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Plato, Dickens, and the Soul: Examining the Role of Justice on the Path to Liberation

François de Soete

Abstract: This paper examines how Ebenezer Scrooge's journey in *A Christmas Carol* reveals different elements of his character, and how this revelation resonates with Plato's discussion of the soul in *Republic*. Specifically, the apparent change that Scrooge undergoes over the course of the novel, this paper argues, serves as a useful illustration of Plato's core arguments about the soul in three ways. First, Scrooge's apparent change over time illustrates Plato's argument that having the soul's different parts in proper order is what constitutes justice for individuals, with particular emphasis on the relationship between two parts in particular, namely, appetite and reason. Second, the profound change that Scrooge undergoes after his journey with the three ghosts affirms the main point of the ring of Gyges debate by demonstrating how the best part of his character, reason, is essentially liberated from the worst part of his character, appetite. Third, the way that the three ghosts lead Scrooge to associate his actions with the painful reality of his past, present, and apparent future serves as a unique way to postulate that, as Plato's myth of Er suggests, hardship can help someone forge a truly just soul that is liberated from the tyranny of unbridled appetite. Ultimately, this line of inquiry demonstrates that *A Christmas Carol* indirectly delves into philosophical questions that date back to ancient times about what constitutes a just soul and the benefits thereof, and also demonstrates how *Republic* holds continuing and wide-ranging relevance for examining the nature of the self in the industrial age and beyond.

Introduction

No novel is more closely associated with Yuletide in the Anglo-American tradition than *A Christmas Carol*. The way that Ebenezer Scrooge transitions

from the archetypal cantankerous wealthy miser to a bastion of generosity and compassion has become a central feature of what is commonly called ‘the meaning’ of Christmas. This radical change not only affords Charles Dickens the opportunity to connect Christmas with the theme of Christian charity, but it also allows him to imbue his novel with additional messaging that transcends its overtly seasonal heartwarming message. Most obviously, his novel offers powerful commentary on the harsh reality of life for the working class during the industrial revolution.¹ Yet another theme, though perhaps not as readily evident, lies at the root of his novel: the benefits of having a just soul. Scrooge’s journey through time reveals different parts of his character and leads to a profound transformation that seems to resonate with this theme of the benefits of having a just soul, which is a notion found in a work to which novels by Dickens seldom relate: Plato’s *Republic*.²

In order to explore the manifestation of this theme in *A Christmas Carol* and in *Republic*, this paper examines Scrooge’s journey with the three ghosts and Plato’s discussion of the just soul, and proposes that the former resonates with the latter in three ways. First, Scrooge’s apparent change over time illustrates Plato’s argument that having the soul’s different parts in proper order is what constitutes justice for an individual, with particular emphasis on the importance of reason having primacy over appetite. Second, Scrooge’s profound change at the end of the novel affirms the main point from the ring of Gyges debate about the benefits of having a just soul, insofar as the best part of his soul, reason, essentially ends up being liberated from the worst part of his soul, appetite. Third, the way that the three ghosts lead Scrooge to associate his actions with the painful reality of his past, present, and apparent future offers a unique way to visualize how, in line with Plato’s myth of Er, hardship can help forge a soul that is truly just—thereby offering genuine liberation from the tyranny of unbridled appetite.

Plato’s Notion of a Just Soul and Scrooge’s Change Over Time

To understand what constitutes a just soul, Plato has his lead character in *Republic*, Socrates, conceptualize an imaginary city, which he calls Callipolis. Socrates outlines three classes that make up the social composition of this imaginary city. First, the guardians effectively serve as the city’s ruling class, and

¹ Edgar Johnson, “The Christmas Carol and the Economic Man,” *The American Scholar* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1951-52): 91-98.

² For more about Platonic imagery in other works by Charles Dickens, namely *Dombey* and *Bleak House*, see: Mark Hennelly, Jr., “Dickens’s Daniel-Plato Complex: *Dombey* and *Bleak House*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 39 (2008): 97-126.

so they should have a love of wisdom in order to rule properly.³ The second class is made up of auxiliaries, who are effectively soldiers, and so they should have courage in order to defend the city against enemies. The rest of the city's inhabitants make up the third class: "the rest of the citizens."⁴ Unlike the two previous classes, the ordinary people do not exhibit a specific virtue like wisdom or courage, but rather, the ideal for them is to specialize in a particular craft and otherwise defer to the judgment of the guardians. The basic desires of ordinary people, Socrates argues, must be restrained by the wisdom of the guardians, and when this happens, the ordinary people will exhibit the virtue of moderation.⁵ Justice in this ideal city, then, is each class doing what it naturally does best without interfering in what the other classes are doing.

The purpose of envisioning this imaginary city is to show how each social class parallels a specific part of the soul.⁶ A person has a just soul, then, when he or she has wisdom predicated on reason being in charge of decision-making, has courage predicated on spirit being in charge of confronting challenges, and has moderation predicated on appetite deferring to reason. It is what people do within themselves that constitutes justice in individuals, and so it is important that people not allow one part of the soul to interfere with the other parts.⁷ This stratification of the soul's characteristics forms the basis of Plato's definition of justice in *Republic*, with particular emphasis on the relationship between appetite and reason. In effect, reason should be responsible for making decisions in the same way that the guardians should serve as rulers, while appetite should defer to reason in the same way that the ordinary people in the city defer to the guardians.

Plato's emphasis on having reason restrain appetite is rooted in his argument that there exists a perfect "form" of goodness and that what people consider good in the world is merely an imperfect approximation of this form. All people pursue what they think is good, but the relationship between reason and appetite in a person's soul affects his or her views about what constitutes goodness.⁸ When appetite rules a person's soul, for instance, he or she will be motivated by greed, under the belief that things like wealth and power constitute goodness. The kind of person who is guided by reason, on the other hand, will

³ Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, trans. Chris Emlyn Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013): 376c.

⁴ Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 423d.

⁵ Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 431d.

⁶ Friedrich Solmsen, "Plato and the Concept of the Soul (Psyche): Some Historical Perspectives," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 3 (July – Sept. 1983): 31-49.

⁷ Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 441e.

⁸ Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 505e.

be able to recognize the true form of goodness, and live accordingly. Plato thus argues that those who place reason above appetite are the only ones who can grasp the true meaning of what is good, whereas those who place appetite above reason pursue things that they merely believe are good.⁹ Plato does not precisely define what the true form of goodness actually is, but instead suggests that striving to understand what constitutes true goodness will make it possible for someone to lead a fulfilling life based on knowledge of things as they really are, as opposed to a troubled life based on erroneous beliefs.¹⁰

Plato's focus on the relationship between appetite and reason can serve as an apt interpretive lens for understanding Scrooge's character in *A Christmas Carol*. It initially seems as though there is nothing more to Scrooge's soul than appetite. However, Scrooge's displays of emotion while with the Ghost of Christmas Past and while with the Ghost of Christmas Present reveal that his soul is not simply pure appetite, but rather, is the product of appetite exercising such a tight grip over reason so as to relegate it to a completely subservient role. In terminology that seems to strikingly benefit Plato's argument in *Republic*, the young woman from Scrooge's past states: "I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you."¹¹ It thus appears as though reason once governed Scrooge's soul, according to the young woman from his past, and so he once had "nobler aspirations," likely in line with what Plato would characterize as relating to the true form of goodness. Over time, though, appetite started to govern his soul, and so Scrooge began to pursue what he merely believes constitutes goodness, namely wealth.

