call Epiphany. This is when Spanish children get their presents. It makes more theological sense, Father argued, since it commemorates the presents brought by the Magi, which were 'real' presents, whereas Christ can only in a very extended sense be called the 'present' that God gives to mankind, however often the formula may be repeated in German Christmas poetry.

As far as presents were concerned, we stuck with established popular German custom (24 December), but official Epiphany was also greatly honoured.

This compromise showed that Father was not a fanatic and did not want to isolate us, in spite of his superior historical knowledge, from the society in which we lived. His was realpolitik. In this respect he was different from the typical sectarian, for example the Jehovah's Witnesses, who also know that Christmas is not a very ancient festival but who crossly refuse to acknowledge it in any way and make a virtue of not celebrating it, as if it were idolatry. I appreciate the common sense and tolerance which I learnt through such examples. Tolerance does not require ignorance or indifference.

Epiphany was the last day of our celebrations. A full set of fresh candles was put on the Christmas tree, and the sweets that had strangely disappeared from it, were, I think, tacitly replaced.

All candles would be lit, and once more the tree would appear in its full glory. Carols would be sung including at least one suitable one of this day: "Es führt drei König Gottes Hand" (God's hand was leading three kings through a star in the orient to the Christ Child near Jerusalem). There was a pair of scissors, and after each carol one child or each child was allowed to cut a thread and take one sweet or one apple off the tree. That was called "den Baum plündern", plundering (ransacking) the tree. When the tree was empty, we would wait for the candles to burn down, and then for the very last candle to die away.

Thus Christmas has quietly come to an end, and next day when we return from school, the tree, the crib and all the decorations will have gone.

--- End of Part 1: Christmas at Home ---

^Part Two

AND ABROAD

I have since spent Christmas in many countries and the occasions have often felt distant, alienated, cold or melancholic: I have not grown up with the traditions, tunes and texts of those countries.

If texts are to appeal to the emotions, they have to be exactly those that have been anchored in memory. 'Hört' will not do in place of 'Höret', 'Herr' not in place of 'Lieber Herre Gott', just as it will not do to omit a beat or a bar of a piece by Mozart. The exactness of a phrase is more important than its 'meaning'. I do not want a paraphrase, I want 'the text'. The foreign texts 'mean' (in the sense of irrational response to exactness) something to the natives of those countries but not to me, however well I may translate.

The meaning may be meaningless anyway, but the text will always be the text and no less. The text is the meaning, even if it is meaningless or I no longer believe in what the text asserts. Even the assertion is only a symbol or a metaphor, so I must at least stick with the text.

ENGLAND

I have experienced many Christmases in England and heard the English carols on the radio and in the shops. That did not teach me the texts, but the tunes now speak to me of Christmas, even though they were usually only background music. But I have never "believed in English". Therefore they do not speak as strongly and 'truly' as the countless German chorales, the Catholic ones which I learned as a child or the Lutheran ones which I acquired as a teenager and which now are equally or even more strongly rooted in me.

I have never spent Christmas in an English family, and the very thought embarrasses me because I fear to witness customs with which I am expected to sympathise while being emotionally unable to do so: it is too late.

GIVING CHILDREN A CHOICE

I am grateful to my parents for having been so firm, straight and single-minded in their convictions, so that I could associate myself with these sub-rational traditions, which can still give me pleasure today because they were so early and firmly implanted.

If I had been brought up with doubt before it forced itself upon me, if I had been given merely information about religion or religions from which to choose later on, there would be nothing to cling on to now (and also nothing that I could have so strongly rejected as an adult): there would be merely ignorance and indifference and superior rationality which can teach us nothing that is really important.

Paradoxically, in religion, I consider excessive and unsubtle reliance on reason as simple-minded, naïve and self-destructive: Reason (and its twin sister, belief) miss the essence. All discussions based on reason are a waste of time. Religion is not something to be discussed but something to be practised.

This applies to those who want to accept and follow a religion as well as to those who reject it.

I prefer what I have: a deeply rooted memory, something I once strongly believed in, that I could later reject with good reason, and that is still, in a strange way, very important to me.

Without the teaching I received from my parents, I would have nothing but a cold set of assertions about God and man which may be declared as true and false, believed or not believed, and which often pass for religion in simple-minded people. This includes the intelligentsia and most Christian theologians. Such assertions must of necessity be rejected by people (our future atheists) because they mistake religion for a set of beliefs or assertions which may be true or false and, the way they are formulated, must needs turn out to be false.

In this theology of clever simpletons, God is proudly presented (like a toddler presents his potty) as a person and as a transcendent creator (and our missionaries swarm into all the world to propagate this great discovery). His love and power are praised and considered an essential feature of God.

But must God be thought of in such childish, rationalist terms? Must he be so anthropomorphic? God = Superman? Is there no possible concept of God that is more elemental, more powerful, more pervasive? Is the Christian God the only God one can reject (or accept)? If we have rejected the Christian God, have we rejected God? Are they the same?

The short-coming of the 'Western atheist' is that he bases his denial of God on the Christian concept of God, which is the most untenable concept imaginable, as if there were not entirely different approaches to religion, different concepts of God available for consideration and rejection.

Such is the pernicious and destructive influence of Christianity in the world that its naïve and worldly categories of thinking are considered fundamental, inescapable properties of the human mind. Therefore even non-Christians (atheists and members of other religions) have been contaminated by Christian thought and

feel compelled to think, and pose their questions, in these terms. Christian atheism therefore also drives members of more subtle religions into atheism! Christianity being mistaken for the paradigm of religion destroys religiosity as such and thereby all other religions.

The religious formulae are important whatever they are supposed to mean, they are great and real comforters, and we need them. They must be implanted in early childhood when we are still capable of responding with curiosity and affection to anything we hear for the first time.

Giving a child information about a religion is giving him nothing. What we all need, once in a lifetime, atheists and believers alike, is experience of religion. This can be had with no more than one religion at a time. This time is childhood.

