

# Beyond Candy Cane Lane

BY F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.

**Our Christmas cheer turns sour as mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities overwhelm us. Buying fair-trade gifts and celebrating Christmas within the context of the Christian year are two humble practices for disentangling the holy day from consumerism.**

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Sometime in November we sense the approach of Christmas. Sounds of the season—caroling, cantatas, and holiday tunes—begin to float from schools and churches, echo on street corners and in shopping malls, and beam from every radio station. Evening television is populated again with holiday classics, Christmas specials, and a cast of beloved imaginary characters—Rudolph, Frosty, and Charlie Brown. And we espy specimens of the season’s most prominent personality, the grandfatherly gift-giver himself, jolly old Saint Nicholas. We may nod in approval as Perry Como croons “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.”

Yet this holiday cheer can turn sour all too easily, and Christmas become anything but a magical season of celebration and fellowship. Scott Cairn’s *Advent* captures this shift in mood:

Well, it *was* beginning to look a lot like Christmas—everywhere, children eyeing the bright lights and colorful goods, traffic a good deal worse than usual, and most adults in view looking a little puzzled, blinking their eyes against the assault of stammering bulbs and public displays of goodwill. We were *all* embarrassed, frankly—the haves *and* the have-nots—all of us aware something had gone far wrong with an entire season, something had eluded us. And, well, it was *strenuous*, trying to recall what it was that had charmed us so, back when we were much smaller and more obli-

vious than not concerning the weather, mass marketing, the insufficiently hidden faces behind those white bears and other jolly gear. And there was something else: a general diminishment whose symptoms included the Xs in Xmas, shortened tempers, and the aggressive abandon with which most celebrants seemed to push their shiny cars about. All of this seemed to accumulate like wet snow, or like the fog with which our habitual inversion tried to choke us, or to blank us out altogether, so that, of a given night, all that appeared over the mess we had made of the season was what might be described as a nearly obscured radiance, just visible through the gauze, either the moon disguised by a winter veil, or some lost star—isolated, distant, sadly dismissing of us, and of all our expertly managed scene.<sup>1</sup>

Mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities can utterly overwhelm the strongest person. For too many of the weak and alone, especially shut-ins and convalescents, Christmas brings well-intentioned, yet fleeting, songs of carolers in an otherwise open calendar of painful solitude. Yes, something has indeed “gone far wrong with an entire season.”



In a small town not far from where I grew up in southern Illinois, immediately following Thanksgiving a typical middle-class neighborhood transforms into Candy Cane Lane—the region’s largest display of lights, seasonal greetings, holiday characters, and manger scenes. Spectator-packed vehicles throng to tour this street and admire its decorations. The diffuse glow in the surrounding night sky over Candy Cane Lane that marks the celebratory excess of America’s real religion, consumer capitalism, obscures the radiance of the Infant’s star.

As surely as the season brings excessive decorations, so too does it ring in the year’s most unrestrained shopping spree. And then we endure the inevitable, annual backlash of sermons, letters to the editor, magazine articles, and catchy bumper stickers frantically reminding us to “Put Christ back in Christmas” because “Jesus is the Reason for the Season.”

Bemoaning this commercialization of Christmas in the U.S. is nearly as old a tradition as is gift-giving. “In about 1830,” notes historian Stephen Nissenbaum, “the literature of Christmas in America began to change. Before that date it dealt chiefly with questions of social disorder. Afterward, a new concern emerged, an anxiety about private selfishness and greedy consumerism, especially as those issues affected children.”<sup>2</sup>

Christmas celebrations in early America often were very different from today’s family-oriented affairs. Instead of sentimental occasions for gift-giving or well-wishing, they were more akin to *Mardi Gras* in New Orleans.

People celebrated by indulging in alcohol, food, promiscuity, “mumming” (cross-dressing accompanied by sexual antics), and wassailing (*demanding* gifts from superiors, often with the threat of violence). It was an opportunity for social inversion during which the poor would invade the homes of the wealthy and demand gifts of food, drink, and money. “Give us some figgy pudding, we won’t go until we get some,” was more than an expression of boisterous gaiety; it was a thinly veiled threat from a band of boys and young men bursting into your parlor!

It occasioned such outrageous public disorder that some Protestants, particularly the New England Puritans, tried to stamp out the Christmas holiday altogether. They quickly pointed out (and rightly so) that Scripture doesn’t give a date for Christ’s birth and that December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen by the early church to “Christianize” pagan religious feasts that occurred during the winter solstice. But as the Puritans discovered, eradicating Christmas observances and their offensive revelry was an effort in futility.

