

Good Will Among Men, Is it a Fact or a Theory?  
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We are approaching one of the great Christian holidays. In theory at least it purports to be a day set aside to celebrate the birth of the founder of Christendom. In reality it is an adaptation of an old festival, celebrating the return of the sun from its journey to the south, or in other words, it is a nature festival. It is also noteworthy for the fact that in its customs we may see clearly its composite character, and get a good side-light on the composite character of Christianity itself, into whose institutions it has been absorbed. The custom of presents and gift-making is derived from Roman Paganism; the use of greens, and the Christmas tree comes [from] the Germanic heathen, and the Yuletide is European. Christianity as it became more firmly established was not able to eliminate such a thoroughly human and natural custom as the mid-winter festival, so it gradually transformed its very nature and significance, and adapted it to the celebration of the birth of the founder of Christendom. So today among Christian people it comes to be associated with that fact.

Yet even among those who are the most devoted of Christians the real meaning and significance of the day is hardly realized. Here, as elsewhere, the accidental and the mythical have usurped, and driven from power, the real and the essential; dogma has destroyed the spirit, and a crude and barbaric literalism has eliminated the poetry and the idealism. If possible, I want to present what seems to me to be the real and true significance of the day.

The institution of Christmas, or the celebration of the birth of Christ on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of December was probably first celebrated as such in the year 352, and from that time on it grows in importance and significance as the spread of Christianity itself goes apace.

Now let us forget ourselves and our own times, and go back two thousand years or more, and see somewhat of the life of those human fellows of ours who lived and thought, hoped, loved, despaired, and gloried in life even as we do today. There is not such a wide difference after all in the real essentials of life. Among the gods whom the Romans worshipped was one Saturnus.

According to the popular belief of the Romans, Saturnus first made his appearance in Italy at a time when Janus was reigning king of the fertile region that stretches along the banks of the Tiber on either side.<sup>1</sup>

The legend is that Saturnus instructed the people in gardening, agriculture, and other arts quite unknown to them. By such education he at length raised the people from a hard, rude, barbarous life, to a life of comparative comfort, and peace. On this account he was held in high esteem among the people. Each year, at the time of the winter solstice, when the return of the sun from the south again directed the attention of the people to the coming summer, with its agricultural pursuits and its plenty, the Romans celebrated the feast of the Saturnalia. As time went on and the days when Saturnalia was believed to have lived on earth became more remote, the people began to look upon those days as a Golden Age. The poets sung of them as a happy time when sorrows and cares of life were unknown, when innocence, freedom, and gladness reigned throughout the land. During the feast of Saturnalia, which lasted several day, the people occupied themselves with all kinds of amusements; they did away with the ordinary distinctions between master and servant or slave. No civic assemblies were held, no crimes were punished. Servants and slaves dressed like their masters and received from them costly presents. During those days slaves and servants were permitted freedom of speech, and freedom of action. They were celebrating the days of the Golden Age in that dim dead past when life was what it should have been. In their celebration they tried [to] bring back the golden moments of real life, and for a few days in the year to relieve themselves from the dread conditions of reality, and to live a life such as in their heart of hearts they all

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<sup>1</sup> This passage is very closely adapted from Alexander S. Murray's *Manual of Mythology*, London: Asher and Co., 1873, P. 35.

longed for. There is a certain tragedy in the festivities of a holiday, if we but stop to realize the real meaning of the day. It seems that on that day we bring out for use, simply because we must, the cherished hopes and ideals, that for the rest of the time we sacrifice to the brute things of life. So among the Romans in their celebration of the Saturnalia, and the glories of the Golden Age, we get at the real idealism of them. They believed down at the bottom and they longed for the life of freedom, in which distinctions between master and slave are eliminated, and the relations among men are characterized by fellowship and joy, symbolized, not by the ruthless grabbing from one another, but by the honest giving to one another. So much for Romans and their dream of a Golden Age that is past.