Parents should not give their children information about several different religions so that they can choose later. There are good arguments for that policy, but for that very reason they are naïve. They mistake the very nature of religion. One religion is sufficient. The child can reject that religion when he is older if he wishes. He can easily pick up another when he wishes, provided he has once understood in simple unambiguous terms what it means to practise a religion.

A religion is not something we should learn about or talk about, but something we may practise and should enjoy. Comparative religion is not for children. Once the child has 'learnt' one religion and the principles of religious practice through that one religion, he can easily learn what he wishes to learn about another when the time comes. If it is too late for him to become happy with the new religion, still no harm is done. He can stick with his maternal religion (for if he is not strong enough to reject it, it cannot be all that bad for him), or he can abandon religion altogether. None of these possibilities will do him any serious harm.

Parents should not be too eager to give their children options. Children who are, as young adults, so intellectually weak that they depend on being given options rather than taking them anyway, do not deserve the options and are no asset for any other religious community. Converts are usually not worth having anyway.

This year I was given a modern book of Christmas tales for children. I expected some nostalgic pleasure. Most texts were by modern authors. They were written in plain and simple German. They should have spoken to me since I do not mind reading children's stories. But they didn't, they left me cold, for I had no previous association with them and was no longer as open as a child who is fascinated by anything new that is presented to him. The child demands and enjoys repetition and after a while enjoys the text or the tune regardless of the fact that he already knows what it says, or does not understand it at all. Modern German

children who grow up with this book and these stories will probably be able to associate pleasant memories with them, but I cannot. It is too late.

Audiatur et advocatus diaboli: I do not agree with his conclusions because he too treats religion (like most of the simple-minded and pseudo-learned supporters of Christianity) as a set of propositions which can be verified. But he makes his point so brilliantly that it is worth listening to him, for the sake of 'his text'. This is from Arno Schmid: 'Aus dem Leben eines Fauns' (From the life of a faun), first published in 1953, Part 3, p 131 f; Fischer Taschenbuch, Frankfurt/Main; Publisher note: This passage may still be Copyright! ???). The scene is set in 1944 (Nazi period).

<p>Ein Kinderchörchen sagte brav auf:</p> <p>"Händä falltänn. Köpfchänn sänkänn: / Imma an dehn Führa dankänn!/ Dea uns giebt unsa Täglichsbrot.: / Unt uns befreit: aus Allanoht!";</p> <p>und ich konnte nicht anders, ich mußte hin zur Hecke, und besah mir die fünfjährigen Wesen, in bib and tucker, wie sie da auf den dünnen Holzbänkchen saßen. Die Schwester (die die verruchten Verse vorgesprochen hatte), gab Jedem einen kleinen gläsernen Bonbon ins blecherne Henkeltöpfchen, und da drehten sie ihn mit den Löffeln, und <kochten> ihn tüchtig: was ist das für ein Regime, das dergleichen aussinnt?! (Aber mir fiel sofort ein, daß ich damals ja auch als erstes Liedel gelernt hatte</p> <p>"Der Kaiser ist ein lieber Mann (sic!)/: er wohnt in Berlien";</p> <p>und das ist dann also scheinbar überall die unvermeidliche Art, <Bürgerkunde> zu betreiben!: Oh, die Schweine Alle!! In die wehrlosen, zart-unwissenden Wesen solche Wortjauchen zu pumpen! Oder das gleich sinnlose Geleier von "Christi Blut": bis zu 17/18 Jahren mußten Kinder in vollkommener geistiger Neutralität aufwachsen, und dann ein paar tüchtige Lehrgänge! Könnt ihnen ja dann abwechselnd die Wunderwippchen von der "Heiligen Dreieinigkeit" und den Lieben Männern in Berlin vorlegen, und zum Vergleich Philosophie und Naturwissenschaften: da würdet Ihr Dunkelmänner Euch ganz schön umsehen!).</p>	<p>A chorus of children recited sagely:</p> <p>"Hände falten, Köpfchen senken: / Immer an den Führer denken!/ Der uns gibt unser täglich Brot / Und uns befreit aus aller Not!"</p> <p>(Fold your hands, / lower your little heads:/ always think of the fuhrer / who gives us our daily bread:/ and puts an end to all our woes!);</p> <p>and I couldn't help it, I had to go to the hedge, and I inspected the five-year-old creatures, in bib and tucker, how they were sitting there on their thin little wooden benches. The kindergarten teacher (who had recited the pernicious verses for them) put a little glass imitation sweet into the little tin pots which each of them had, and the children were turning it with their spoons and were <boiling> it thoroughly: what sort of regime is this which can think up such games?! (But I remembered straightaway that when I was that age, the first cheerful song I had learned was</p> <p>"Our Emperor is a lovely man (sic!)/: and he lives in Berlin";</p> <p>so this seems to be everywhere the unavoidable way to teach <civics>!: oh, those pigs, all of them!! To pump such verbal sewage into the defenceless, tenderly ignorant creatures! Or the equally meaningless bla-bla of "Christ's blood":! until children are 17 or 18 they should grow up in perfect intellectual neutrality, and then a few thorough courses! Then you present them in turn with the miracle frauds of the "Holy Trinity" and of the Lovely Men in Berlin, and for comparison filosofy and science: then you obscurantists can be sure of a surprise!).</p>
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**THE FULL TEXT OF'
DER KAISER IST EIN LIEBER MANN@**

Tune: Üb' immer Treu und Redlichkeit, or:
Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen, from Mozart's Magic Flute

Lied "Der Kaiser", dessen Text in den preußischen Schulfibeln um 1900 abgedruckt wurde:

Der Kaiser ist ein lieber Mann,
er wohnt in Berlin,
und wär' das nicht so weit von hier'
dann ging' ich heut noch hin.

