

## *From the Kitchen*

23 December 2009



I've never understood the ability of some people to see the likeness of Jesus or the Virgin Mary in a piece of burnt toast or in a banana peel, especially as no two-thousand-year-old likenesses exist of either of them. I've not heard of a Muslim discovering images of Mohammed in a falafel or of a Jew seeing Abraham on a matzo (although, on their fiftieth birthday, some Jews declare that they have finally seen Abraham).

I'd actually like to see Lao-tse in a lychee.

We need new songs to sing at this time of the year. For example:

Insanity clause we believe  
Truculent loads toy with us  
Crisp moose trees we retrieve  
Pulleys to the buoy with us ...

You get the drift. The more alcohol we consume, the more interesting the words.

Christmas, Easter, ANZAC Day: days for remembering and reflecting. Yet, for so many, these are seen as opportunities to get blind drunk. Perhaps they are times for forgetting.

We have certainly forgotten much about why many of these times are celebrated. Many of the Christian festivals are, of course, layered on top of much older 'pagan' festivals – temporally at least, although they also still borrow from some of them.

The timing of Christmas and Easter are particularly good examples. Christmas is celebrated close to the solstice, which in the northern hemisphere equals the shortest day. The lighting of a pine or similar tree heralded the return of the light in the far north.

Easter is a movable feast. I understand that Good Friday falls on the first Friday after the first full moon after the 21<sup>st</sup> March (the equinox). The timing is based on the lunar calendar, which is closer to the female principle, as opposed to the (male) solar calendar we now use. The giving of or hunting for Easter eggs is an old fertility ritual, which makes sense at the start of the (northern) spring. The (Easter) bunny is also a fertility symbol.

While on the subject of things pagan, I am intrigued by the thinly-veiled animism practised by many Christians. That is how I see their entreaties to the saints, of which there are hundreds. Each saint is connected with a date and often with an aspect of life, or an occupation or an activity. This is similar to the beliefs in many 'primitive' societies, where various spiritual entities are invoked at different times of the year and for different purposes. Are we so much more sophisticated?

None of this is meant as a denigration of people's beliefs. Beliefs about how the universe works are an essential part of each individual's life. They provide a guide to behaviour, if nothing else, and to most people they offer much more. I am, however, critical of hypocrisy,

especially if it dresses something up as other than it is and, more insidiously, when those perpetrating the hypocrisy demean others' beliefs.

Christmas is a very confusing time. It is meant to be a spiritual celebration for Christians, but has been hijacked by cynical businesspeople out to make a buck. There are, for instance, complaints from retailers that people are not spending as much this year. The retailers are blaming economic factors but, maybe, it could have something to do with many people recognising the excessive commercialism, especially in the light of the recent economic fiasco and the involvement of most Australians in the giving of a total of more than three hundred million dollars after the February fires.

It is also useful to reflect that Saint Nicholas has nothing to do with Christmas. His birthday was traditionally celebrated around the 5<sup>th</sup> December by the giving of small, often hand-made, presents. As the venerable man came from around the Mediterranean, he is unlikely to have ever travelled by reindeer-drawn sleigh. When I was a child in the Netherlands, we received gifts on the Saint's birthday and it was a largely secular event and was enjoyed by people of many faiths. Christmas was the later festival celebrated by Christians.

I would welcome a complete abandonment of Christmas and Easter as commercial free-for-all events (though they are far from free for anyone), with a return of spiritual festivals to those for whom they have meaning, be they Jews, Muslims, pagans, Wiccans, Buddhists, Hindus or Christians. Let's put Santa Claus where he belongs.

I'm glad it will soon be January. And, for those of you who are looking forward to the next opportunity to indulge gastronomically, Easter eggs and hot cross buns should be on the supermarket shelves in about three weeks.