The Ring of Gyges and Scrooge's Misplaced Sense of Satisfaction

Plato has another character, Glaucon, challenge Socrates by arguing that it is better to be unjust, while still managing to appear just to other people. To make his case, Glaucon recounts the tale of the ring of Gyges to demonstrate how having an unjust soul can prove more advantageous than having a just soul. According to this tale, an ordinary shepherd happens upon a chasm that had recently opened up following a heavy rainstorm. The shepherd enters the chasm and finds a tomb, in which lies a corpse bearing a golden ring. The shepherd takes the golden ring and soon discovers that the ring has the power to make its wearer invisible. He begins to use the ring's power for his own selfish gains, and

⁹ Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 581b.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 505a.

¹¹ Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol," in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 110.

ultimately kills the king and installs himself as monarch. Anyone in possession of such a ring, Glaucon argues, would use its power in a similar fashion since there would be no need to fear repercussions or penalties. “Nobody, it could be supposed,” Glaucon argues, “could have such an iron will as to stick to justice and have the strength to resist” its power.¹² In essence, Glaucon argues that people act in accordance with the concept of justice merely due to social constraints, and so anyone who believes that there is no one around to punish his or her transgressions will break the law and ignore the rules.

Glaucon’s argument seems hard to refute, given that such a ring could indeed easily bring someone great wealth and power, and enable its wearer to commit injustices while still maintaining an outward appearance of being just.¹³ Plato has his character Socrates stand firm and insist that even though people could enrich themselves by using such a ring corruptly while outwardly appearing just, they would nevertheless end up worse off in comparison with a truly just person. The reason for this again comes down to the relationship between reason and appetite. A truly just person, as opposed to an unjust person who only appears just to others, has a properly ordered soul whose parts are “temperate and harmonious.”¹⁴ This means that even though the just person misses out on the material benefits that would come from using the magic ring for selfish purposes, having reason guide his or her decision-making effectively amounts to self-mastery.¹⁵ An unjust person, on the other hand, would in effect be a servant to appetite. Socrates therefore argues that it is senseless to think that ill-gotten material gains are beneficial if it means that someone “subjects the best part of himself to the most wicked.”¹⁶ Moreover, a person whose soul is controlled by appetite will always want more, and thus never be satisfied, whereas a person whose soul is properly ordered and thus governed by reason will have all of its parts satisfied.

Scrooge serves as an ideal example of a wealthy person with an unjust soul being worse off than a person of relatively limited wealth with a just soul. This contrast is especially pronounced when comparing Scrooge with his nephew. Fred is clearly not as wealthy as Scrooge, yet appears to have a joyous time as he engages in games and laughter while surrounded by friends and loved ones. Partially in defense of his uncle, Fred observes: “His wealth is of no use to him.

¹² Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 360c.

¹³ Lawrence W. Beals, “On Appearing Just and Being Unjust,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 19 (Sept. 1952): 607-614.

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 443d.

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 443d.

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 589d.

He don't do any good with it. He don't make himself comfortable with it.”¹⁷ As Fred explains, he cannot be angry with Scrooge: “Who suffers by his ill whims! Himself, always.”¹⁸ His uncle's living conditions validate Fred's argument, for Scrooge's dwelling is described as a “gloomy set of rooms,” situated in a building that is “old enough now, and dreary enough, for nobody lived in it but Scrooge, the other rooms being all let out as offices.”¹⁹ Home alone after work, eating his meager meal, Scrooge seemingly pinches every penny: “It was a very low fire indeed ... he was obliged to sit close to it, and brood over it, before he could extract the least sensation of warmth from such a handful of fuel.”²⁰ In this way, then, Scrooge appears to validate the argument in *Republic* that a man governed by appetite, even if he acquires great wealth, can be worse off than a poorer man with a just soul. Scrooge appears to have allowed the worst part of himself to enslave the best part, and it appears that despite clearly possessing far more money than he needs, his desire for wealth is so insatiable that he cannot bring himself to spend on even relatively minor comforts to improve the quality of his own life.

The Myth of Er and Scrooge's Journey

Plato's character Socrates argues that even if the just suffer at first, and the unjust profit from their reprehensible actions initially, in the long run it is the just who will end up better off. The unjust are like sprinters who take off quickly and then end up struggling to finish the race, Socrates argues, while the just are like “those who are truly runners” who run steadily and win the race, and the accompanying prizes.²¹ He goes on to clarify that even though the unjust may be able to act nefariously in their youth without repercussions, they will eventually reveal themselves for what they really are and will end up being miserable, whereas the just, who may suffer early on in life, will end up enjoying success in the end.²² To make his point, Socrates brings up a story about a soldier named Er. After getting killed in battle, Er moves on to the afterlife and witnesses what happens to the soul following a person's death, and then returns to the world of the living to recount what he has seen. Er describes a meadow with a passage that leads up to the sky, where those who acted justly in life ascend and enjoy a wonderful experience, and a passage that leads to an underground realm,

¹⁷ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 136.

¹⁸ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 137.

¹⁹ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 81.

²⁰ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 84.

²¹ Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 613c.

²² Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 613d.

where those who acted unjustly in life descend and experience immense suffering. Each person, whether from the sky or from the underground, eventually returns to the meadow and then each takes a turn choosing a new life from among a wide range of options.

This process of each person choosing a new life offers an interesting way to think about the benefits of having a just soul.²³ On the one hand, it seems to twist the reward process: many who had ostensibly led a just life, evidenced by the fact that they were sent up to the sky, ended up living miserably after reincarnation, while many who had led an unjust life, evidenced by the fact that they were sent underground, often ended up better off after reincarnation. This is obviously perplexing, for it seems as though the just do not end up better off than the unjust. One example in particular, however, helps clarify that the just do indeed usually end up better off. Er recalls that a man who returned from the sky hastily selected a life that seemed desirable, yet the life he selected ended up being calamitous. Commenting on this man's failure to think carefully before making such an important decision, Socrates notes that this man "in his previous life had been living under a well-run constitution, where he shared in virtue out of habit, without philosophy."²⁴ This means that to simply avoid committing injustice is not the same as having a soul that is truly just. Having a truly just soul means actually making a conscious choice to reject injustice, and as a comment earlier in *Republic* makes clear: justice has nothing "to do with a person's external activities, but the internal ones."²⁵

The lesson from the myth of Er also appears to address Glaucon's claim from the ring of Gyges debate, namely, that living unjustly while appearing to be a just person offers the greatest benefits. The moment of choice in the meadow seems to serve as the ultimate test of a person's soul, and so those who in life managed to appear just to others despite actually being unjust will surely exhibit character traits that lead them to choose poorly. Those who are truly just, on the other hand, will likely exhibit character traits that lead them to choose wisely. This means that even though injustice in life may often go unpunished, and even though those who choose to live justly may end up disadvantaged initially, they essentially get what they deserve in the next life. Socrates concludes that the only people who are almost certain to always end up choosing a happy life, and

²³ Stephen Halliwell, "The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul: Interpreting the Myth of Er," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 445-473.

²⁴ Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 619d.