Und was ich bei dem Kaiser wollt'?
Ich gäb' ihm meine Hand
und reicht' die schönsten Blumen ihm,
die ich im Garten fand.

Und sagte dann: "In treuer Lieb'
bring' ich die Blumen dir!"
Und dann lief' ich geschwinde fort
und wär' gleich wieder hier.

FRANCE, PORTUGAL, JAMAICA AND SPAIN

I have spent some Christmases in France with an adult clan, but without religious associations, without chanting and without going to church. For me, something was missing. These were cheerful pleasant occasions, socially interesting too, because my hosts were charming and belonged to a big conservative and interesting family, but they remained secular and did not move me. The same happened during a Portuguese Christmas when I did not even sample a church and Portuguese singing and organ playing. The only French Christmas music I can respond to is Marc-Antoine Charpentier's 'Messe de minuit pour noel', which is based on ancient French carols, and this year (2000) at midnight mass in Tréguier Cathedral, I was fortunate to hear parts of it again and be reminded of pleasant times. However, the choir was out of tune and at times went off like a run-away train or rather a stampeding herd (completely in unison with itself though), much to the consternation of the conductor, and of the organist, who did not know whether to yield and jump to catch up, or to insist on his score, which would have resulted in a cacophony right through to the final solution, also known as 'cadence' or 'Twilight of God'). No English cathedral choir would have put on such a shambles, nor would it have happened in even medium-sized churches in Germany.

How much discomfort a single unbeliever can cause the church even in modern times is demonstrated by the emotions (and continuing pranks) surrounding a statue that stands outside Tréguier Cathedral.

Tréguier is the birthplace of Ernest Renan (1823-1892), who became famous for his excellent French prose and infamous for his book about the life of Jesus (which is still in print as a paperback), in which he asserted (like Albert Schweitzer) that Jesus was the son of man, completely the son of man, and nothing but the son of man, which convinced the clerics of the time that Renan was the son of a bitch, completely the son of a bitch, and nothing but the son of a bitch. The cathedral square (la place du Martray) belongs to the liberal (i.e. anti-clerical, Don Camillo and Peppone) City Council. The cathedral chapter could therefore not prevent the Council from erecting, in 1903, a colossal statue of a sedentary Renan outside the cathedral so that every churchgoer has to pass it. They put three then provocative quotes from Renan's works on the monument:

1 On ne fait de grandes choses qu'avec la science et la vertu.	Great things cannot be done except through science and virtue (courage?).
2 La foi qu'on a eue ne doit jamais être une chaîne.	The faith which one has had must never be a chain.
3 L'homme fait la beauté de ce qu'il aime et la sainteté de ce qu'il croit.	It is man who infuses with beauty that which he loves and with holiness that in which he believes.

The council ordered that every churchgoer has to raise his hat when he passes the statue. The chapter countered with introducing a preparatory rite to all its masses. The faithful now arrive hatless and, as they pass Renan, they spit out, that the scripture might be fulfilled which sayeth: 'And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads' (Matthew 27:39). For many years, the clergy refused to take the Holy Sacrament to the deathbed of people who lived in the 'rue Renan'.

In 1904, the church got its own back by buying a tiny piece of land on the river promenade, just on the stretch where the atheists most love to walk and take counsel together against the LORD and against his anointed. On 19 May 1904, in the presence of Cardinal Labouré, they erected a 'calvaire' (crucifixion group), officially known as 'Calvaire de Réparation', 'commandé par les catholiques en signe de protestation contre l'érection de la statue d'Ernest Renan sur la place du Martray' (as a plaque for tourists says), ordered by the Catholics in protest against the erection of the statue of Ernest Renan, and equipped it with a tablet which says, in Latin, Breton and French:

'Truly this man was the Son of God.'

VERE HIC HOMO FILIUS DEI ERAT
E GWIRIONEZ AN DEN-MAN A OA MAB DA ZOUE
CET HOMME ÉTAIT VRAIMENT LE FILS DE DIEU
(MARC 15:39)

Here too people spit, of course. So the church provided spittoons. During Holy Week, however, (its date is the only thing the liberals want to know about Christianity), the liberals erect a kiosk on the promenade where they sell vinegar, sponges and bamboo canes, and Coca-Cola-Registered-Trademark.

When I visited Tréguier cathedral on Christmas Eve, someone had surrounded the Renan statue with grave lights: a posthumous conversion of the old bugger, an attempt to draw him willy-nilly into the Christian community, an indication that the next Popess is planning to canonise him...? Who knows? Pranks on the statue continue to this day. Some time ago, somebody had draped the statue in toilet paper, and when I visited Tréguier again to copy the quotations on the Calvaire, someone had stuck the branch of a tree under his arm.

And so the disgrace continues.

I spent one Christmas on a Jamaican beach and felt lonely and outcast because of the personal circumstances which had brought me to the island.

I was lucky in Spain because I had learnt and enjoyed some villancicos, had learnt them so thoroughly, that they spoke to me.

<p>1. Hacia Belén va un borrico, Yo me remendaba, yo me remendé, cargado de chocolate. Lleva su chocolatera, Yo me remendaba, yo me remendé, Yo m'eché un remiendo, yo me lo quité, su molinillo y su anatre. Maria, Maria, ven acá corriendo, que al chocolatillo se lo están comiendo.</p>	<p>1. Towards Bethlehem goes a donkey, I remember, I remember, laden with chocolate. It carries its chocolate-pot I remember, I remember, I remember, yet I forget, its chocolate mill and its stove. Mary, Mary, come here running, because they are eating up all the chocolate.</p>
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This is, of course, a far cry from our German oh so theological tradition. I spent that Christmas in the warmth of a family in which the mother was pious, whereas the two adult children and the father were atheists. I could not sample church since I did not wish to make a point of it. I like to visit the catacombs secretly so that I have to share my experiences neither with eager believers nor with naive outsiders. I prefer to look, listen and absorb without comment and without a companion. The heroic father followed the will of his wife and, for sixteen years, he went to church without fail and without faith every Sunday with her and the children, until **they** refused to go any longer. On that day, the father resolutely stopped too. He had only been waiting for that moment, had gone merely to keep up appearances for the sake of the children. From now on the wife went alone.

