

Bounty≠Consumerism: An International, Aesthetic Christmas

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, DEC 24 2017

Christmas has always been a big holiday for my family. Today, the debate rages: has consumerism corrupted Christmas? Is Christmas about shopping; keeping up with the Joneses; getting the best new gadget (or boat); one-upping friends and family alike; who spends more on each gift, etc.? Or, on the other (contemporary Puritan) extreme, is it about one present per person, each under \$12, and preferably made of either wood or coal? I have never been a fan of the Puritan settlers' response: Presents are un-Godly, must be hand-made with blood and sweat, and must cost less than \$.50 or we have all gone to Hades never to return – oh, and by the way, keep stirring the porridge for 120 minutes straight or we will all be eating lumpy porridge for lunch. I'm OK with lumpy porridge. I would rather have little bit of free time for enrichment in place of the smooth stuff. And I'm Ok with Christmas wonder. Cheer. Good tidings. Good will. And presents. The whole nine yards. I'm good with all of it.

Just to be clear, I am not a fan of consumerism. I am not even an advocate of modern, rationalized capitalism of the type that Max Weber traced precisely to – Pietist and Puritan worldly asceticism. *Worldly asceticism* has for a long time seemed to me a rich man's disease. Those who are ascetic without choice around the world would likely not choose it. Even ascetic Buddhists spend enormous hours and resources creating and meditating on stunningly beautiful art – something considered just as un-Godly-and-we're-all-off-to-Hades-never-to-return as presents to your average Puritan.

If we do not know by now how to make Christmas and gift-giving *bountiful* rather than consumerist, then perhaps we all need a few years in an ascetic Buddhist monastery in the East somewhere to help us tell the difference between the red string and the blue – to mix my religious metaphors.

There is nothing wrong with bounty won through artwork, creativity, or otherwise through one's own efforts (such as the creativity required to find and purchase thoughtful, aesthetic, useful gifts). Concerned about the international context? I am, of course, in no way advocating bounty of the type pillaged during warfare. No, I am talking about the incredibly beautiful Ukrainian, Russian, and Indian hand-painted eggs, balls, Santa, and Russian-doll-style Christmas ornaments now available on on-line stores for less than \$10 each; nativity sets from Bethlehem made with local olive wood; hand-painted glass ornaments from Eastern Europe that are reproductions of the Faberge egg Christmas ornaments of the Russian monarchy! My answer to the Bolshevik revolutionaries: Faberge eggs are not the problem – *Let everyone have a Faberge egg remake! That is the solution!* And, no, I am not kidding. There are also hand-made Chinese and Thai cloisonné Christmas ornaments as eggs, butterflies, owls, the magic rainbow fish, you name it.

I have no ties with Amazon. And, yet, just as Marie Antoinette insisted, Amazon, together with Overstock, and a myriad of other on-line and local stores, is contributing to making sure that beauty and bounty is inexpensively available to any and all, not only to the wealthy.

Following something perhaps approaching Mircea Eliade's work on axes-mundi, I would suggest that one can find bounty in *aesthetics*, particularly aesthetics that bring one closer to a sense of wonder and oneness with divinity, creation, the universe, you name it (e.g., what Eliade might call the sacred). Consumerism, by contrast, is that feeling

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you get when you buy a present and it makes you feel holier than thou, a sense of social hierarchy, or a sense of social righteousness (e.g., what Eliade might call the profane). We have all been there. Let's be honest.

Bounty is beauty. It is a feeling of wonder and awe and plenty. Such a gift should inherently, beautifully, and wordlessly express the grandness of the universe and the smallness of ourselves in it.

The sacred, in this sense, is light – not heavy. Likewise, making Christmas sacred does not require that it be heavy (or self-denying). The bounty of the universe *is* sacred.

Consumerism is all about pride. Fighting consumerism in Christmas, ironically, can also be all about pride.

So, I say, get the presents that fill you (the children and adults in your family) with wonder – rather than with pride. And don't worry about whether the neighbors are doing bounty or consumerism this year. It's not our business. The difference between bounty and pride is an internal striving anyway. Let our children (and ourselves) be filled with wonder and light and a feeling of bounty so that they (and we) can know that this life could be good rather than filled with things Grinchy.

Saint Nicholas was a 3rd century Turkish saint known for bringing bounty to his people, and especially to the lives of children. His example is worthy of following. If you are being consumerist about Christmas, you can change that; if you do not care, don't worry about it. But let there be bounty at least one time per year in our lives. If you prefer, you do not have to spend for the rest of the year. Save up your family's needs for socks, boots, coats, mittens, scarves, fancy linens, blue jeans, and home goods trinkets for the days of wonder and light that Christmas is supposed to be. Add to that a bit of art – almost always sacred in nature, and found in everything from ornaments to notecards. Remember that great food can also be aesthetic. If you are worried about the international, be international in your purchases. If you are worried about poverty in the world, buy amazing, Old World, hand-made silver and semi-precious Fairtrade earrings for your wife or daughter instead of gold.

But, for heaven's sake, those who are concerned about consumerism: please stop trying to take Christmas away. Christmas is a Holy season with good reasons for being, and gift-giving is one of them. How about an aesthetic (and international) Christmas rather than an ascetic (and purely domestic) one?

About the author:

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