²⁵ Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 443d.

consistently end up ascending to the sky for a rewarding experience in between lives, are those who continually engage in “sound philosophy.”²⁶

The myth of Er clearly resonates with Scrooge’s journey through time with the three ghosts. Much like the arduous journey that the unjust must endure underground, Scrooge appears to experience considerable emotional hardship over the course of his journey. Revisiting the past, Scrooge must endure the torment that comes with facing his regrets. In the present, he must endure the anguish of coming to grips with the sorrow that he has caused those who still manage to care about him despite his unrelenting callousness. Finally, in the future he must endure the dread of what awaits a man who is so uncaring and so devoid of charitableness. Another parallel between the myth of Er and Scrooge’s journey lies in the moment of choice at the end of the meadow and Scrooge’s moment of reckoning when he sees his tombstone. Although it appears that determining whether or not a person has a truly just soul occurs when either being sent up to the sky or being sent down to the underground, this determination is actually only made upon reaching the end of the meadow. Similarly, it appears as though Scrooge’s soul is properly reordered quite early on, but it then becomes clear that he must continue his journey with the spirits until the very end before he can truly reorder his soul.

A good example of this apparent early shift arises while revisiting his youth with the Ghost of Christmas Past. Scrooge displays “a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and to see his heightened and excited face; would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed.”²⁷ Scrooge even expresses regret over his behavior during a recent encounter: “There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something.”²⁸ Although Scrooge’s display of emotion while in the presence of the first two ghosts suggests that he has reordered his soul, his visit to the future with the final ghost makes it clear that his spiritual journey is incomplete. He watches in horror as the charwoman, the laundress, and the undertaker cackle and laugh while sorting through a stingy dead man’s belongings. Clearly upset by this, Scrooge pleads: “If there is any person in the town, who feels emotion caused by this man’s death ... show that person to me, Spirit, I beseech you!”²⁹ The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come then takes Scrooge to observe a poor couple expressing delight over this man’s death, for they now have more time to raise

²⁶ Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 619e.

²⁷ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 102.

²⁸ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 103.

²⁹ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 155.

the money needed to repay their loan.³⁰ Astoundingly, Scrooge fails to recognize the obvious, that the dead man no one mourns is his future self.

Scrooge has thus come to recognize the suffering of others, and has even come to express genuine concern for others, but it seems as though he has not yet grasped just how justifiably contemptible he is in the eyes of others. Scrooge at this point is like those in the myth of Er who have simply avoided acting unjustly. One final step remains before he can truly attain a just soul: “The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to One ... Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE.”³¹ He finally recognizes that the reviled dead man is his future self, and that his actions in life merit this lonesome outcome. In finally realizing this, he seemingly moves from expressing a desire to merely do good, to a desire to also condemn the behavior that had come to define his present life—he now not only seeks to act justly, but to also actively reject injustice. It is at this moment that Scrooge truly elevates reason in his soul, and thereby ensures that he will no longer suffer the oppression that comes with being guided by the dictates of appetite.

Conclusion

As his journey nears completion, Scrooge exclaims despondently to the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come: “I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse.”³² He ultimately sheds his unseemly parsimonious tendencies and instead adopts a level of generosity befitting a man of his means. When he sends the boy to go buy the prize turkey in town, he offers generous compensation: “Come back with the man, and I’ll give you a schilling. Come back with him in less than five minutes, and I’ll give you half-a-crown.”³³ He also makes what is clearly a stunningly large donation to charity, stating to the portly gentleman who is raising money for the poor: “A great many back-payments are included in it, I assure you.”³⁴ With regard to Bob Cratchit, Scrooge declares that he will raise his dutiful worker’s salary and will “endeavour to assist” his struggling family. On the surface, then, it appears that Scrooge in the end has undergone a complete transformation and has thereby indeed become a different man. A closer look, however, reveals that Scrooge is still the same man.

³⁰ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 157.

³¹ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 161.

³² Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 161.

³³ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 167.

³⁴ Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 169.

Most notably, Scrooge remains in business, as opposed to, for instance, becoming a monk who relinquishes all of his assets. Scrooge instead now seeks to balance the desire to accumulate wealth with the desire to make good use of his riches. The profound change that Scrooge experiences thus seems to resonate with Plato's notion of the just soul, insofar as he has seemingly restructured his soul so that reason now governs appetite rather than the other way around. In other words, the individual parts of his soul have not changed, but the relationship between them has.

Scrooge's disposition after rearranging his soul strikes a chord with the argument in *Republic* about the benefits of having a just soul. Rather than being a servant to appetite, and subject to the misery that comes with such an arrangement, Scrooge now allows reason to guide his actions, and in so doing goes on to experience joy and happiness on a level that he previously could not even envision. The best part of himself is liberated from the worst part of himself, and so in effect, reversing the relationship between reason and appetite offers liberation from the tyranny of unbridled appetite. None of this would have been possible of course were it not for his journey with the three ghosts. It is largely the emotional turmoil that Scrooge experiences during this journey that leads him to restructure the relationship between reason and appetite in his soul. Similar to the moment of choice outlined in the myth of Er, the rearrangement of his soul—and by extension his path to liberation—is not truly complete until after he learns to not only do good, but to also condemn the traits that hinder his ability to do good. Ultimately, examining the resonance between Scrooge's journey and Plato's discussion of the just soul highlights how *A Christmas Carol* transcends its overtly moral and seasonal message by offering a unique way of thinking about key philosophical issues that date back to ancient times and remain relevant to this day, and simultaneously highlights the wide-ranging and continuing relevance of *Republic* for inquiries into the nature of the self in the industrial age and beyond.

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Unwrapping Christmas: Barthes, Baudrillard, and Disney Holiday Specials

Michael Barros

Abstract: This essay explores the transformation of Christmas in contemporary culture, using Roland Barthes' and Jean Baudrillard's theories. It examines how Christmas, traditionally a Christian holiday, has morphed into a secular, commercial event in the media, specifically through holiday specials. By analyzing the shift from religious to secular and the creation of a "hyperreal" Christmas, it discusses the broader implications of this change on cultural narratives and societal perceptions. It further explores potential methods to understand and engage with this transformed cultural landscape.

Introduction

Recently, I was watching the Disney Holiday special for this year, 2023. As I watched, I wasn't overly interested in the fact that it was called a "Holiday" special rather than a Christmas special - we live in an inclusive time, and Disney is no stranger to that. What I did find interesting, however, was the fact that they could get away with effectively having a Christmas special while still referring to the holidays broadly in both the title and little reminders throughout. Toward the end, they had multiple short video clips of families offering a little greeting, with at least one of those families appearing to be celebrating Hanukkah. The hosts, at times, noted that this celebrated all holidays, Christmas, Hannukah, and Kwanza. But the content itself was all Christmas music, Christmas sets, and Christmas attire. Now, the commentary ought to count for something, but it would be hard to argue that anyone was listening to a musical holiday special primarily for the commentary. Had they not reminded the audience that they were doing a holiday special, most would've likely assumed it was a Christmas

special without question. Thus, I began to wonder, who is the “holiday” thing really for?

If you were the sort of person who celebrates Hanukkah and doesn't want to watch a Christmas sort of thing, you would still leave thinking that this was a Christmas special that gave the slightest of head nods to your holiday. If you were somebody who exclusively celebrates Kwanza, you wouldn't be satisfied because they mentioned Kwanza one time; you would be thinking that the entire thing was dedicated to a Christmas-oriented audience. Thus, we can't rightly assume that as they described the target audience, they believed it would primarily be these holidays that are much less common than Christmas in the English-speaking world. No, the most popular winter holiday is the same one that inspired the entire soundtrack: Christmas. So, why say, "Happy Holidays"? Why let everybody know that you're being inclusive?

On first sight, it manifests as performative inclusivity. It's letting the people know, “We are doing an inclusive thing! Despite all appearances, what you're witnessing here represents all holidays.” What I want to do throughout this essay is unpack the implications of that idea. What does it mean to take what seems to be a Christmas special and tell people it's a broad Holiday special? Then, with that analysis as a jumping-off point, I will argue for an even more pessimistic view.

