

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

December 24, 2006

10:00 a.m.

Christmas Greeting

Luke 1:41

A recent article in *The New York Times* explores the attitude toward Christmas of some high profile atheists. The writer placed a phone call to Sam Harris, author of *Letter to a Christian Nation* which has reached the number six position on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. Sam Harris readily admitted to the interviewer that he had a decorated Christmas tree in his living room. The article describes Harris' perspective on Christmas in these words:

Mr. Harris explained that as a "full-time infidel" these days, with book-tour and speaking duties, he didn't have time to pick out his Christmas tree personally. And it was really not his idea but a result "of a lost tug of war with my wife," who likes Christmas trappings and insisted on buying it. But he added that his reluctance "was good-natured all the while." In other words, he is having a (relatively) holly, jolly atheistic Christmas, one that will include presents and a big family party and Mr. Harris sees no glaring contradiction in doing so, at least not one he feels the need to spend much time thinking about. He said, "It seems to me to be obvious that everything we value at Christmas—giving gifts, celebrating the holiday with our families, enjoying all of the kitsch that comes along with it—all of that has been entirely appropriated by the secular world (Randy Kennedy, *The New York Times*, December 17, 2006, page 3)."

Harris, like the other atheists interviewed for this piece has accommodated himself to the immense cultural power of Christmas. If there is a war on the holiday of Christmas they clearly want no part of it.

Some of our spiritual ancestors did in fact wage a war on Christmas. 17th century English Puritans were appalled by the extravagant Christmas celebrations of King Charles I, which included twelve days of excessive feasting, heavy drinking, and elaborate theater presentations. Charles' supporters argued that this and similar feasts hosted by local Lords and gentry were essential because they provided a rare opportunity for the poor to receive hospitality. It was customary to include them in these boisterous gatherings. For some these gatherings would be their only chance during the winter to be warm and well fed. But the Puritans countered that the poor should receive assistance year round and not just during the twelve days of Christmas.

This war over Christmas was just one of the many controversies that led to the English Civil War which pitted the supporters of the Parliament against those who followed Charles I. On January 4, 1645 Parliament ruled that the holiday of Christmas should be abolished. This edict could only be enforced in those areas controlled by Parliament's military forces. But the Puritans and the Parliament soon discovered that the holiday of Christmas had immense cultural power in the 17th century as well. Defenders of the holiday soon made their voices heard. Diane Purkiss has described one of the resulting incidents in these words:

In Canterbury, the county committee outlawed Christmas in 1647, and in response a huge crowd gathered to demand a church service and to enforce the closure of shops and businesses. Predictably, fights broke out, and the mayor's house was attacked. A

crowd ‘threw up and down the wares’ of those few shopkeepers who obeyed the mayor’s order to open for business, while others set up holly in their doorways and gave out free drinks. They also got out that ancient symbol of rebellion and misrule, the football. For some weeks, the city was controlled by rioters (*The English Civil War: Papists, Gentlewomen, Soldiers and Witchfinders in the Birth of Modern Britain*, pages 239-240).

This makes today’s so-called “war on Christmas” sound rather tame.

The Puritans clearly underestimated the cultural power of the holiday and in the end they were not very effective at implementing their spiritual vision. But they recognized that something very important was at stake. They understood that in the England of Charles I, Christmas had become an instrument of social control. The King used religious festivals like Christmas as a tool for enforcing a hierarchical social structure. When the lower classes accepted the invitation to the Great Hall of the local Lord for the Christmas feast, they knew that they were entering into an implicit agreement. They agreed to accept their downtrodden status for the rest of the year. They endorsed the *status quo* which maintained the Lord at the top of the hierarchy and consigned them to the bottom rung of society.

The Puritans were the people who said, “We can do better than that.” For them the *status quo* was not acceptable. They wanted to build a world that would no longer be based on ancient hierarchical relationships. They wanted a world where relationships would be based on the message of God’s love in Jesus Christ. They dared to oppose the holiday of Christmas because they believed so strongly in the message of Christmas. They were convinced that the holiday had lost touch with that message by propping up a social system that Christ would never endorse.

A similar perspective on the message of Christmas is expressed in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luke sees the coming of the Christ child as an event which signals the end of the old world and the birth of the new world. Luke describes this momentous change through an encounter between two expectant mothers. Mary the mother of Jesus comes to visit Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist. When Elizabeth hears the voice of Mary she feels the unborn infant leap in her womb. Elizabeth understands it as a leap of joy.

Luke’s description of leaping in the womb is offered in light of the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau in the womb of their mother Rebekah. They, too, were leaping in the womb. But they did not leap for joy. They are described as struggling with one another to see which of the twins would be born first. The firstborn would have rights and privileges that would be denied to the other. The firstborn could claim a position at the top of the social hierarchy. The struggle in the womb was a sign of the tension that would exist between them throughout their lives. The leaping of Jacob and Esau was an expression of the ethos of the old world. This ethos is shaped by greed, jealousy, and warfare.

But Luke sees the leaping of John the Baptist in the womb as a sign that this old world is already breaking down. John does not struggle to be greater than Jesus. There will be no tension between these two for neither of them seek a place of privilege at the top of the social hierarchy. Their relationship will be grounded in the harmony of the new world of God’s grace. It is that world that the English Puritans dared to imagine.

Mary dared to imagine that world, too. She responds to Elizabeth’s greeting by singing the song that we call the Magnificat. Her song celebrates a transformed relationship between rich and poor.

He has brought down the powerful
from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry
with good things (Luke 1:52-53).

To listen to Mary's song is to be reminded that Christmas is not just a holiday. It is the promise of a new world of grace.