MUNICH AND CAPRI

I spent one lonely, snowy Christmas in a cheap and cold boarding house in an industrial suburb of Munich where I had a holiday job with a transport company while studying at Innsbruck University. I spent most of the time in pubs in order to keep warm, reading books and writing settings of Christmas carols and drinking mulled wine, while listening to the jukebox and the pop songs of the day.

This was a perversely attractive time, enjoyable loneliness combined with the alien social environment, so much time to think about so many things which I do not remember, and so much time to observe new things. I often think back with nostalgia to the hardest and most unpleasant times in my life, such as my very first years in London, as a young man. Perhaps it is these harsh environments which are also (luckily for me) rare and unusual, and therefore interesting.

I tend to be disappointed when I go to services in foreign churches, presumably because I do not know the music, the texts

or the ritual. Yet I keep going, religiously (sit venia verbo), in the vain hope to experience a pleasant surprise. Presumably it will happen on the last Sunday before my ascent to heaven (Eternity Sunday). Until then I will keep trying.

I spent a strangely lonely Christmas in Capri while my girlfriend and her daughter in Naples, just a mile away across the sea, was for some reason unable to have me, or had ***** I ***** demanded to be alone in Capri at Christmas? I was the only guest in the little house in which Erika Mann stayed regularly in summer. There are no winter tourists on Capri. I walked to the little church by the Piazza above the harbour and went to midnight mass. I was unable to get involved. My fault.

FUSIO

IN THE COLD

High in the Mountains above Locarno, in the Ticino, the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, on the Mediterranean side of the Alps, is the hamlet of Fusio, where I spent a memorable Christmas with Pilar.

Fusio had been dear to me for many years, and whenever I needed a refuge, a few totally free days, undisturbed even by my own thoughts, I would go to Fusio. On several occasions, I had spent three days there to systematically brush up my Italian before joining business battle in Milan, Bologna and Naples.

To get there, one takes a coach of the aptly named regional transport company "Ferrovie ed Autolinee Regionali Ticinesi", whose logo, FART, is prominently displayed on the rear of all its vehicles. I had known Fusio only in spring and summer. There were a few inns and hardly any tourists. Fusio is the highest inhabited point of a small side valley, and there is no through traffic.

On that memorable Christmas Eve, we had spent most of the day sightseeing in the spring-like climate of Locarno, and had paid our respects to the Madonna del Sasso, before taking the last of the three daily coaches for the two-hour trip to Fusio. For about an hour, the coach runs on a large level road alongside a river in a wide valley, then branches off into a side valley. The road begins to rise and becomes ever steeper until, in yet another side valley, the bus has to climb up the hillside through serpentines and narrow hairpin curves, which it takes at dizzying speeds. Pilar was terrified when she looked into what appeared to be an abyss and saw deep down below her a stretch of road we had traversed only a few minutes ago.

When we arrived in Fusio, three natives and us, the natives went home, the bus turned back not to return till tomorrow lunchtime, and we were left with our suitcases in the deep snow and silent darkness. I left Pilar with the luggage and went scouting. All

inns were closed: no strangers are expected in winter. On a hillock, slightly raised above the village and surrounded by tall fir trees was the hotel which I knew from previous visits: the hotel was closed but its lounge was warm and open. There were rooms at this inn, but they were not "on offer", for they were not, and could not be, heated, the water in the taps was frozen -- but we could have one. I negotiated a discount: I never miss such a chance.

I am reminded of the mother of a German girlfriend, who went to Genova for a dirt-cheap holiday when the town had been struck by a cholera epidemic, was shunned by tourists, and 80% discounts were offered by the desperate hoteliers. "These are offers," she said, "too good to refuse!" By God's grace she survived, proof yet again for the existence of a loving father in heaven.

Pilar usually insists on certain minimum comforts and is not fond of backpacker hotels, for which she has coined the term "hotel romantique". But she had no choice: accept this room, stay in the snow, or go begging for a stable and a manger.

We carried our cases up the hillock and entered the lounge. Six curious faces on the bar stools, five men and one woman (there is always just one sad and lonely woman out on Christmas Eve to brighten the bars), turned towards us. It was warm and smelt of smoke, beer and wine.

We stayed in that warm room until closing time, Pilar drank mulled wine and I had hot chocolate. Then we put on layers over layers of clothes; we used all we had: several pairs of socks, underpants, vests, tracksuit and jeans, pullovers, scarves, an anorak, a knitted cap, gloves (gloves in bed!), and thus chastely overdressed, a Christmas Eve and a Christmas Adam, we lifted the frozen quilt (which immediately snapped in two places), climbed into bed, huddled together, chastely kept apart by the five inches of clothing that separated us, and comforted each other by breathing into each other's faces.

If Pilar, who comes from the Philippines, had been less plucky, less willing to fight to overcome her own fear and prejudice, she would have insisted that we catch the one coach at lunchtime on Christmas Day to return to warm and sunny Locarno, where a young Italian-Swiss lad had tried to chat her up by saying, in his incomparable English: "Hi, Chinatown, want to join me for a drink?" However, when she had seen Fusio in daylight, the snow-covered mountain tops surrounding us, sensed the prospect of an afternoon walk up to the reservoir a mile above the village, had breathed the crisp air, seen the fir trees, heard the silence, she decided not to bail out but to explore and enjoy this God-given place for another twenty-four hours and put up with sleeping again "fully overdressed" in our unheatable room.

THE LOGOS

It was Christmas Day. We walked through the village to look for the church. Every house had a small presepio standing on the snow-covered sill outside the window. We arrived well in time and sat among the congregation of 50 which just about filled the church. The priest was white-haired and kind. The third mass, the Missa in die, was being said.