The Mythologies of Barthes

To begin, I will be drawing heavily on the work of Roland Barthes, who wrote the book *Mythologies* early in his career. Later on, he would become perhaps more post-structuralist without ever becoming a full post-structuralist.³⁵ Although he critiqued his earlier work, he didn't abandon the principles. He seemed to believe that times had changed, and his work had become insufficient, yet the work of *Mythologies* was to be extrapolated rather than abandoned.

Barthes' cultural semiotics developed from the work of Saussure, who posed semiotics (semiology) as a science³⁶ of symbols. In semiotics, there is a signifier, such as the word “rose,” and the signified – the thing the rose points to – passion or romance. Saussure understood that linguistics, his area of focus, was only one part of semiotics, but there are other areas of study. To use the example given, the word “rose” can act as a signifier in the same way that a physical rose might, with the signified being passion or romance. The signifier and the signified, rarely being mutually exclusive, together form the sign.

³⁵ He seemed to be an anomalous liminal figure at the intersection of structuralism and post-structuralism.

³⁶ In France in the early 20th century, the idea of “science” was used more broadly than it is today.

Barthes takes this a step further and suggests that, in actuality, the sign is not the end of the story, but becomes something else. The linguistic sign then becomes drained of its richness and its history and is filled with myth. More precisely, the sign, which is the pair of signifier and signified in the linguistic semiotic order, becomes the signifier of myth. This is a second-order semiotic system. For clarity's sake, Barthes introduces some new terminology.

He says that, in the linguistic sense, the sign could be called the "meaning." That is, when being considered in its fullness, prior to being absorbed into the myth. When the meaning is drained of its history and richness and taken as a signifier of the myth, it is called a form. Think of the form as the emptied-out sign that becomes the new signifier of the mythic. That form and its signified (called "concept") taken together are the new sign of the myth, which he calls the "signification."

In application, Barthes would look at culture and see mythologies everywhere. He believed that these cultural mythologies, which he identified in various commonplace things, such as professional wrestling, stripteases, and so on, were examples of ideologically motivated myths. Myths designed not to hide, but to distort. They seek to *naturalize*, rather than eliminate. The history of the meaning is absorbed into the myth, recontextualizing it and depoliticizing it. This process effectively declaws or defangs symbols so that they serve the myth, rather than subvert it.

Think of Che Guevara³⁷, who, in the Americas, represents revolution and rebellion - often associated with Marxism. Yet, when college students wear it on a T-shirt, they're purchasing it as a commodity, not for its use-value, as Marx might hope, but for its sign-value.³⁸ An act which implicitly supports the very systems that spurred Guevara's interventions in Cuba to overthrow the corrupt Batista regime. There's an ironic sense to it, yes, but what has happened is that the symbol, the sign of Che Guevara, has been naturalized. Nobody has tried to hide his history as a revolutionary; it has become part of the myth and absorbed into the concept. As a result, Che Guevara retains only a tamed richness - rebellion within the context of non-rebellion. It's depoliticized speech and no longer a threat. Guevara is initially encountered as a symbol of rebellion, steadfastness, idealism, and bravery - his upward gaze staring imperialism square in the eyes. Behind that myth is the real myth: the commodification of the revolutionary impulse. When symbols of revolution can only be gained by means

³⁷ Barthes uses an example of a French revolutionary, but Che Guevara is much more commonplace – at least in America.

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London ; Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007).

of the capitalist system, the system must be all-pervasive and wield ultimate authority – or so the myth might be interpreted.

Barthes' perspective on myth was complex, acknowledging that myths permeate culture with ideological significance. While he recognized that myths could reinforce dominant ideologies, he also saw the potential for semiotic analysis to demystify these constructs. Unpacking myths, for Barthes, was an exercise in critical interpretation, revealing the socio-cultural underpinnings of what might otherwise be accepted as “natural” or “given” in the fabric of everyday life. This critical work is not necessarily an overt act of rebellion but is a form of intellectual resistance to the passive consumption of ideologies. Therefore, the role of the mythologist is not solely to challenge the status quo but to illuminate the ways in which cultural narratives are constructed and can be interpreted.

The holiday special's substitution of “Holiday” for “Christmas” is illustrative of the Barthesian mythopoeic process. The signifier “Christmas,” historically tied with Christian connotations, has undergone a cultural reinterpretation. Its specific religious significance is abstracted, transforming it into a “form.” This form is then imbued with a new, inclusive myth encapsulating the broad holiday season. Here, “Happy Holidays” is a linguistic signifier aiming to convey inclusivity, while the traditional Christmas images – trees, songs, sleigh bells, snow – serve as imagistic signifiers. These signifiers, once exclusively linked to Christmas, are strategically realigned to evoke a broader “holiday” ethos that ostensibly includes diverse winter celebrations.

However, this realignment reveals a tension – despite the inclusive linguistic gestures, the prevailing imagistic signifiers invoked maintain an exclusive association with Christmas rather than a truly ecumenical holiday spirit. The special's narrative, therefore, navigates a delicate balance, inviting the audience to a shared “holiday” space while predominantly presenting Christmas-centric symbols. The overt corrections in the narrative, which assert the special's “holiday” nature, aim to reinforce the inclusive intent. Yet, they also highlight the semiotic dissonance between the linguistic aims and the imagistic reality.

The transformation of Christmas within the holiday special can be interpreted through the lens of Charles Taylor's notion of the “secular age.”³⁹ Therein, Taylor's secularization is not the stripping of Christianity from the culture but the cultural shift where traditional religious beliefs and practices are no longer the sole, assumed framework for societal norms and personal identity. In this secular age, a multiplicity of belief systems coexist, and individuals may identify as Christian, Jewish, Hindu, atheist, or whatever else. Christianity is one

³⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

option among many. The holiday special reflects this secularization by presenting Christmas as a cultural festivity that does not necessarily invoke its religious origins. Several Christmas traditions are maintained – melodies and decorations abound – yet the core religious elements, such as the narratives of the immaculate conception or the nativity, are not emphasized (though they are present in some songs). The original sign (meaning) of Christmas has been repurposed, and it now serves as a mere signifier (form) for the secularized “holiday” myth of a society that has moved beyond a singular religious narrative.

The myth of a non-denominational winter holiday season seeks to encompass various belief systems under its aegis. Here, the glaringly obvious point that emerges is that Christmas can be celebrated entirely on its own without reliance on religion, as it is by countless people of different faiths – atheists, non-practicing Christians, and so on. Indeed, in many, if not most, American households, people feel no need to mention religion, religiosity, or religious narratives during Christmas celebrations. So, presumably, there would be no need to deal in the muddy waters of differing belief systems. This is, however, a category error. The issue being circumvented here isn’t one of the packaged religious frameworks that necessarily come with the holidays themselves but of cultural expressions, religious or not. The secular myth has already been naturalized, now operating as the default narrative within the broader cultural context. It’s not that the religious roots of Christmas have been forgotten or entirely dismissed; rather, they have been subsumed by a more commodified, secular celebration that easily coalesces with the consumerist ethos prevalent in many societies, particularly in the United States. In this sense, the secularization process has not so much eliminated the religious significance of Christmas as it has broadened its appeal to include those who may not subscribe to its religious origin story. The “merry” in “Merry Christmas” no longer necessitates a Christ-centric joy, but rather a universally accessible sentiment of goodwill and festivity.

