



WANTED: A NEW CHURCH AND A NEW TEMPLE

It is Christmas-time when I write this. As food for thought, I present the following Christmas-day excerpt from Terry Lane, columnist of Australia's "The Age" newspaper

"First, an angel of the Lord appears to Zacharias and Elisabeth, an elderly, childless couple, to tell them that, though apparently past menopause, Elisabeth will have a child. Zacharias is sceptical so the angel, Gabriel, makes the old man mute from that time until he does what he's told and names the child John (the Baptist). Gabriel then flies off to see Mary in Nazareth to tell her the good news that, although a virgin, she is now pregnant with the Son of the Most High.

When it is time for Mary to give birth, a star appears over Persia and leads three astrologers to Jerusalem, where they ask the king where the holy child is to be born. The king consults his soothsayers and is told to look in Bethlehem. Afraid of the usurper, Herod tells the astrologers to let him know where the baby is located so that he can go and worship him. Fortunately, the angel of the Lord is on hand to warn the astrologers that the king is up to no good.

Then, on the night of the birth, the angel appears in the sky to tell some shepherds that a big event is taking

place in Bethlehem and if they are quick they can get to see the holy child. Whereupon a whole host of angels appears with Gabriel to sing the first Christmas carol. Gabriel's work is not yet done. He then appears to Joseph to warn him that the king has dire plans to wipe out all present and future competition and so Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt and stay there until the angel of the Lord tells them it is safe to go home to Nazareth"

Even if one were to take out the touch of sarcasm that Terry Lane has in his description of the beginnings of Christianity one is still left with a tale that does not sound plausible at least to a contemporary mind.

Similar stories have been built around other religions. The Buddha is said to have walked immediately after birth and even spoken. The latter's birth is also said to have heralded mysterious signals although without angels. Buddhist stories of yore also tell us of the 'iddhi balaya' by which special humans (Arahat Mahinda was one) were able to fly through the air against the law of gravity without the aid of vehicles of transport.

Fortunately, the modern preachers of Theravada Buddhism today avoid the use of such mythology except, perhaps, to credulous kids at Sunday Dhamma Schools. It is argued in some circles that the employment of mythology is the right way to address kids but aren't we thereby training them to believe without evidence? Particularly in the case of Buddhism its founder has stressed the need to test with experience and reasoning before accepting even his own doctrine. In the Buddha's exposition of laws governing the universe there is no provision for 'divine laws' that alone can explain angels flying or humans flying through iddi balaya!

Tell me: why hasn't the world ever seen a repeat of these supernatural performances since their alleged initial appearances? There are many people in the world who are still programmed to believe in these myths. Some other religious followers do not really believe in them but prefer not to question for that would take them out of a comfort zone of existence. Our columnist Terry Lane belongs to the valiant "no non-sense" scientifically-bred generations that are now outnumbering the rest in hordes.

The growth of evidence-seeking thinking men and women have led

to the decline of churches and temples. Nevertheless, this need not be and should not be. Churches and temples have a vital role to play in today's selfish and self-destructive world. However, they can play that role only by going back to the essential foundations of the teachings of their religious leaders, leaving out the mumbo-jumbo, and relating to modernised audiences.

Fundamentally, these leaders- Buddha, Christ, Mohammed- basically taught a gospel of love and compassion to human beings. In Buddha's case, that love was meant to extend to the entire

sentient world. While the myths are being celebrated and manipulated by the merchants of commerce the message is largely ignored. Pope Benedict in his annual Christmas preaching regretted that commerce has submerged the teachings of Christ. I would say that commerce has picked up from what the churches have been doing all along.

Human beings have both the potential for good and for evil; for creativity and for destruction. The inculcation of proper religion can help make better humans beings of us. If we continue to teach the myth, religious sermons would become a yawn. Clearly, the world needs a new church and a new temple. The new institution will have to discard the irrational and bring out from the old religious teachings

the following unchallengeable principles of understanding based on our common humanity:

- (1) the fundamental vulnerability of humans living as they do lives threatened with old age, decay, and death.
- (2) The humility that we all must therefore accept
- (3) The need for mutual help and cooperation in this threatened life
- (4) The implied need for compassion and for give-ness

The continued propagation of myth is part of a long institutional tradition of emphasis on the worship of religious leaders. Our churches focus too much on the worship of God rather than teach people to live and make meaning out of their lives.

During Tsunami days, I attended a church mass with a friend and I was amused to hear the preacher urge: "Pray harder so that God would deliver us from such misfortunes...". I asked my friend: "Why should an all-powerful and benevolent God inflict such a terrible catastrophe on innocent humans



in the first place?"

He whispered to me: "It's the work of Satan". I followed up: "Isn't God all-powerful and so why does he not destroy Satan instead of going for the innocent?" My friend looked puzzled.



Shyamon Jayasinghe

In Buddhist temples, too, there is too much concentration on Buddha worship

or 'buduguna vandanava' at the cost of teaching the dhamma.

All this is meant to drive in faith into the minds of an ignorant audience. That category of audience is now fading away. The new church and the new temple must look in the new direction if they are to be relevant to new generations. Many of the new generations are already shunning these institutions. We see this trend very graphically in Australia. Churches remain closed and sealed for most of the days in the year. Many of these empty buildings become the target of drug-addicted desperate youth trying to bridge their expanding budget deficits. The new evangelistic brands that have come up to fill the void in the marketplace have, again, not changed the message. It's the same teaching - approach with a different technology that includes contrived family picnics, revlry etc.

Australians are very practical people who have little patience with mumbo jumbo.

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