

A Child Is Born

Nazareth , Israel is a town of about 40,000 inhabitants, with Arab Christians in the majority. During the 60's its was governed by the only Arab communist mayor in the entire Middle East.

It was on December 1st in the year 196-something -or- other,

(Gregorian calendar, that the administration of Nazareth decreed the formal abolition of Christmas. The Party's patience had finally run out: why should enlightened Marxists permit the continuing existence of such relics of feudal decadence? Since Israel is nominally democratic, (no more nor less than the United States), Nazareth could not prevent Christian pilgrims or tourists from visiting the town to pay their respects. Henceforth, however, they could expect to receive neither acknowledgment nor encouragement from the town government.

A combination of factors had made it impossible for them to take action sooner than they did. These included : 3,000 years of theocratic absolutism endemic to all the peoples of the region; the lucrative revenues from Christian pilgrims that swelled the coffers one month out of twelve; the obscene industrial and military might of the Christian West; and the political power of Israel's Russian Jews who were unanimous in giving short shrift to communism in any shape or form.

Yet orthodox Marxists, like the orthodox of all faiths, chaffing under the reign of heretic or infidel , will feel compelled to assert their will at the first opportunity. A committee of radical atheists headed by the mayor pushed through a series of bills that were clearly designed to make Christian pilgrims pay handsomely for the privilege of being reminded every five minutes that they weren't welcome.

New ordinances prohibited non-residents of Nazareth from parking their vehicles in the city's streets. This law, and others of a similar intent, was selectively enforced. Tourists were invited to use the parking lots maintained by the city, charging exorbitant rates; or they were directed to the heights of Upper Nazareth to the east, where they could park then walk the long distances to the Church of the Annunciation and other sacred sites. The police were rewarded for their liberality in handing out tickets during all religious holidays; fines and court costs were appropriately outrageous.

Some of the grievances of these regional leftists had long histories. They'd been fulminating for years against the devastation wrought by the deluge of Nativity reconstructions. It cost the city a fortune every year to clean up these dangerous obstructions to motor and pedestrian circulation. All through December and beyond into the New Year, horse, cow, sheep, ass and camel dung would cover the roads with a thick slippery blanket. At the same time the appearance of the downtown was disfigured by hideous mountains of pious and sanctimonious kitsch. Another ordinance therefore forbade the presence of livestock in the streets of Nazareth during the months of December and January. It was also forbidden to sell palm fronds for Palm Sunday, or to parade through the streets with a crucifix at any time; people caught doing so were shipped off to the mental hospital in Haifa.

Hotels, motels and hostels were hit with a seasonal 'tourism tax', with the result that only Rothschild - who, not being Christian was not likely to pay a visit at this time - could have afforded the rents they were obliged to charge. Camping-out remained as the only option, with the city, once again, maintaining a monopoly over all camping sites. Police and security guards were quick to harass or ticket anyone caught sleeping outdoors in a sleeping bag or hammock. Such things as midnight raids on mobile homes, justified by flimsy suspicions of illegal drug activity, were common. To further broadcast the message that there would indeed be no room at the inn, all the hostels and shelters were closed during the Christian holidays for disinfection and repairs.

The revolutionary purists on the town council eventually stepped over the line. The Party's resident ideologist, coincidentally editor of Nazareth's communist daily, was an eminent scholar with a doctorate from Moscow University. In the first week of December he published a two-page editorial in the form of a lecture on Marxist-Leninist fundamentals. Book, chapter and verse were cited to explain how, under capitalism all economic transactions are psychologically alienating. What, therefore, could be more loathsome than merchants who enrich themselves by exploiting superstitions, to which they themselves do not subscribe!

A few days after the appearance of this editorial, the police raided every souvenir and gift shop owned by professed Jews, Moslems, Druze, Ba'hai, communists, atheists, or otherwise non-Christians. All merchandise being held in readiness for the influx of Christian pilgrims was confiscated: relics,

souvenirs, breviaries, devotional literature, postcards, trinkets, statuettes, etc. Businesses were fined, shopkeepers arrested or even beaten up! (Middle Eastern fanatics have never been accused of being couch potatoes.) Their stock, now designated contraband, was carted to the city dump. After being piled in great heaps and soaked in gasoline, it was burned less than a week before Christmas in a grand auto-da-fé that lasted through the night .