The Hyperreal of Baudrillard

In order to explain why that sentiment is both concerning and demonstrative of a broader cultural phenomenon, I would like to – perhaps rather abruptly – introduce Jean Baudrillard’s idea of “hyperreality.” As stated before, Barthes moved from the more structuralist approach to *Mythologies* toward more post-structuralist approaches, especially of literature and texts. He didn’t lose all concern for broader cultural myths, but they were a bit less pertinent, and certainly, he saw his structuralist approach to them as insufficient. Baudrillard developed Barthes’ ideas in what seems to be a proper direction. Indeed,

Baudrillard's hyperreality, ideas of media influence, and lamentation over the loss of referents seem more relevant than ever in the Digital Age and are still relevant in contemporary scholarly dialogue.

Baudrillard was a postmodern theorist who extended the semiotic exploration of Barthes into a more disillusioned terrain. If Barthes saw myth as a second-order semiotic system that reshapes reality into a cultural narrative, Baudrillard took it further, suggesting that in contemporary society, we are not just interpreting reality through myths but are instead immersed in a "hyperreality" where the simulation is indistinguishable from or even replaces the real.⁴⁰

Barthes believed that myths' function was to distort, but not to hide. By contrast, Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" is contingent on hiding or obfuscating. It describes the progression by which representations become increasingly detached from their original referents:

1. **The first order** of simulacra is a faithful image or copy, clearly connected to a real referent.
2. **The second order** distorts reality; the signifier still suggests a link to the referent but misrepresents it.
3. **The third order** masks or denies the existence of a profound reality; the signifier claims to represent something real but has no relation to it.
4. **The fourth order** is pure simulation, the simulacrum, which is entirely unrelated to any reality—it is a creation unto itself.

Within this framework, the simulacrum doesn't just distort reality but becomes a reality of its own, a "hyperreality" that is more palpable than the original. Applying this to Christmas, the holiday's commercial expression has transformed from an altered form of a religious tradition to a hyperreal phenomenon. This "hyperreal" Christmas, adorned with shopping frenzies and Santa Claus, is no longer tethered to the nativity story but is a culturally dominant form of celebration in its own right - that is, it can make do without a historical referent.

Disney's Holiday Special = Disneyland

To pick up where I left off earlier: the signification process that took place during the "Happy Holidays" special and every other special like it is a farce. They weren't engaging in a war on Christmas. The war on Christmas has already been

⁴⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994). See also: Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, n.d.).

lost. The Christmas that they drained of its essence was no longer Christmas at all. It was a simulacrum. The signifiers that pointed to Christmas were not pointing toward something wrapped up in religiosity. They were distorting – in a Barthesian way – a simulacrum called Christmas. When Ryan Seacrest said that the holidays are all about our loved ones, his substitution of “holiday” for “Christmas” is enough to draw attention toward the intentional broadening of Christmas themes. But with the jarring and obvious word-shuffling, attention is drawn away from the value statement: the holidays or Christmas are primarily about loved ones. The statement required no malicious intent; it drew from the dominant cultural *milieu* surrounding Christmas.

Baudrillard provides analysis in his most famous work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, of Disneyland. He conceptualizes it as an exaggerated representation of reality – a hyperreal space designed for refreshment and escape. It's a simulation intended to make the outside world appear more authentic upon your departure. However, Baudrillard posits that this differentiation between Disneyland and the “real” world is illusory. We don't return to reality; we step back into a world increasingly dominated by the hyperreal. The media landscape – encompassing news and social media – filters and frames our perception, providing a distorted representation of reality. In this mediated world, the line between the genuine and the constructed becomes blurred, and the hyperreal becomes our new baseline for understanding the world around us. Disneyland serves to further obfuscate “real” reality from the hyperreal. You're meant to see how exaggerated Disneyland appears and differentiate it from the outside world. By contrast with that land of naivete and excess, the rest of the world appears to be vastly more real. You're meant to say, “That was a nice vacation, but now it's back to the real world.”

Disney's Holiday special serves the same function as Disneyland. We're meant to look at it and say, by contrast, “I like Christmas. That's old school. I like traditional Christmas. My family's a real old-school family.” Here, I think of the Bing Crosby and David Bowie cover of “Peace on Earth” and “Little Drummer Boy.” It begins not with singing but with a dialogue between them. Bing is talking to David, a young man at the time, and he asks him if he knows any of the older stuff. Bowie says, “Oh, sure.” And he talks about The Beatles, and Bing says, “Oh, you go back that far,” in a, perhaps slightly mocking, sort of way. After a few more lines, they begin to sing one of the older songs they both turn out to be familiar with: “Little Drummer Boy” (mixed with “Peace on Earth”).

However, the “Little Drummer Boy” song only goes back to 1941 and wasn't recorded/popularized until the 1950s. The little drummer boy himself was certainly not part of the biblical narratives, yet is placed there alongside the Magi in various Christmas media. So, the “old” that Bing refers to is the first half of

the 20th century. In fairness, when contrasted with Bowie's career, that is old; certainly, when contrasted with 21st-century Christmas, it seems very old. But it's still around 2 millennia too late to be considered a representation of the referent that the song serves as a reference for. In fact, in its modification of the nativity *via* the addition of a character, it serves to distort the barrier between the representation (the song or movie) and the real (the original nativity narrative). This is precisely the impact of the simulacra and the defining trait of the hyperreal.

We may know the history behind the development of Christmas traditions, but such knowledge isn't a necessity to engage with the thing we call "Christmas" today. Why should there be 9 reindeer? Why should Rudolph be one of them? The questions, presumably, have answers, but the celebration of Christmas is self-sufficient whether we have them or not. It can be celebrated independent of its religious and historical roots; Rudolph can be on our lawn and in our songs without us knowing why. In this hyperreal tradition, the "why" fades into the background, overtaken by the "what" - the immediate experience of Christmas as it's been presented to us. Saint Nicholas, the 4th-century Bishop, is represented in the figure of *Sinterklaas*, a second, or perhaps third-order representation. Still, the Santa Claus, whose likeness is owned by Coca-Cola, the one most familiar to American audiences, is a North American figure. It doesn't bother with claiming a historical origin. It *is*, and *what* it is turns out to compel us more than its predecessors do.

The ~~Christmas~~ Holiday special presents a collection of signifiers traditionally associated with Christmas but recontextualizes them within a new framework. The viewers, unless they internalize this recontextualization, might challenge it by saying, "Hey, that's Christmas stuff!" However, what they're actually engaging with is not the traditional Christmas but a reconstituted version—a simulacrum. This hyperreal version does not simply distort the original meaning of Christmas; it creates a new narrative where the traditional elements of Christmas are mobilized to signify a constructed reality that stands apart from the historical and religious origins of the holiday.

The Way Out

The question of how to escape the trap that Holiday specials have laid for us and, in turn, subvert the hyperreal is a troublesome one. Baudrillard argued in *Seduction*⁴¹ that the thing to do is engage in "seduction," not in the erotic sense,

⁴¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Pr., 2007).

but in a very specific, Baudrillardian sense. This would involve a sort of free play of symbols that subverts their utilitarian and functional purposes. That is, symbolic exchange absent of traditional ideas of value, such as functionality – for example, on the basis of aesthetics. Think of the exchange of memes online. These are divorced from their referents knowingly. They are exchanged precisely because they do not claim to point to a profound truth of any sort – which Baudrillard was highly skeptical of. The memes facilitate a shared cultural experience that transcends the matrix of functionality that Baudrillard thinks to be so problematic.

