

A Meditation on the Incarnation

Choose Cheese and Crackers

Once saw a cartoon picturing a long religious pilgrim with a staff, a cowl, a long beard, and a haggard look. Stopped at a fork in the road, the religious seeker faces a sign. One arrow points toward “The Meaning of Life.” Another arrow points in the opposite direction toward “Cheese and Crackers.” If that pilgrim believes in the incarnation, he will not hesitate for a second. He will head straight for the cheese and crackers, where others will be gathered to eat and to talk, and perhaps to sing and to dance.

The incarnation affirms that the meaning of life is not an abstract concept, not a vague ideal, not a collection of words and thoughts. Rather we find the meaning of life in the love and grace of God as embodied in a particular human being and in the community that gathers around him. Jesus, like us, had a heart that pumped blood and lungs that pumped air. He was not a spirit that floated above the earth but a body whose feet pounded the ground and whose stomach growled when he was hungry.

Those who are his followers are called the body of Christ. When they gather together, they feast on wine and bread, human bodies consuming a meal.

Christians practice the spirituality of materiality. Materiality is not the same as materialism. Materialism is the religion that worships the acquisition of things. Materiality is the weight of water, the thickness of air, the hardness of stone, the flesh and bone that untwine from the macramé of the DNA molecule, the pressure of blood in the veins, the body-ness of the aggregate of atoms that constitutes the universe.

Materialism is the abuse of materiality. It is an ideology like other isms: communism, capitalism, socialism, sexism, racism. The failures and distortions of these various isms have spawned a hunger for spirituality, a slippery word that can mean a host of different things to different people. Go to your local bookstore and find the books shelved under that category. I have done it several times, and I have been astonished by the range of works for sale, everything from guides to finding your true inner self through physical exercise to learned tomes on ancient meditative practices. Nearly all of the books, at least upon a quick perusal, are about individuals attending to their own inner resources. It is as though spirituality were some pure ether unpolluted by our interrelationship as material creatures.

Much of what passes for spirituality these days fits very nicely with American materialism. The marketplace reduces spirituality to a way of finding some individual peace without challenging the distortions of materialism: the pursuit of wealth to the detriment of the environment, inequities in the allocation of medical care and education and the use of sexuality to sell practically anything. Such spirituality does little, if anything, to alleviate the abuse of materiality by materialism.

We need the spirituality of materiality that is rooted in a sound understanding of incarnation: finding the meaning of life through the bodily world in which we live as bodily creatures. When we practice the spirituality of materiality, we find the meaning of life in honoring, celebrating, and faring for the complex web of all things inanimate and alive. We heal broken bodies and feed hungry people. We treat the earth tenderly. We honor the sensual and sensuous pleasures of the body as gifts of the creator.

The spirituality of materiality is what saturates the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He loves a good meal. Consider all the parables about feasts, the miracle at the wedding in Cana, and the way some opponents characterize him as a glutton and a wine imbibor. He is not afraid of the body. Consider all the sick people he dares to touch, all the children

he blesses, all the miles he walks. Consider that those who serve Christ do so by clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, feeding the hungry. Christ is a body living among bodies. The gospel is a bodily gospel, and the spirituality that is embodied by Christ is the spirituality of materiality.

If we have come to the fork in our pilgrimage where the sign reads “The Meaning of Life” in one direction and “Cheese and Crackers” in the opposite direction, and if we have headed off toward “The Meaning of Life,” then it is time to turn around. It is time to repent, time to head straight for the cheese and crackers, time to practice the spirituality of materiality, time to transform the materialism that is destroying our bodies and the little mossy stone on which we all live. □

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