The main gospel of the Missa in die is the beginning of St John's Gospel, "In principio erat verbum, in the beginning was the Logos," a gospel which is so important that, at that time, it had to be read at every mass throughout the year as the final, the closing, gospel, but therefore also was never chosen as the text for a homily. It was part of the furniture, no longer noticed. Luckily so for the priests, for it is not easy, and it is risky to preach about this gnostic gospel for agnostics, this atheist gospel that has managed to slip undetected into the canon of the theists. But today our plucky priest had chosen to talk about this text to a village congregation, a congregation of simple believers.

He spoke about the Logos, the pure spirit, pure consciousness that existed in the beginning, unmanifested, that was uncreated, without beginning, eternal, that was therefore "existence" as such and for whose existence, therefore, no cause or explanation needs to be sought. That Logos did not create the manifested world, it is not a "she" or a "he" that is apart from her creation. Everything that came into existence, like us, came into existence **"through"** that Logos" (omnia per ipsum facta sunt), but was not "made **by** that Logos": "Et verbum caro factum est, the Logos became flesh", it became manifested in the visible world.

That event of manifestation is what people popularly call "the creation of the world", but since the manifested world is not a creation **outside** the Logos but a transformation, a manifestation, **of** the Logos, we all **are** the Logos. The Logos has become flesh in us.

The child in the manger symbolises the fact that the unbounded spirit, the Logos, God, who is nothing but conscious existence and has no form manifests as visible, material, limited and therefore "humble" **form**.

When we are called "brothers of Jesus" or "children of God", this is only another way of saying that we **are** God, the Logos, which is the only thing that really and immutably exists: whatever we **see** in the world is merely his reflection and manifestation.

We need not believe in that God, and we need not doubt his existence. The question does not arise. Nothing else exists. We do exist and are aware of it: our awareness of existence is His consciousness in us, and that consciousness is the only thing that is permanent. We cannot believe in our own existence and

deny the existence of God, the Logos: for we and the Logos are the same; only the names are different: the Logos as such is unmanifested: in us and in all the so-called "creation" the Logos is manifested. The Logos does not exist outside his "creation". If the creation ceased to exist (as opposed to becoming unmanifested), God would cease to exist. But nothing that "exists" in that sense can cease to "exist".

We cannot conceive the non-existence of the material world. Therefore we cannot conceive the non-existence of God.

We are the child in the manger, and it teaches us that "We and the Logos are one", as Jesus said later: "I and the father are one". That insight means the end of fear, the end of real suffering, it means immortality and victory over death. "And the word became flesh," said the old priest and bent the knee, "Amen".

During the holiest part of the mass, there was an interruption: The old priest observed something on the steps of the altar, tried to suppress a giggle, in vain, and soon was shaking with laughter. He explained something to the congregation which made them laugh but which I did not understand: all I can guess is that the altar boys had played some prank on him. A truly merry Christmas, I thought, and in Italian the true nature of God is easier to understand than his jokes.

I continued reflecting on the sermon, repeating to myself what I had heard and spinning out its implications. Perhaps it was a good thing that neither the Pope, nor the Bishop, nor the learned Fathers Of The Church, nor Torquemada, nor any Jesuit or any Dominican, nor any member of any theological faculty was in that mountain church. None of the people capable of understanding the old priest were in that church, which was filled only by people who, like the shepherds, would mainly remember the prank and the priest's uncontrollable laughter, who would take comfort from his words without understanding them, from the message which is so simple that no more books on God have to be written, no more disputes can arise, and all theological faculties can be closed.

Therefore there is no need to distinguish between atheists and believers or for one to convert the other, for the Logos exists whether we believe in it or not. Atheists and believers, each with his own religion, are both fools, each in his own way. Belief in God presupposes that we are distinct from God, that we are the subject (the ones who believe) and he is the object (the one who is perceived through faith). But since only God is, God is the only perceiver, the only observer, and all he can perceive is "himself". He has no parts (unlike I who have my eye which can see my hand), and nothing but him exists. Therefore for him "perceiving" can be nothing but "being conscious". He is therefore "calm", nothing can ruffle his "equanimity". This infinite calmness is called "bliss". The Logos is existence, is consciousness, is bliss. The more we learn to perceive our identity with that Logos, the greater our calmness and bliss will

become. A good religion will lead us nearer that insight if we co-operate. But no religion can simply give us that insight. Obtaining it is a matter of effort, time and grace.

This God has no attributes and does not talk. That is the reason why there is so little to be said about him.

The Logos does not listen to us. If we need a confidant to talk to, daily or in extremis, e.g. when we are in the dentist's chair, in ecstasy or the depths of despair, we can invent God in any form we like, in our imagination, our words, our speculations, or as a graven image. Graven images are best, especially as some rationalist smart-ass has so gravely forbidden them. The Logos will manifest in the form in which his devotees prefer him: a traffic surveillance camera, as a baby, a young hippy, a criminal on the cross, with balls or with boobs, as a piece of bread, as a golden calf, a pigeon, a sheep, or as a vacuum in the sky.

Even the vacuum is a God, the reverse side of a coin, so to speak, the Logos who is "existence per se" is also "non-existence", but the vacuum is, perhaps, not the most comforting God to talk to. If so, why not choose another? There are plenty on offer and we can invent more. And they shall be called 'designer gods'.

EXIT FATHER ERASMI

After mass was over, I waited for the priest, to thank him for his sermon. He was delighted, introduced himself as Dr Erasmi and invited us for Christmas lunch. It turned out that he spoke English fluently.

He was born in the centenary year of 1900 and was seventy when I met him. He had studied in Oxford, Marburg, Göttingen and Freiburg (Breisgau), met Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967) and Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) personally and heard their lectures. He had read (Friedrich) Max Müller (1823-1900) and dipped into the Upanishads and, at the beginning of the century, sympathised with the Modernists, with George Tyrrell (1861-1909), Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), and he had visited Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925) in his Hampstead villa shortly before he died.