I find this solution dissatisfactory simply because history hasn't supported its effectiveness. The Digital Age has undoubtedly ushered in all manner of acts of Baudrillardian seduction, yet the functional always caught up. Think of early YouTube prior to monetization – it was like the Wild West, but monetization caught up, and now videos are bound by algorithmic influence. Moreover, I am unconvinced that the hyperreal can be laid solely (or primarily) at the feet of functionalism, utilitarianism, or even consumerism. Rather, those are symptoms of the broader process of secularization.

Despite *The Matrix* paying homage to Baudrillard – Neo was using a hollowed-out copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* to store his hacking paraphernalia – Baudrillard was highly critical of *The Matrix* franchise for 3 main reasons:

1. It drew too clear a distinction between the simulated and the real, whereas his theory emphasized the lack of clarity.
2. It was a movie that required and benefitted from the very thing it critiqued.
3. It failed to employ his preferred method of escape – seduction.

There are a few reasons why at least 2/3 of these critiques demonstrate a misunderstanding of the franchise, but I want to focus on the first critique. He claimed that *The Matrix* was too Platonic⁴²; it didn't describe an unclear distinction between simulated and real, but humans simply unplugged into the real. This is shown to be an erroneous interpretation by the Architect scene in *The Matrix: Reloaded* and by the whole of *The Matrix: Resurrections*, but if we only had access to *The Matrix*, it would be a valid critique – if the Wachowski's were only interested in expressing Baudrillard's thoughts. But, if the Platonic

⁴² Gary Genosko and Adam Bryx, trans., "The Matrix Decoded: Le Nouvel Observateur Interview with Jean Baudrillard," *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, October 13, 2018, <https://baudrillardstudies.ubishops.ca/the-matrix-decoded-le-nouvel-observateur-interview-with-jean-baudrillard/#:~:text=The%20actors%20are,classical%2C%20Platonic%20treatment.>

idea⁴³ of an idealized world beyond the veil of the material world *did* exist, or at least if everyone believed it existed, it would present a more suitable method of escaping the hyperreal.

Nietzsche was very hard on Plato⁴⁴ for his popularization of the *Hinterwelt*, the behind-world which was realer than the material world. He found it cowardly, as though Plato and all other *hinterwelters* were simply looking for a way out so that they didn't have to make do in the material world.⁴⁵ But, when the hyperreal has been woven into the material realm, and seduction has failed, the behind-world bears a certain appeal, even to the irreligious. Conceptually, the transcendent is a way of escaping the entangled real/hyperreal. Practically, a collective belief in such a world, irrespective of its actual existence or non-existence, allows for appeals that the ancient philosophers would've greatly appreciated: appeals to the unchanging.

In Praxis

Returning to the ~~Christmas Holiday special~~ Hyperreal Space of Refreshment, transcendence allows for at least 1 of 2 possible circumventions of its façade:

1. I can appeal to some transcendent Form of Christmas.
2. I can sift through the façade and find the Christmas spirit in it, even if it's greatly obscured and fragmented.

For the former, numerous theological and traditional approaches might be taken. For the latter, we need merely to argue for a depth dimension⁴⁶ to the disparate or spurious elements of the special. The Christmas tree, as with all trees, is loaded with symbolic import and cross-cultural significance throughout history. The gift-giving may be viewed from a consumerist lens, but it may also be viewed from the lens of the lively virtue of charity. "Peace on Earth and goodwill toward men" goes without saying.

These abstract notions can be abstracted further to serve as signifiers of the ultimate signified: God. And story elements of the greatest story ever told: the Gospel. Gift-giving at its best is charity, a free-giving as grace is freely given to us. All elements of pagan origin, such as the Christmas tree, the Yule log, mistletoe, etc., can be understood as pagan elements conquered by Christ. The

⁴³ I use this phrase solely to echo Baudrillard – certainly all expressions of a world beyond the veil don't belong to Plato.

⁴⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Alexander Tille, and M. M. Bozman, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (London: Dent, 1958).

⁴⁵ In fact, he described his philosophy as being anti-Plato. The more immediate, the better!

⁴⁶ I'm thinking here of Tillich's theology of culture and/or Jung's archetypes.

spirit of peace, joy, goodwill, and love of family that characterizes the Christmas spirit can also be said to characterize the Kingdom.

By introducing this depth dimension, the Christmas and Holiday specials lose their superficial, ever-shifting grip over our imaginations. Instead, they are recontextualized as only the expressions and manifestations of timeless truths, and it is those timeless truths we focus on.

Conclusion

The hyperreal landscape, as it was manifested in the Disney Holiday special, is interesting - an odd and deceptive blend of ideas that obfuscates our ability to identify what Christmas is. I've argued that it a new version of Disneyland, a place where we're meant to attend and say, "that's phony, I know the real Christmas," perhaps even engage in a pseudo-culture war that we've already lost. But, if there *is* a true and transcendent meaning to Christmas - not that Baudrillard would've agreed that there was - then it won't, and necessarily cannot be stamped out by any sort of layers of falsehood, be they commercial or whatever.

Baudrillard's seduction is insufficient for escaping, at least this expression of, the hyperreal. We ought to focus on the depth dimension of Christmas - those values that make it Christmas.

*"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."
(Philippians 4:8)*

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King as Ring-Giver: Gift Giving and its Influence on the Christianization of Germanic and Nordic Peoples

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Abstract: This essay examines the cultural significance of gift-giving in Germanic and Nordic societies, particularly focusing on the figure of the king as a "ring giver." It argues that the kingly ideal of generosity and honor-bestowing in these cultures created a fertile ground for the reception of the Gospel, as the narrative of Jesus Christ resonated with the Northern ideals of what a good king should be. This essay aims to show that from the ideals of the king to the celebration of Yule, the Christianization of these peoples was not a wholesale rejection of their cultural ideals but rather a fulfillment and transformation of them.

Gift Giving Globally and in Northern Europe

Gift-giving is a universal and timeless activity that spans the global and human history. It builds and develops relationships and functions as a tool for social bonding and even religious practice. Ancient examples include the ancient Mesopotamians from whom gift giving was a form of tribute to kings and gods. Ancient Egyptians followed this sacrificial tendency and also exchanged gifts among themselves, especially during times of celebration and festivities. Greeks and Romans saw gift giving as a mark of hospitality and an expectation of what illustrious citizens would do. In China, the tradition of giving and receiving red envelopes stuffed with money during Lunar New Year has ancient roots. Christians had an ethic of generosity and giving gifts, especially at Christmas as a sign of hospitality and Christlike love. These practices often continue in cultures up to the present day. Whether it is an expression of thankfulness, a bestowal of honor, a sign of good will, or a giving of grace, gift giving has been a seemingly universal component of human cultures. Ancient and Medieval Germanic and Nordic cultures were no exception.

The first things about ancient Germanic and Nordic lands that might come to a modern readers mind are bearded brutes.⁴⁷ However, a foundational aspects to their cultures was actually generosity and the role of generosity in the assessment of a good king. In Germanic and Nordic traditions, the king was known as the "ring giver" or "gift giver." The ring giver was a central figure that embodied the values of generosity, leadership, and social example. The figure of the ring giver is not only a literal dispenser of wealth, which he was, but also a symbol of the humility that binds a village and a people together. The king's ability to give gifts fostered loyalty increased the support received from their warriors and subjects. Accepting a gift from the ring giver came with the understanding of a commitment to support and serve the giver as king.