Having in mind these Romans, and their hopeless dream of a day that is dead, let us go to the remote corner of one of the provinces over which the iron hand of Rome held sway, and trace another line of influence. In order to get down below the surface and really see what was happening, we have to cast aside a lot of rubbish that has accumulated during the ages, and obscures our vision today. An example of this I came across the other day in one of the well-known religious papers. For the sake of emphasizing what I am trying to say, I will quote it, as a glowing example of what Christmas is not. It says,

The near approach of another Christmastide, with its fresh outburst of merry-making and holy joy, is a reminder of the world's debt to the Incarnation. To the Christ child we owe all that is best in life and hope. For when those feet of flesh touched that rocky birthplace at Bethlehem, there gushed forth a stream of blessing richer than the fountain Hippocrene (Hip-o-crin) on Mount Helicon struck by the hooves of Pegasus—a steam perennial in its flow.

Poet-angels found in it inspiration for their advent song. Humble shepherds were charmed away from their midnight watch among their silent flocks to see in the face of a Babe the sunrise of the hope of a new race. The wise men, led by a star, were conducted to an Oracle where divinest wisdom ever wells up in exchange for the gold and frankincense and myrrh of the heart's devotion.

And today the Helicon of joy and affection and strength for the Christian soul is the manger where the Young Child Lay.

I quote that passage as an example of the pure and unadulterated rot, and sentimental gush that destroys the very fiber of Christianity, and deprives men and women and children of the unspeakable joy of the real human Christmas spirit. It contains not a word of truth, it mistakes a highly imaginative poetry for cold history, and worst of all, it robs the Christian religion of its moral significance, and sends a humanity hungry for life, and hope, back to the graveyard of history to quench its thirst. Poet-angels found their inspiration for the advent song after the babe had become a man and proved his worth to human life by dying for the truth. The story of the shepherds and the wise men is the fiction of poetry, and if one has imagination enough to see what it really means, it is one of the most beautiful poems of all literature. Today the Helicon of Joy and affection and strength for the Christian soul is not the manger where there lay a Young Child two thousand years ago, but in the countless homes where yesterday, today and tomorrow Christ child are being born, while the Herod of greed is sending out his daily mandates for their death and destruction. Perhaps that child and its mother, driven from the only home they had two days after the child was born, by the officials and hired representatives of the manufacturing corporation at Ludlow, perhaps that child is as important in the eyes of the infinite as the Christ Child was two thousand years ago. Anyway the Helicon of our joy and affection and strength is not in the manger in Palestine, but in the homes where babes and children are born today.

But let us try to picture what really did happen. One day in an obscure town of Palestine probably under conditions of poverty, the dream of a young woman and the hope of a young man were realized in the birth of a boy. The woman became a mother and the man became a father. Doubtless they cared for the child, watched over it, loved, dreamed their dreams about [it], as fathers and mothers will. Years went by, other children came to share the home, and to intensify the affections of these two people as they lived the ordinary human life. The father died, left the mother with this large family. Upon the shoulders of this boy, now

growing to manhood, fell the responsibility in part of providing for the mother and the brothers and sisters. He learned the trade of his father, and worked at the carpenter's bench. As he grew in years and experience he began to reflect upon the nature and the conditions of human life, began to think for himself, began to see into human beings among whom he lived, and to understand their real thoughts, and hopes. He began to think about life and the world in which he lived. He came into contact, and felt the pulse of a strange unrest among people. As he worked there at the bench, and went in and out among the people of the town in which he lived, and caught sight of the great outer world, and heard the talks of men, some of the truths of life came to be clear to him. He worked out his way of life, and living. He saw that men were spending their time in doing the things that are worthless, that their religious forms had lost their life, that religion did not consist in ceremony, or in ecstatic feelings, or in formal worship, but that it consisted in loving, in knowing, in understanding the truth of life, in worshipping God in spirit and in truth, and in loving, honoring, and respecting fellow man.

In due time this man went about teaching this doctrine. The ideal for such a life as he was speaking of was not foreign to the people. It was then as it is now, the real longing of the people, even as the festival of the Saturnalia showed that it was the longing of the pagan Romans. While the ordinary people said that it was once true, and we will play that it is true for a day or two every year, and it would be nice if it were true all the time, this young man said, "Not only would it be nice if it were true, but it ought to become true, and it shall be true, and I will go about my work making it true." He gathered about him people who also believed that it ought to be true and that it shall be true, and they went about preaching that the Golden Age was not behind them but before them, and that it was their work and duty to see that it should be established. After a time, following this truth wherever it might lead them, the leader of this little band of idealists was lost to them by a tragic death that only the more firmly cemented them together. They...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Here, unfortunately, the manuscript ends, clearly incomplete.