Modernism is, of course, never dead but rises from the dead, like the plague (Camus), when the Pope least expects it, currently in the guise of Küng and Drewermann (was hat man dir, du armer Papst, getan, weißt du es wohl?) and their supporters. It is the yeast that keeps the church alive.

Vor der Kathedrale steht ein Drewermann, Hört nicht auf den Bischof, drewert, was er kann.	Outside the cathedral Drewermann's in sight, Challenges the bishop, drewers with all his might.
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This ditty was inspired by:

Drüben hinterm Dorfe steht ein Leiermann
Und mit starren Fingern dreht er, was er kann.
Barfuß auf dem Eise wankt er hin und her
Und sein kleiner Teller bleibt ihm immer leer.

The source of "Weißt du es wohl" (above) is Goethe's "Kennst du das Land".

IS CHRIST INDISPENSABLE?

Father Erasmi admired Friedrich Heiler for his tolerant understanding of both the catholic and the evangelical form of religiosity. Heiler had, as a young man, converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism, motivated by exceptionally strong sentiments, by profound love for Christianity in the form he considered ideal. Instead of becoming an aggressive opponent of the Catholic Church, as 'apostates' so easily do, Heiler continued to work for mutual understanding of the two denominations and showed much sympathy with Catholicism. Father Erasmi appreciated that but chided Heiler for his belief that it was vital to make up for the 'inadequacies' of Hinduism by sending Christian missionaries to India. "Heiler's brain was obstinately set in Christian ruts of thinking."

"How important is Christ to you? Are you a Christian?" asked Father Erasmi.

"No."

"And yet you came to church. Why?"

"Wherever I am, I will follow the religion and the customs of my hosts as best I can -- if they let me. Therefore on high festivals I like to go to church. And if I pass a church and have the time, I will enter it for a minute or two. But I prefer to do it secretly. I can never call myself a Christian because I would be ashamed for anyone to think I belong to that crowd."

"That is strong language. You sound convinced. Why?"

"Because a Christian, good Christian or bad Christian, conservative or progressive, liberal or orthodox, believes that Christ is absolutely essential for any religious practice worth its name. Even Christians who are unhappy with their churches, or with the Pope's views on birth control, or with certain dogmas (e.g. papal infallibility; bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven), etc., believe that. In spite of their dissent with their churches, or the doctrines which have been superimposed on his person, they feel they have to salvage at least the original Jesus, or Christ, if they want to salvage a religion worth having, since, on no account, do they want to become atheists or heathens.

"I know many dissenting theologians like that," said the priest.

"So do I. And some years ago I met a woman, very intelligent in her profession, also lonely and introspective, and therefore drawn to "new-ageism" or what not, even more ridiculously called "esoterics", i.e. a syncretistic show-off religion for sick and idle women, whose sitting-room and kitchen was full of strange oriental books, symbols, images and names (one would have thought that she had converted to some non-Christian religion!), but again and again, the name Christ cropped up in her museum of religious names / concepts. "Ohne Jesus läuft bei mir nichts," she declared, in a rather flippant, slightly aggressive, German idiom, when I expressed my surprise. ("Without Jesus, I won't do any business"; i.e. none of my religious practices are valid if Jesus is not involved.)

I intensely dislike that notion. Christianity can be made effective (practised intelligently) without reference to other religions. This is what she can try to do. Or, if she doesn't like Christianity and if another religion makes her happy, she should turn to that religion and practise it properly as its "native" followers do, without excesses, no better, no worse: in which case she doesn't need Jesus: he is not indispensable, except in Christianity."

"What do you think of the historical Jesus? Doesn't he set a good example for the world?" suggested Father Erasmi.

"I will not make a desperate effort to salvage Jesus, the teacher, or Christ, the Saviour, for a doubting world," I replied. "He was not the best teacher of ethics and he was not a saviour in any meaningful sense of the word. The world, and especially the followers of other religions, can manage perfectly well, and better, without him and should do so. There is no point in trying to restore the "real Jesus" by freeing Christianity of all the doctrines, customs and superstitions, of all the interpreters, priests and power structures that have, over two millennia, accrued around Jesus.

I often have reason to think about Christianity. I then make the effort of showing a more relaxed approach towards Jesus and Christianity not because I think Jesus is in any way "essential" in absolute terms, but because we are now saddled with him and Christianity, our minds and modes of thinking are conditioned by it, and we cannot possibly universally adopt a more rational religion. Therefore we might as well make the best of what we have got, rather than casting out religion altogether (which many people, especially the ill-informed young, are doing now) or trying to introduce another one, which we can never do with universal success. It is important that the larger part of a community have the same religion in common, e.g. have the same notions of right and wrong, the same the stories to refer to, the same ideals. Even a bad religion is better than no religion at all."

"You are saying some daring things which it is better even for me not to think and even less to say."

Father Erasmi had once been destined for a prominent career in the church but had fallen out with the authorities because of his unorthodox views, and been banished to Siberia, so to speak, the end of the world, to this little village where people would not take him seriously and where therefore he could do no harm. His confratres called him 'Dr Con Fusio', to which he replied: "Thank God they don't know French, and they don't even know all letters of the alphabet: Can't they at least grant me a 'z'?".

I told him about my upbringing: "Without the strict and straight way in which our parents taught, lived and nourished religion, I would not be as open-minded and perceptive towards other religions (including the great religion called 'atheism') as I am now. They developed my sense of what Rudolf Otto called 'das Heilige', 'The Idea of the Holy', which is even more important for the perception of reality than so-called belief in God itself."