In Germanic and Nordic literature, such as in the epic poem "Beowulf," the ring giver is presented as the heroic ideal. The hero's relationship with their king and the hero's ability to themselves become a ring giver is a powerful theme highlighting the pre-Christian Germanic and Nordic values of honor, loyalty, and generosity in the ideal king. The concept of the ring giver survived the Christianization of Germanic and Nordic societies, adapting to Christian liturgy and ethical expectations. It influenced the portrayal of Christian kings and leaders in the north. Post-Christian Germanic and Nordic kings were expected to exemplify the virtue of generosity and leadership and to act as moral and spiritual guides for their people. This continued to influence these cultures and contributed to the Anglo-Saxon and Norman chivalric codes centuries later.

In Christianity, the narrative of God's gift of salvation centers on the belief that God, in His infinite love and grace, offers salvation to humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This act is seen as the ultimate gift to humanity, providing redemption from sin and the promise of eternal life to those who believe and accept it.

Jesus is often referred to as the "good King" or "King of Kings" in the Bible and Christian tradition. This depiction highlights the qualities of a just, benevolent, and generous ruler. As the good King, Jesus embodies the virtues of compassion, generosity, and self-sacrifice. He is seen as a shepherd to his people, guiding them, providing for their needs, and ultimately laying down his life for their sake.

The concept of Jesus as the good King resonated deeply with the Germanic and Nordic ideals of a king as a "ring giver," a leader whose legitimacy and honor are tied to their generosity and ability to care for their people. In the Bible, Jesus fulfills and transcends these kingly ideals by giving the gift of salvation, offering

⁴⁷ Battle of Teutoburg Forest, raiding Vikings, and the blood eagle.

not just material or temporal rewards, but eternal life and reconciliation with God and incarnationally living with His people and not in isolation and opulence.

The Ring Giver Ideal in Germanic and Nordic Cultures

"Beowulf" is an epic poem composed in Old English, likely between the 8th and early 11th centuries. It centers on the hero, Beowulf, and his heroic deeds in a time of kings and monsters. In Beowulf, the dynamics of kingship and the "ring giver" are a central theme. Final victory over the dragon is not achieved by the strength of Beowulf but by his generosity which empowers the warrior Wiglaf to come to the king's aid against an otherworldly horror.

When he saw his lord Tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,
He remembered the bountiful gifts he bestowed on him,
How well he lived among the Waegmundings,
The freehold he inherited from his father before him.
He could not hold back."⁴⁸

The sight of Beowulf under the heat of the dragon's fire brought not thoughts of heroism but memories of generosity and so Wiglaf cast himself into danger. After the dragon is defeated, it is Beowulf's turn to give even more to Wiglaf.

"Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped
The collar of gold from his neck and gave it
To the young thane, telling him to use
It and the war shirt and the gilded helmet well."⁴⁹

In this scene, Beowulf bestows a list of symbolic and functional gifts to Wiglaf. Wiglaf receives the gifts because the original gifts inspired Wiglaf to behave as Beowulf did—to risk life for another. The gifts represent the transmission of honor and trust, further solidifying the bond between the king and the new heroic generation. Beowulf's "great-heartedness" is the archetype of the ideal "ring giver" who generously honors those who serve their people well.

⁴⁸ Heaney, Seamus. 2001. *Beowulf*. Translated by Seamus Heaney. New York: Norton., 2604-09.

⁴⁹ Heaney, 2809-12.

Robert Schichler provides an interesting comparison between the imagery use in *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon Psalter. In this comparison of imagery Schichler points out several times the importance of gift-giving and demonstrates the way the generosity of Hrothgar, another good king in *Beowulf*, is seen in Anglo-Saxon translations of the psalms of the Bible and emphasized animal imagery, particularly in Psalms 41 and 111.⁵⁰ It is clear that generosity was important not only to pre-Christian German and Nordic peoples but a central component to the contextualization of Christianity to their cultures. Generosity became a central link between pre and post Christian Northern Europe.

One implication of the gift-giving king in these cultures was the understanding that no one was too good to give. This ideal was represented by the pre-Christian gods as well. In contrast to the selfishness of the Greco-Roman gods who kept secrets and punished Prometheus who “stole” fire from them, the Germanic and Norse gods were known more for their generosity as this example from the *Völsung Saga*. In the saga, Odin, the highest deity in the Nordic pantheon, manifests himself as an aged, one-eyed wanderer and thrusts his sword into the Barnstokkr tree amidst a celebratory gathering at King Völsung's court. Odin says, “he who draws this sword out of the trunk shall receive it from me as a gift, and he himself shall prove that he has never carried a better sword than this one.”⁵¹ The ring-giving activity of the king was one of participation in divine activity. This influenced the orthodoxy of pre-Christian Germanic and Norse in the doctrine that the gods were generous. But orthopraxy was also influenced since the praxis of the king was to also be generous and the praxis of those under his care was also to be one of generosity and gift giving. In the German and Norse cultures gift-giving was a privilege sought by all—not least of which being the ideal king.

The Gospel Narrative and the Kingly Ideal

Paul summarizes God's intentions in the life, death, and the resurrection/enthronement of Jesus, “in order that in the coming ages he might show *the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*. The Bible goes on to state explicitly, the gift-giving activity of God in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:8-9 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—

⁵⁰ Schichler, Robert L. 1996. “Glæd Man at Heorot: *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon Psalter.” *Leeds Studies in English*, no. 27 (January): 49–68.

⁵¹ Byock, Jesse. 1990. *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. New York: Penguin Books.

and this is not from yourselves, *it is the gift of God*— not by works, so that no one can boast. *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" God is the ultimate generous God, sharing not only wealth but the gift of reconciliation and a new covenant between Himself and mankind through the giving of the gift of Christ Jesus. But similar to the gift-giving of the ring-giver, the gift of Christ Jesus is not supposed to occur in a vacuum, rather it is to establish a relationship that includes good works partnership.

Earlier in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul introduces the concept of the bestowal of honor to humanity as a gift from God when, in Ephesians 1:3-5, he says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." In adopting humans into His family, as an expression of His pleasure and will, God honors humans by giving them the gift of not merely the family of a human king but the family of God. So we see, in the summary of the Gospel, the role of God as the archetypal gift-giver. The character God in Jesus Christ as the ideal King is continued in Paul's words to the church in Philippi. Paul is highlighting the primary role of humility in social cohesion and in imitation of Christ Jesus. In Philippians 2:5-11 Paul says,

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
 advantage;
 rather, he made himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 he humbled himself
 by becoming obedient to death—
 even death on a cross!
 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
 and gave him the name that is above every name,
 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

In this passage, Paul explains that Jesus came to earth and lived a human life as a servant to His people. Jesus lived among, and as, His people in humility and leading from the front. When Jesus asked something from His disciples He was not asking something He had not already done. The Christian view of Jesus' obedience to death shares the heroic undertones of a king saving his people. Humans cannot decide whether or not they will die but Jesus' death was not an act of cause and effect—it was an obedience. Like a king who did not have to join the battle but chose to lead his thanes from the front and enter the battle by choice, so Christ did not have to take on humanity and die but chose it. This is another aspect of the ideal Germanic/Nordic king that was fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

This is clearly drawn out, in another Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Dream of The Rood*, a poem about the cross and Christ at the Crucifixion where Jesus is presented as “a "heroic German lord, one who dies to save his troops.”⁵² The sacrifice of Christ was a call to follow Christ and with the Christian emphasis on the historicity of the Cross it was a call to follow the flesh and blood manifestation of the great kingly ideal.