This could only mean war. At all the major intersections of downtown Nazareth barricades blossomed like cactus flowers in the Negev . Automobiles, torched , spewing dense jets of black smoke, cantered down the avenues in a wake of exploding shrapnel towards the police brigades . Rains of stones, Molotov cocktails and tear-gas canisters blackened the sky. The same fierce divisions of loyalty that had erupted among the citizenry reigned within the ranks of the police themselves. Riot control collapsed as many of them abandoned their posts to run off and join their religious or political comrades. In a country like Israel, the threat of Civil War was all too easily imagined. In an emergency session the Knesset authorized Nazareth's occupation by the National Guard .

The arrival of the early dawn light on the morning of December 24th revealed little in the external disposition of the streets of Nazareth that might confirm the promise, made so many centuries ago, of " Peace On Earth, Good Will Towards Men. " The grim staccatos of automatic weaponry punctuated the sky, while flares of sparks, smoke and metal wove patterns as exotic as any Oriental tapestry. Mortar bursts , whines and thuds of exploding shells, the wailing fire sirens, and shrieking ambulance klaxons danced in syncopation with the screams of the wounded and the shouts of militants. As the day progressed, an unflagging convoy of truckloads came rolling into the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, carrying more artillery than there was to be found in any other settlement of comparable size throughout the state of Israel. With the coming of twilight, each confession bunkered down on its own bitterly wrested domain for the People's Revolution, or Armageddon, or whatever perverse mixture of the two, the final battle of Good and Evil to take place on Christmas Day.

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For the select group huddled about the color TV console in The Seraphic Bagel , Heaven's kosher delicatessen , every stage in the escalating nightmare was the cue for renewed exclamations of horror and dismay . Thus did Moses, Marx and Christ receive the news from

Nazareth , broadcast live on the NBC evening news. In a far corner of the deli, dressed in a seedy jacket, baggy trousers and moth eaten sweater, his head wreathed in a halo of pipe smoke, sat Albert Einstein . An order of bagels, cream cheese and lox at his left hand remained all but untouched. With a recent physics journal open on the table before him, totally absorbed and lost to the cosmos, he was working out an endless train of computations.

" Forgive them, for they know not what they do ! " Christ wept , more in sorrow than in anger. Moses stood up and began nervously pacing the floor. He scowled, then said: "You want to know something, Jesus?" I've never fully agreed with that old standby of yours; I know that you like to drag it out all occasions. Don't forget, I was the one who said " Thou shalt not kill ! " Those people down there must have some idea that what they're doing is wrong ! "

Marx face was suffused in turn by annoyance and pain: "Beliefs are conditioned by economic necessity. ", he wheezed, his voice sour as if giving a lesson to a class of unruly children, " That mayor doesn't understand one word of anything I ever wrote ! "

" Oh - I wonder why that is? " Christ snapped, his voice oily with sarcasm , " I doubt he's ever read anything of yours. Who has the time to get through them ? Your books, Karl, are - well, I don't want to say 'unreadable', because I am taken as a model for compassion in much of the world - but I don't know anybody who reads them. It's a miracle , (and I know something about those, too) , that you've any followers at all! Ah , Karl! If you only knew how hard I had to work to put my ideas into parables so simple than every kid could understand them...As it is written, " Christ became solemn, almost sacerdotal, while he intoned:

" ...'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise.'..... "

This comment brought Moses to a dead stop. With rising fury he pointed his right index finger towards the TV screen: " Look here, Jesus!" he stormed, " Are you trying to tell me you're not responsible for this mess!"