This reference excited the old priest and he showed me proudly a copy of Rudolf Otto's 'The Idea of the Holy' (Das Heilige) (1917), with a dedication by Rudolf Otto himself. Two passages were marked in red:

- "The numinous, the awe-inspiring element of religious experience, evades precise formulation in words. Like the beauty of a musical composition, it is non-rational and eludes complete conceptual analysis; hence it must be discussed in symbolic terms."
- "We are dealing with something for which there is only one appropriate expression, *mysterium tremendum*... The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane,' non-religious mood of everyday experience... It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of -- whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures."

Father Erasmi told me about a visit to Kendal (Lake District, England) where he had spent two weeks with a Quaker family. His host had once told him:

"We, like most other people, know in broad outline, what is good, and we try to behave accordingly: we should help and not hurt others, not steal or kill, not go to war, not quarrel unnecessarily, not cheat the taxman, not be greedy (therefore we do not gamble), help anyone who is in trouble (that's why our ancestors in America sheltered fugitive slaves)... The bible

cannot make us do things which we believe are wrong (e.g. to stone unbelievers, heretics, adulterers, blasphemers, witches, apostates, homosexuals, girls who have pre-marital sex and persistently disobedient children [Leviticus 20:27, 24:16; Numbers 15,35; Deuteronomy 13:11, 17:5, 21:21, 22:21, 22:24]) nor give us excuses to indulge into our vices after clever interpretation (casuistry). The bible is neither our tyrant nor our alibi. We do not do things "because the bible says so". The bible is not God's word, but it says many inspiring or comforting things. If we find a sentence inspiring, we take it to help us in our efforts. If we find the bible unhelpful or wicked, we simply ignore it, as we do when we see a believer, in any religion, break its or our ideals. Our task is to become better and happier people, not to 'assess' scriptures, other people or other religions. We follow our religion in our pursuit of happiness. We avoid that which makes us unhappy .

We listen in silence and try to perceive the spirit of God. We allow the bible to inspire us but not to rule us. We take what encourages us in our efforts or what comforts us in our need; we ignore what is useless or contrary to the spirit. Religion is a toolbox for people who try to live well and be content. We choose the tools we need."

Father Erasmi had been to the headquarters of the Salvation Army in Camberwell too. I told him about my admiration for them: "They do not hold to dogma and feel that doing charitable works is a better way of honouring Christ than holding the correct beliefs about him. When they collect money, they always get a contribution from me. When I was a young and inexperienced man in England and my daughter Lisl was on her way, I found out that I had forgotten to book a hospital bed for my wife sufficiently in advance. The doctor told us, my wife could not be accommodated anywhere in the National Health System. Someone told us about the Salvation Army's 'Mothers' Hospital' in Clapton (East London) and they gave us a bed. My wife, Gloria (in excelsis Deo; nomen est omen), was suffering from high blood pressure; she was in a dangerous condition. To save her life a premature birth had to be induced. Lisl spent the first weeks of her life in an incubator. Both mother and daughter survived. I owe that to the Salvation Army. They did me a good turn, and I will never forget it."

I told Father Erasmi about the simple lessons of Lesskow's 'The Beast'. He knew Lesskow and had an Italian translation of his works.

"It is not dogma or belief that matters but only the works that result," I said. "If the atmosphere and environment of Christmas, be it in Church or at home, makes a person receptive for the message of 'Das Tier', to give just one example, or any other message that is 'useful' today, then

- it is quite irrelevant whether Jesus was or was not the son of god, as Albert Schweitzer and Ernest Renan argued, or whether he, as George Wells more convincingly demonstrates,

never existed at all and is as legendary as Little Red Riding Hood, as the Christmas story of St Luke and the childhood stories of the apocryphal gospels,

- it is quite irrelevant what the official Christmas prayers or texts actually say or mean (as long as they are faithfully recited, preserved, kept alive and handed down, by believers and unbelievers alike),
- it is quite irrelevant whether the birth of Jesus or his existence 'in heaven' makes any real difference in the world and whether he can or can not hear our prayers,
- and it is quite irrelevant what the priest actually says in his perhaps poetic but probably confused and not quite convincing sermon, but he must say 'Hoc est enim corpus meum' and not 'Hocus porcus fidelibus'
- it is irrelevant whether we believe that a graven image is God or that it represents God, even though, of course, it is God
- it is irrelevant whether we have the right belief or the wrong belief as long as we act right
- it is irrelevant whether he lived sub Pontio Pilato and whether the Holy Ghost procedit filoque or not

Nothing matters, as long as the result of all this is something good that happens in the individual, even though it cannot really be predicted or caused by the words and the rituals.

This also means that it is pointless to argue about truth and falsity in different religions or between believers and non-believers, to say nothing of trying to convince or convert anybody or, even worse, exercise any form of pressure as happened during the times of the inquisition, during the Calvinist regime in Geneva, and in many other far too clever religions and denominations all over the world."

"It is nice to talk to someone for a change who does not treat me as Dr Confusio," said the old man with a trembling voice. "It can get lonely up here, in these spiritual heights. I have been banished to the end of the world, -- well not for much longer."

"I agree with much of what you say," said the priest. "It does not follow, of course, from the fact that many believers are bigots and hypocrites, that every atheist or humanist is automatically a saint or a superior moral human being. But you did not want to say that, did you? I think a religious education can help to instil a desire for virtue and self-improvement in young people that may remain even if later on they turn into non-believers. Therefore the effort in childhood has not been in vain."

I let myself go during my sermon today, talking more to myself than to my congregation. But sometimes one has to articulate one's thoughts, and it helps to have a listener, even if the listener does not understand. It can get terribly lonely. Anyway, it was my sermon that brought you along and made you wait for me, quite unexpectedly, so my words were not completely wasted, not even for me.

I know that talking isn't really important. I can just help and encourage my parishioners from time to time, help them not to sin too much and cope with their guilt, and listen to their worries. And sometimes my stories, my Christian stories, help me to do that."