The Christianization of Germanic and Nordic Peoples

The Christianization of Germanic and Nordic peoples was a slow process over a period of multiple centuries. For Germanic peoples, the process of Christianizing their culture started around the 4th century AD and continued for hundreds of years. For most Scandinavian peoples the process did not start until the 9th century AD and again continued for at least a hundred years. It is not possible to perform a univariable analysis of the Christianization of these people groups because each nation and tribe had its own reasons as did different kings and within the centuries long transition there were also different motivations during different centuries. This essay is not about analyzing the many factors that were at play in these transitions so it will suffice to say that it was a complex and long process. This essay is looking into the mythos of these people groups as a whole—the mythos of gift-giving, kingship, and the ideal king. The mythos of gift-giving was specifically associated with the celebrations surrounding winter solstice. During this transition into Christianity people still kept their Yule traditions and many still do today, over a thousand years later.

⁵² Treharne, Elaine M. 2004. *Old and Middle English C.890-c.1400 : An Anthology*. Malden, Ma: Blackwell Pub.

Yule

Yule was a pre-Christian winter festival celebrated by Germanic and Nordic peoples. The exact origins and practices of Yule are not fully known. What is known is that Yule was an important midwinter event that aligned with the Winter Solstice.

Yule focused on feasting together and burning a Yule log representing light and warmth in the cold and dark northern winters. The timing of the Winter Solstice is important because it also is symbolic of the transition in winter where, from that point forward, the daylight would grow longer and the dark winter was waning—the light was coming into the world. These cultural practices of Yule were easily adapted into Christianity and the celebration of Christmas. Both Yule and Christmas celebrated the light of the world, the idea of birth and rebirth, and the invasion of light and renewal into a world of darkness and death. The feasting honored Christ the ultimate ring-giver, rather than the Germanic/Nordic gods.

The contextualization of Yule into Christmas was one of fulfillment and evolution—the symbols were consistent and the main change was the object of worship. The great ring-giver gave the greatest gift to humankind—the light of the world had come and that was worth celebrating.

Legacy and Transformation of Cultural Ideals

Yule is an example of the ways in which the gift-giving nature of Germanic/Nordic kingship and social expectation presented fertile ground for religious conversion to Christianity. But these transitions into Christianity made their regions Christians unique in their festivities and practice as does almost all contextualization. Looking back to the expectations of kings it is important to note that the idea of gift-giving and incarnational leadership in early Northern European Christianity expanded to include religious leaders as well. It is interesting to see how the role of a Christian priest or bishop did not adapt to the role of a seiar (shaman) but more took upon itself a kingly role. Christian clergy were expected to live and die with their congregants as the Germanic and Nordic kings had done and continued to do. As Ben Merkle points out in *The White Horse King*, “Anglo-Saxon Britain had, of course, a very different set of expectations for their clergy than that of the modern church. Priests and bishops were expected to be leaders of men, and this obligation didn’t vanish during times of war. Thus Anglo-Saxon armies were often commanded by members of the clergy who, like Heahmund, fought and died along with the men of their

parishes.”⁵³ This historical fact challenges the popular portrayal of the warriors of the north being subdued by pacifist clergy. The clergy of the early Christians in Northern Europe were warriors and found no prohibition to leading their congregants in justified war. After all, if Jesus voluntarily left the privilege of heaven and incarnated among His people, being obedient to death, then how could a leader among Jesus’ church do anything different?

The warrior king leadership of the Christian clergy suggests a possible answer to the question to why Germanic/Nordic peoples lived less violent lives but were not pacifists. Even nearly a thousand years after the introduction of Christianity, the empires involved in the 30 Years War recognized the prowess of Swedish and Norman warriors. Yet there was a cultural change when Christianity was introduced and made normative. What was it? The answer suggested here is that the change was in the source of honor. Given that Christ gave the ring-giver’s gift of ultimate honor, being adopted into the family of the one true God, the need for honor based killing and retribution decreased. The concept of defensive violence did not end—even the priests and bishops fought to defend their lands and families. But the need to kill in order to save face was no longer seen as necessary. Forgiveness, not pacifism, was the innovation. Freedom from shame, not bondage to dovishness renewed the Germanic and Nordic cultures.

This is reinforced by the self-expressed motivations of the German people prior to World War II. Many Germans who supported the maniacal violence of Hitler did so because of a sense of honor. The idea of honor coming from Christ had become out of vogue in the decades leading up to World War I and its aftermath. Culture shifted yet again and this time away from Christ as the source of honor. Germans sought honor in the abstract article of “the fatherland”, and not in the gift of the ring-giver. Simone de Beauvoir recounts the following in an interaction between herself and Sartre in the time between the World Wars:

A German approached us: around forty years old, with a black cap on his head, a gloomy face; after a few banalities, he told us that he had served in the 14-18 war as a sergeant; his tone rose little by little: “If there is a new war,” he said, “we will not be the vanquished: we will regain honor. >> Sartre replied that there was no need for war: we should all want peace. “Honor comes first,” said the sergeant. First, we want to regain honor. » His fanatical voice worried me. A veteran is necessarily militaristic, I thought to reassure myself; all the same, how many were there to live with their gaze fixed on the moment of the great revenge?

⁵³ Merkle, Benjamin R. 2009. *The White Horse King*. Thomas Nelson. “Chapter 3: The Battle of Ashdown.”

I had never seen hatred burst forth on a face in such a triumphant way. Throughout this trip, I tried to forget him without success.⁵⁴

The German's fixed gaze upon revenge was due to a 19th century reliance on the fatherland as the source of honor. The results of coveting honor apart from the great ring-giver was one of the greatest acts of collective violence known in these cultures to date.

Conclusion

The Christian narrative in the New Testament resonates deeply with Germanic/Nordic traditions, making the integration and acceptance of Christianity within these societies as consistent with their prior culture. These include parallels between the Germanic/Nordic ring-giver (king) and God's ring-giving nature ultimately through the gift of Jesus to the world. The life of Jesus, while offensive culturally in some aspects, ultimately finds itself as the fulfillment of the Germanic/Nordic kingly archetype. Yule is an example of how fulfillment focused contextualization took place and is still celebrated today. What we saw as well was a religious, kingly leadership class in Christianity that did not mirror the pre-Christian religious cast but focused more on a holistic leadership approach that reimagined the priest and bishop as a leader of men. This leadership and incarnational approach to priests and bishops made sense in a culture where ring-giving and incarnational living was not expected only of an elite religious class but of all capable members. Since the priests and bishops were members of the kingdom they too were to live as Christ lived, that is to say, live as the king lived.

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, Simone de, 1908-1986. 1960. *La Force De L'age*. [Paris]: Gallimard. Page 221, translated into English.

Original French: Un Allemand nous aborda : une quarantaine d'années, sur la tête une casquette noire, un visage morose ; après quelques banalités, il nous dit qu'il avait fait la guerre 14-18 comme sergent ; son ton se monta peu à peu : « S'il y a une nouvelle guerre, ditil, nous ne serons pas les vaincus : nous retrouverons l'honneur, » Sartre répondit qu'il ne fallait pas de guerre : nous devons tous souhaiter la paix. « L'honneur passe d'abord, dit le sergent. D'abord, nous voulons retrouver l'honneur. » Sa voix fanatique m'inquiéta. Un ancien combattant, c'est forcément militariste, pensais-je pour me rassurer; tout de même, combien étaient-ils à vivre le regard fixé sur le moment de la grande revanche ? Jamais je n'avais vu la haine éclater sur un visage d'une manière si triomphante. Pendant tout ce voyage, j'essayai de l'oublier sans y parvenir.

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