As northeastern cities grew into industrialized urban centers crowded with large immigrant, working-class populations, unruly Christmas and New Year celebrations became ever greater causes of concern. A group of New York elites struck upon a solution: they decided to reinvent the holiday! Nissenbaum recounts how these Knickerbockers transformed a season of raucous public mayhem into one of domestic gift-giving. Their success lay in *inventing* nostalgic traditions of home and hearth. The principle means of achieving this was through the creation of Santa Claus, an invented character that soon included his own history, geography (the North Pole), and cast of supporting characters (elves, reindeer, and eventually a Mrs.). The most successful literary vehicle in this transformation was Clement Moore’s “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” written in 1823. Moore’s poem captured the hearts of adults and children alike. Within a few years, retailers were using Santa Claus to promote shopping and gift-giving. Once this commercialization took root, as early as the 1830s, helped along by the rise of advertising, marketing, and the industrial production of goods, it was only a matter of time until consumerism replaced public rowdiness and drowned out the angelic chorus announcing the Newborn King.<sup>3</sup>



We enjoy exchanging gifts with loved ones and, truthfully, there is nothing wrong with gift-giving. Yet, as James Tracy notes, “storming the malls to purchase the new toy craze [our] children demand as the result of a television advertising blitz constitutes markedly different cultural content than does gift exchange.”<sup>4</sup> It reveals the triumph of an ethos of consumerism—an insatiable appetite to acquire merchandise, the conviction that our happiness lies in the next purchase, the sense that life’s highest good is the accumulation of material possessions, and the belief that what we own de-

defines our worth. It's behaving as though we are, as the bumper sticker declares, "Born to Shop!"

This consumerist perspective invades the church too. "Across the spectrum of church life, both liberal and conservative," observes Walter Brueggemann, "the contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or act."<sup>5</sup> We live as *de facto* consumers in nearly every aspect of our lives. We consume entertainment, education, healthcare, politics, and worship. All of this pulls apart the spiritual fabric that binds us together in ways that cannot be quantified, packaged, marketed, bought, or sold.

What challenges Christians in America "is not just that we have become consumers," says Stanley Hauerwas, "but that we can conceive of no alternative [ways of living] since we lack any practices that could make such [alternatives possible]."<sup>6</sup> We have so embraced the gospel of the American Dream, which says we need a big house, new car, nice clothes, and comfortable lifestyle to be happy, that we cannot think of living any differently. We have forgotten, domesticated, or simply ignored the radical call in biblical stories and songs to be peacemakers, care for the poor, live simply, and serve others. In ancient Israel, when God's people forgot their true vocation as a nation of priests to the world, the Lord sent prophets to awaken them from their stupor. [They] *criticized* cultural beliefs and practices that seduced God's people and *energized* them with prophetic speech and action to live differently from the dominant culture.<sup>7</sup>

Keeping with this prophetic model, let's consider two courses of action—shopping subversively and rooting our holiday festivities within the Christian

year—that can *energize* our celebration of Christmas and our critical engagement with the culture of consumerism.

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A quiet revolution is spreading over the country, even reaching into quiet little Elm Mott, Texas. At World Hunger Relief's Village Store you can purchase picture frames from India, Christmas ornaments from Bangladesh, candles from Mexico, tribal masks from Kenya, musical instruments from Cameroon, kitchenware from Haiti, and coffee from El Salvador and

Tanzania. There are also children's toys, jewelry, baskets, wind chimes, household and holiday decorations, and organically-grown teas from all over the world. The revolution is that these are *fair-trade* goods from artisans and farmers in developing countries.

Fair-trade employs market processes similar to free-trade, but conducts business according to a different set of principles and practices. Everyone

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is familiar with free-trade system abuses that occur apart from adequate legal protections or ethical practices—sweatshops, environmental devastation, or the exploitation of economically-disadvantaged workers. Fair-trade avoids these abuses by being thoroughly committed to long-term, sustainable economic growth that encourages social development. It is defined by seven funda-

mental practices: fair wages, cooperative workplaces, consumer education, environmental sustainability, financial and technical support for workers and their communities, respect for indigenous cultural identity, and public accountability.<sup>8</sup> Profit is important in fair trade, but only as a means to helping people and communities flourish. As much as forty percent of a fair-trade item's retail price is returned to the producer and reinvested in community development projects like education, healthcare, sanitation, or micro-loan programs. Buying fair-trade gifts is one way of shopping subversively. It can be a refreshing alternative to storming the shopping malls.

