

## EPIPHANY: RIDICULOUS AND SUBLIME

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A few years ago, a friend showed me a clipping from a mid-western city's newspaper. The column reported a fracas at an Orthodox Church downtown. It seems the hierarch had, in a gesture of ecumenism, changed the date of Epiphany (Theophany) from that according to the traditional, Eastern liturgical calendar to that of the Western Church more prevalent in the United States. When the women of the congregation came to receive blessed water from the priest for use in their baking for the feast, the priest refused their request in behalf of the authority of the Church.(1)

Arguments and fights broke out between opponents and defenders of the priest. A number of combatants were arrested for various offenses, mostly for disturbing the peace. The accompanying photograph showed a medical doctor on his knees biting the leg of the priest. A caption proclaimed that the doctor had been charged with assault and battery and the priest had been treated at a local hospital.

Never mind the many other lessons available in the illustration--the depth and irrationality of the work of liturgy in our lives, the sinfulness of Christians everywhere, or the anti-clericalism which remains in almost all communions. Notice for the present the obvious points regarding Epiphany--that it remains exceedingly important for the Eastern Church, that dates for the festival vary, and that the ridiculous and the sublime interact in Christian tradition.

### I. The History of Epiphany

Epiphany remains important in Eastern Christianity. Well it should! Epiphany in the early church usually ranked third in significance during the Christian year. Easter focused the meaning of Christ's resurrection together with its promises; Pentecost centered upon the work of Christ's Spirit and the call to discipleship; Epiphany emphasized the recognition of Jesus Christ as God incarnate and the meaning of revelation.

Epiphany has usually involved feasting, sometimes fasting, and consistently a festival. According to Duchesne, whose interest was primarily in the Latin tradition, Epiphany began as a celebration of nativity in the East. It evidently was the most important festival for some portions of the early Christian family. Most scholars mention the pagan origin of the date; winter solstice according to the Egyptian calendar simply occurred a few days later than it did in the Roman.

As some Christians remembered nativity, others remembered the baptism of Jesus. As doctrine developed, and as the Gnostics were excised as heretics, a certain measure of the Baptism meaning endured. It may well have been, as orthodox Christians claimed, that the Gnostics believed God did not appear in Christ until the act of baptism. At any rate, the pluralistic focus of Epiphany resisted excision. The festival celebrated God's manifestation in Christ, whether in nativity, adoration of the Magi, or the baptism of Jesus.(2)

As the instance of the central "manifestation" varied, so the dates in different

traditions varied. Donatists evidently did not keep the festival at all; Basilidians probably first celebrated Christ's baptism on the 6th of January; others took the 25th of December for that celebration; and some communions kept the festival of Epiphany on the 10th of January. Other variants exist, but the lesson that the Church developed the liturgical event over time remains a significant learning.(3)

Note also that the ridiculous and sublime interact in the traditions connected with Epiphany, as in all Christian observance. A doctor biting a priest does not differ much in its nonsensical nature from the establishment of festivals in Christianity to confront the same festivals in other religions. Whether Christmas sought to overthrow Saturnalia or Natalis Invicti, it sought to dominate another religion's holy days. Similarly with Epiphany, whether it addressed the day of the birth of the Sun in Egypt (after solstice), or whether it sought to conquer Mithraic mystery worship, it adopted and changed another festival. This imperialism is not so much a cause for blame as for amusement, reflection upon the feeble attempts we make to render pure and holy worship.(4)

Since the epiphanies of the incarnation were pervasive and thorough-going, it is not surprising that many different events have become the subjects and objects of Epiphany remembrances. The Roman rite has considered the adoration of the Magi as the fulcrum of the festival. In the coming of the "wise kings," all the world could see that Jesus Christ had come for all the world. This revelation to the gentiles (Matthew 2:1-11), can be the occasion of learning that we are not the center of the initial message. The universal message of salvation has come indirectly to gentiles.

Oriental Christians passed along the legend that there were twelve Magi, comparable to the numbers of tribes and apostles. Western legends about three wise and illustrious worshippers still accented the diversity of the group. The Venerable Bede in 736 spoke of them:

The first was called Melchior; he was an old man, with white hair and long beard; he offered gold to the Lord as his king. The second, Gaspar by name, young, beardless, of ruddy hue, offered to Jesus his gift of incense, the homage due to Divinity. The third, of black complexion, with heavy beard, was called Baltasar; the myrrh he held in his hands prefigured the death of the Son of man.(5)

Early Christians apparently were not just interested in claiming a wide range of admirers for Christ because they wanted to do so. They followed the references of Psalms 71 and 76, where leaders from exotic places worshipped God. One authority mentions also the passage in Isaiah 60 (3-6) which foreshadows the account in Matthew.