He fetched Lesskow's story 'At the World's End': A young and inexperienced bishop is keen to convert the nomadic people in Siberia who at present are Buddhists or Shamanists to Christianity. After having visited a tribe, he realises that conversion is pointless. People have their religion, it works, and they should be left alone with it. Ours is not superior. These people will not understand the Christian doctrine, even if they understood it, it would be irrelevant, and their notions of right and wrong, and their behaviour, are better than those of the Christians. He has nothing to teach them. The old monk Kiriak, who has known this all along, says to the bishop: "You cling to words like a lawyer. What for? Every word is a lie. I condemn nothing. Consider what makes me so rich: it is love and not hatred. Be patient. You and I have been baptised, that's like receiving a printed invitation for a big party. We attend because we know we have been invited, we have our ticket. Then we see someone without a ticket going to the same house. We think: 'Look at the fool, he's wasting his time, for he won't be admitted. When he arrives, the security guards will get rid of him.' As we arrive, we see the security guard is about to chase him away, but the host sees it and lets him enter, saying: 'What do I care whether he has a ticket. I know him personally. Please, come in, my friend, I am so happy to see you.' He leads him into the house and treats him better than those who came with a ticket." (Chapter 5)

"God does not need believers even though he has to put up with them," I said. "If he has any sense, he will prefer atheists (especially those who hate him with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their mind, who are not lukewarm like the believers, whom he will spue out of his mouth) for they tend to be more sincere, and God, being pure existence and consciousness, does, unlike us, not depend on the presence of an observer or admirer. He can do as well without us as we can without him."

"Revelation 3:16," smiled the old priest, "I wouldn't go so far as to encourage people to hate God, that would really get me into trouble with Rome, but I can see your point. You cannot hate God unless you fervently believe in him; thus a person who hates God is very close to him. Atheists and unbelievers do not hate God."

If they hate anything, they hate bigots, unpleasant believers, the church, its doctrines, its rituals, the hierarchy, its representatives. You can "love" God without believing in him because, in the church, "loving God" is the done thing, so it is easy to go through the motions of loving God without even really believing in him. People who commit crimes do not do so because they hate God but because they are greedy, want to satisfy some desire or other. Only those who hate God are sure to hate with conviction, and they are therefore very rare; I have never met one."

Father Erasmi opened Max Müller's autobiography and found a typed piece of paper which he gave me to read:

"I read Gita 3:11, on the interdependence of gods and men. Idea: gods and whatever is said about them, ditto rituals, prasad, sacrifices, vibrations, nadis, karma, etc, are not descriptions of reality but MODELS (like those of physics, psychology, mathematics, cybernetics) which help us to get through life without too much pain or confusion, and to make sense of the world, of the events we observe. Blessed are those who take these models as literal truth. They may have their way (i.e. we may leave them alone) provided they do not abuse these models (their limited understanding) by deriving (as if by irrefutable logic) other "facts" from them or deriving "laws" and norms of behaviour from them which they try to impose on the rest of mankind. If they merely do their own thing, they deserve to be protected and supported.

"Those who are misled by the modes of nature get attached to the works produced by them. But let no one who knows the whole unsettle the minds of the ignorant who know only a part." [cf Gita 3:29]"

"This allows," said Father Erasmi, "for literal believers and 'enlightened' believers to co-habit in the same religion: why not in the same church. It requires tolerance of those 'enlightened' souls who know better. They must keep their 'superior' knowledge to themselves."

"Yes," I said, "but it also requires constraint by the naïve believers. They cannot have it entirely their own way, as at present they often do. If they try to gather followers for their narrow views or throw their weight about, they should be mercilessly ridiculed by those who know better. We all must permit and accept ambiguity or uncertainty. This is not the same as declaring nonsense to be literally or historically true and then defending the truth of the unjustifiable nonsense by declaring it to be a divine mystery and particularly adorable (valuable) at that. The "quia absurdum" is an absurd creed."

"I cannot quarrel with that," said Father Erasmi, "even though you are challenging a Father of the Church."

"Jews, Christians and Muslims are not the only monotheists. Jews: One God. Christians: One God, three persons. Muslims: One God, one person. Hindus: One God (Brahman), 999 persons + one million -- nobody has seen any point in counting yet. What a happy people, what a cheerful approach to God," said the old priest.

The priest had a harmonium and I played a few chorales for him. I ended with variations on the New Year chorale.

10. Hilf gnädig allen Kranken, Gib fröhliche Gedanken Den hochbetrübten Seelen, Die sich mit Schwermut quälen!	Be with the sick and ailing, Their Comforter unfailing; Dispelling grief and sadness, Oh, give them joy and gladness!
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TOWARDS ANOTHER NEW YEAR

On the Feast of Stephen, Pilar and I sat in our coach to return from the extraordinary world of the spirit to the plains of our daily work. I had much to think about. The tune of the New Year chorale kept turning in my head.

"We, the atheists," I thought, "need the believers and the priests to keep the churches warm, the organs sounding and God alive. They need us to stop them from becoming too confident and overbearing. It is a symbiotic relationship. I thank God every day that not everybody is as smart as me. Otherwise who would pray for me, just in case? A God who is not worshipped dies, as happened to the gods of Egypt, Greece and Rome, who were once as real as God Father Son And Holy Ghost. A God-forsaken church building, however artistic, without prayers, music and incense becomes a sight, and a pretty sad one too."

11. Und endlich, was das meiste, Füll uns mit deinem Geiste, Der uns hier herrlich ziere Und dort zum Himmel führe!	Above all else, Lord, send us Thy Spirit to attend us, Within our hearts abiding, To heaven our footsteps guiding.
12. Das alles woll'st du geben, O meines Lebens Leben, Mir und der Christenschare Zum sel'gen neuen Jahre!	All this Thy hand bestoweth, Thou Life, whence our life floweth. To all Thy name confessing Grant, Lord, Thy New Year's blessing.
Text: Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676)	Translation: John Kelly (1833-1890)

+ Here endeth this story +