We can root Christmas in the seasons of the Christian year by allowing the church's calendar to shape our celebrations. In an academic calendar, Christmas is “time off” sandwiched between semesters; in the secular calendar, it's the crown jewel of a year-ending triad of holidays, Thanksgiving-Christmas-New Year's Eve. Only the church calendar places Christmas in its true context—following the penitential season of Advent and before the redemptive events of Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Worshiping through these seasons of the church calendar richly shapes our lives by keeping us ever-mindful of God's divine drama. “Just as the Hebrew year focused upon holy days and seasons which were constant reminders of God's covenant,” Norman Maring notes, “so our observance of the Christian year,” which pivots on the central events of Jesus' life and our response to them, “would help to surround us with reminders of the

lordship of Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The Christian year preserves us from slipping into sentimental or secular celebrations of Christmas by reminding us that the significance of Christmas is revealed in Lent’s overshadowing event. “Why lies He in such mean estate, / Where ox and ass are feeding?” asks William Dix in the beloved hymn “What Child Is This?” and the answer is found at Calvary:

Good Christians, fear, for sinners here  
the silent Word is pleading.  
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,  
the cross be borne for me, for you.  
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

In a provocatively titled chapter, “Let the Pagans Have the Holiday,” Rodney Clapp suggests the best way for Christians to reclaim Christmas is by first reclaiming Easter. “To put it another way,” he explains, “we could be Christians without the stories of Christmas, but not without the stories of Easter.”<sup>10</sup> Clapp’s point is worth keeping in mind, for as startling to contemporary sensibilities as it may be, celebrating Christ’s birth was of relatively little importance for the early church, which was far more concerned with his life, death, resurrection, and promised return. Only in the fourth century did the nascent Roman Catholic Church establish December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date to observe Christ’s birth in the west. Christmas soon competed with Easter and Epiphany, the two most significant days of the year, for preeminence.<sup>11</sup> Prior to this, celebrating Jesus’ birth was, at best, a distant third among Christian holy days. By the end of the sixth century, Advent developed as a four-week season of repentance and preparation for the threefold mystery of Christ’s coming—as a human baby; in worship through Word, Sacrament, and Spirit; and in his promised future return in judgment and glory. If we would reconsider, with Easter-eyes, our celebration of Christmas, we might resist culture’s offering of salvation in marketed goods, and receive and share in the gift of the Christ child.

Buying fair-trade gifts and celebrating Christmas within the context of the Christian year are but two humble, yet promising, practices for energizing our observance of this holy day and disentangling it from consumerism. They can help us transform our cluttered celebrations and make plain to our culture the Infant’s star, which always shines.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION ON FAIR TRADE**

For over fifty years the fair trade movement has been helping consumers locate products from companies that deal fairly with their producers. The movement began after World War II when churches sold handcrafts made by refugees in Europe. The official certification of fair trade products

began in the Netherlands in 1988 as a response to plummeting prices in the world coffee market. The Max Havelaar Foundation formed that year and began offering a “Fair Trade” label to any coffee company willing to trade a portion of their volume on fair trade terms. Today, Fair Trade certified products such as coffee, bananas, tea, chocolate, honey, sugar, and orange juice are available in stores throughout Europe and the U.S.

The following organizations provide updated information on fair trade products and retailers: International Federation of Alternative Trade ([www.ifat.org](http://www.ifat.org)), Transfair USA ([www.transfairusa.org](http://www.transfairusa.org)), Fair Trade Federation ([www.fairtradefederation.org](http://www.fairtradefederation.org)), Co-op America ([www.sweatshops.org](http://www.sweatshops.org)), SERV International ([www.servv.org](http://www.servv.org)), Ten Thousand Villages ([www.villages.ca](http://www.villages.ca)), and Equal Exchange ([www.equalexchange.com](http://www.equalexchange.com)).

## NOTES

1 Scott Cairns, *Philokalia* (Lincoln, NB: Zoo Press, 2002), 117. Reprinted with permission of the author and Zoo Press.

2 Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 176.

3 On the nineteenth century, see Nissenbaum’s *The Battle for Christmas*. For the story in the twentieth century, see Richard Horsley and James Tracy’s *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

4 Horsley and Tracy, *Christmas Unwrapped*, 5.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

6 Stanley Hauerwas, “No Enemy, No Christianity: Theology and Preaching Between Worlds” in Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz, eds., *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jurgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 32.

7 Brueggemann explores these two prophetic tasks in *The Prophetic Imagination*.

8 These seven practices are the criteria for membership in the Fair Trade Federation ([www.fairtradefederation.org/memcrit.html](http://www.fairtradefederation.org/memcrit.html), accessed August 28, 2003).

9 Norman H. Maring, *The Christian Calendar in the Free Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1967), 10.

10 Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 81.

11 Little consensus about Jesus’ birth date existed in the church prior to this decision. For a detailed account, see Susan K. Roll’s *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995), and “Christmas,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume III ([www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm), accessed August 28, 2003).



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