The "Feast of the Kings" is also the "Feast of Christ's Birth," the epiphany of the incarnation itself. Likewise it remains for many "The Feast of Christ's Baptism." Luther sought to underline this alternative rendering of the feast, emphasizing the need for all Christians to practice infant baptism and encouraging others to preach on the subject. Luther took the trouble himself to translate an old Latin hymn which played upon all three of the meanings discussed thus far: adoration of the Magi, birth of Christ, and baptism of Christ: "Herod, Why Dreadest Thou a Foe."(6)

This hymn, and the traditions, pointed in the fourth place to the first miracle performed by Jesus at the marriage in Cana. Therein Jesus made his own divinity apparent . . . Epiphany. The Gospel of John used the word "manifest" (John 2:11) in

connection with the miracle. Weiser points out that many scholars believed the Egyptians celebrated the turning of water into wine by the gods during their festival. Whatever the occasion of its inclusion, the miracle at Cana further enriches the horizons of meaning for the traditional celebration. It also further confuses the meaning, for from the miracle there Christ proceeded to accomplish myriad other healings and extraordinary events. Did every miracle he performed point to his divinity? The Bible argues on both sides of this question. Weiser has summarized an expression of the dilemma:

There was a trend among many pious authors in medieval times of adding other manifestations to those officially mentioned in the liturgy, such as the multiplication of loaves, Christ walking on the waters, and the raising of Lazarus. It is true that all these events, and many similar ones, could rightly be considered as epiphanies of the Lord. The liturgy, however, has never officially included more than the four events of the Nativity, the adoration of the Magi, the baptism of Christ, and the miracle at Cana.(7)

## II. Epiphany Today

Perhaps the problems in the medieval church were the opposites of our problems today concerning Epiphany. Their preoccupation with the transcendent meant that they sensed a liturgical need to reduce the liturgical focus. Jesus Christ appeared so many times as God that they had to concentrate upon some particularly powerful symbols of the incarnation.

Our situation regarding Epiphany and epiphanies seems reversed. In A Rumor of Angels, Peter Berger recently spoke of the powers of the process of secularization to divest the whole creation of its sense of the Holy. He spoke of a receding of the divine fulness: "We have come a long way from the Gods and from the angels." He argued for an openness to the power, the transcendent power, of Epiphany. He hoped that the rediscovery of the supernatural would overcome triviality and the one-dimensional life with which we are so frequently left.(8)

In his current play, "The Trial of God," Elie Wiesel has explored this loss of the sense of the transcendent by using another time and place in which to cast the story. I believe that we are in the position of Yankel, one of the minstrels who, when confronted with an interpretation of events that argues for a miracle, retorts: "They happen; they should happen more often."(9)

In this condition, well-termed "one-dimensional" in many representations of it, what we need are more manifestations of God's presence both in Christ and in the world about us. The remembering and the celebrating of Epiphany can be the occasion of considering this present impoverishment in our perceptual framework.

On my way to teach a workshop at Howard recently, I had a few minutes to spare and stopped to browse in the National Collection of Fine Arts. As I walked down the hall on the third floor, all of a sudden, in an alcove that surprises the pedestrian, I caught a burst of light and precious metal. Turning, I was dazzled by the multivareate patterns of thrones and chairs, pulpits and pedestals. The gold and predominant silver colors, together with the brilliance of the light, fairly captivated me. Closer, I read that this assemblage of celestial furniture and decorations comprised the "Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millenium General Assembly."

Closer, and I could begin to discern that the silver and gold was simply a covering for familiar objects. I could see that the furniture had been made of simple and junky pieces, with coke bottles on the back and tin foil covering the whole of it. The place labelled for the "Holy of Holies" was a kitchen table; reliquaries were covered cigar-boxes; ornate decoration, a series of spools and light bulbs.

To describe the initial shock of divine presence, and the rapid and thorough process of demythologization which occurred, takes longer than did the events themselves. I stepped back and saw again the transformation, weaker now but still an epiphany of sorts. The special vision I experience (were I not Calvinist) I might have linked with a kind of holy place.