" Pipe down, Moses!" Marx snarled, " We ALL share the responsibility for it : Me! You! Christ! Mohammed over there in the Arab quarter! " Don't try to shift the blame for the inevitable process of dialectical materialism onto the shoulders of individuals ! "

" Sheep may safely grave... ", Christ moaned, humming the tune of the celebrated Bach aria, with sadness in his demeanor and a despondent air. Each of them sat around, distracted and oppressed, burdened with guilt from his sense of complicity in the seemingly irreversible tragedy enveloping Nazareth. Consequently none of them realized ,until he stood right before them that Einstein had gotten up and come over to join them.

"Pardon me", he said, " I couldn't help noticing how upset you've become. Can I be of help?"

With humility seasoned by long-practiced eloquence , Christ relinquished his place. Einstein sat down before the TV to watch an interview with officials from Nazareth and the Israeli government conducted by Jean Farnsworth for the MacNeil- Lehrer News Hour.

" This is serious. " he sighed, every bit as depressed as the rest of them.

"And there's nothing we can do!" Christ sobbed. " My God! My God! Why hast thou - "

Marx's hands rose to cover his ears : "Please!"

" All sound and fury - signifying nothing ! " Moses thundered , and smote the TV console with a mighty blow. Einstein was no longer listening . He'd taken out a journal from a side pocket , and was now churning out equations with demonic energy. Sometimes he ripped out a few pages and started over again . He must have worked without interruption for about 20 minutes before he looked up to get the attention of his friends. None of them had ever distinguished themselves as mathematicians ; they sat silently, regarding him with awe, even a certain amount of fear. Marx's face had in addition taken on a green tinge of envy.

Einstein smiled, as a person might do over a joke, the point of which can be known only to himself : "Their situation down there may not be altogether hopeless. " He put down his pen, and began talking. Every few minutes he pausing, groping for language appropriate to his audience in which to cast his explanations :

" The laws of Space-Time are exactly the same up here , in Heaven , as they are down on Earth. Take the electronics of this television set: there can be no better example. While you were arguing a moment ago I was sitting back there reading the latest issue of Physics Letters , Series A. They've found ways down there of playing around with Time that I couldn't have imagined in my salad days among them - all that 'gauge theory' stuff that came in right after I left... Lie groups... fiber bundles ...Yang-

Mills fields...String Theory.....Wormholes strike me as particularly suited to our purposes... Hmmm.. Schwarzschild necks...Kerr metrics! Well, maybe.....Cosmic gravitons...Superstrings! UGH! ... Awful stuff.. I warned them that God doesn't play dice ...Now I realize that they don't know the half of what He does with His spare time!...Well..." Einstein redoubled his labors. He canceled 196 terms. Then he extracted 34 integrals; inverted an 88x88 matrix; tried out 76 original hypotheses; all in less than an hour. When, smiling broadly, he once more raised his face, it was to Christ alone that he directed his questions:

" Jesus ", he said , " Is there anything that might persuade you - I know you have bad memories of the place - to make a return visit?"

And thus did it come to pass that, at 10 P.M., Christmas Eve, in the year 196-something-or-other, (Gregorian calendar) , that a woman strong in the faith of Abraham, (of whom many generations of ancestors had, by unlikely though not improbable fortune, resided in the land of Canaan - (at least on the feminine side)) , was lowered from an ambulance and, bound to a stretcher, quickly transported through the side entrance of the Emergency Ward of Nazareth General Hospital. She was taken to the Obstetrics Ward. There, after a spontaneous parthenogenesis lasting two hours she gave birth at the stroke of midnight to a choleric, garrulous, doctrinaire yet wondrously sweet-natured 5-pound baby. By consensus of all persons present he was named : "Jesus".

15 minutes later the Marxist administration of Nazareth re-instated Christmas.

The news was immediately broadcast throughout the world by all the means of communication known to the 196-something-or-others' : word of mouth, telegram, telephone, newspapers, radio, television. Jews, Moslems , Christians, communists, capitalists and whatever other factional malcontents had established defensive outposts in the city, lay down their weapons, shook hands with their enemies, and headed back to their homes, presumably to turkey dinners. There to await,

after a reasonable length of

time,

the next

PARADIGM!

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