Again I stepped up to the legend and read about the artist, James Hampton. Hampton, poor and black, had left his broken home in South Carolina at the age of nineteen and had served as a cook in Washington before enlisting in the army during World War II. In 1946, he had obtained a job as a janitor with the General Services Administration. From that time until his death in November, 1964, he had been a custodian. Evidently from 1931 until his death, Hampton had seen visions and sought to prepare himself for the parousia. In the words of Lynda Hartigan, a curator of the Collection, "The Throne stands as remarkable testimony to his devotion, patience, faith, and imagination."<sup>(10)</sup>

The "Throne" also stands as at least a model of Epiphany. In an ordinary event or its representation, divine presence shone through in all its fullness. Instantaneous. Personal. Now that analogy might be carried quickly to extreme, but consider also that the sculptor James Hampton's life can be viewed in epiphanic terms. Poor and oppressed all his life, Hampton received visions which psychologists and theologians could quickly discount with expressions of familial needs and delusions of grandeur. Nevertheless in his careful work, executed in solitude, Hampton communed with God's presence in fact.

Artists, composers, and other "soft-headed" persons today bear residual receptivity to epiphany. They are aware to some degree of the manifest presence of God, of its elusive nature, and of its very special quality. Granted these epiphanies are not of the stature of the birth, baptism, or miracles of Jesus Christ. But they are, I am convinced, of the fabric of revelation as surely as are the foci of the feast. Christians can learn to be receptive and responsive to the divine presence and to rejoice in its appearance wherever and whenever the vision is permitted.

To speak of epiphanic symbol, however, may be presumptuous. John L. Casteel warned of this danger in an article almost two decades ago. "Something of the mystery remains hidden and exacts its cost," he declared. How can the presence of Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of all the cosmos be "manifest" in one event or recalled in one liturgical expression of several events? We need to "resist the temptation to give any answer too easily, too smartly . . ." admonished Casteel. Surely there is a special danger in relating the Epiphany experienced to the whole meaning and purpose of God in the world.<sup>(11)</sup>

By the same token, danger exists in equating experiential epiphanies, special occasions when God is manifestly present, with the great events in the Epiphany, the manifestation in Christ of God's presence. In the birth narratives about Jesus Christ, angels sang and shepherds adored. Wise Kings followed a special star and they located a providential placement of a savior, to worship and present gifts. In the baptism narratives (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21, 22; John 1:29-34), Jesus Christ received the presence of God as a dove. In the miracle at Cana in Galilee, Jesus made his own divinity apparent. All of these accounts describe in

very special terms what the Epiphany declares --the incarnation.

But in the poverty of the twentieth century consciousness, despair may even be more apparent than presumption. People today may have lost the sense of the miraculous, the sense of God's presence, and the confidence that a purpose of God for creation does exist.

In summation, Epiphany has exercised power as a Christian symbol and can continue to do so. It points to the incarnation. It permits celebration of God's presence in Christ which continues in the Spirit's power. It names the experience affirmed by the believer of divine presence manifest in the contemporary. And it points the Church toward the Kingdom of God, toward the promise of transformation of all things.

. What utter nonsense--foolishness for interpreting history and phenomena. What utter truth--wisdom in God's Spirit. Epiphany: ridiculous and sublime.

- (1) The friend, Keith Bridston, says he has since lost the clipping. I do not remember the persons of the patriarchate.
- (2) L. Duchesne, Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution. (London: SPCK, 1903 1942 ), pp. 257, 260, 286, 293,4.
- (3) cf. Duchesne and Francis X. Weiser, Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), pp. 141-153. The two do not agree on many particular items, including the date of Basilidian celebration of nativity.
- (4) Duchesne, op. cit., p. 261.
- (5) Weiser, op. cit., p. 147. He translates De Collect, IV.
- (6) Victor Beck and Paul Lindberg, A Book of Christmas and Epiphany. (Rock Island, IL: Augustana, 1961), pp. 36, 37. Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 53, "Liturgy and Hymns," edited by Ulrich Leupold. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), pp. 302, 303.
- (7) Weiser, op. cit., p. 145.
- (8) Peter Berger, A Rumor of Angels. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 95ff.
- (9) Elie Wiesel, "The Trial of God," (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 147. Wiesel, of course, also concerned himself with many other themes in the rich drama.
- (10) Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, "James Hampton, The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nation's Millenium General Assembly," (Washington, n.p., n.d.), p. 5.
- (11) John L. Casteel, "The Mystery Manifest and Hidden," Union Seminary Quarterly Review. (1961), pp. 387-394.