

Daily Meditation 12-15-25

Prophetic Responses to ICE: Mangers with a Message & a Non-Sentimental Christmas

Good morning. A blessed Hanukkah to everybody, the Feast of Lights, the Feast of miracles, one of many in the Jewish tradition: Being rescued from annihilation, from despots, various kinds and various moments in history. The light candles burn on in hope people's hearts.

In today's meditation, we're talking about recent events in Advent in preparation for Christmas, and how certain churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have individually chosen to stand up and address the injustices, the terror being waged on the most vulnerable among us, including immigrants, especially immigrants. And I end the meditation with reference to the sentimentalizing of Christmas.

So what I want to wish everybody today is a non-sentimental Hanukkah and a non-sentimental Christmas in these last days of Advent.

And I call on one of the most important books in my life, actually, a very important book to me, personally and politically. And that is the excellent study by the sociologist Anne Douglas, entitled *The Feminization of American Culture*. With the subtitle, *How the Victorian alliance between women and the clergy, and the popular literature to which that alliance gave birth, fostered a sentimental society and the beginnings of modern mass culture*. A very, very important book written in 1977.

And I was so struck by it that I wrote a major essay about it, a long review in 1978 in *Spirituality Today* magazine. And that is the essay that I chose to end my book of essays, *Wrestling with the Prophets: Essays on Creation Spirituality in Everyday Life*. It is a conclusion chapter, and for a very good reason. Because, as she points out, a sentimentalism has accompanied the mass culture and consumer culture in America, which, of course, has only crescendoed since she wrote in the 1970s, and since the late 19th century, when, as she points out, consumer culture took over in great part, where women's role was no longer participating in the making of garments, but in shopping for them and so forth--how mass culture and industrialization really brought sentimentalism in.

What is really interesting to me is, it's quite a long book, and she does not define sentimentalism until about page 254. On page 254 she says, quote:

Sentimentalism might be defined as the political sense obfuscated or gone rancid. The political sense obfuscated or gone rancid. Sentimentalism, unlike the modes of genuine sensibility, never exists except in tandem with failed political consciousness. Failed political consciousness.

So she sees sentimentalism as a substitute for justice, and it gathers feeling, irrespective of critical thinking. And something as deep and profound as Christmas and its meaning, can gather sentimentalism about it, and in doing so, missing the whole point. And I think that is why these prophetic incursions by a Catholic Church and some Protestants in Massachusetts and some Protestant churches in the Chicago area, are so important today. They awaken us to the realities of what's going on, and how contrary they are to the teachings of Jesus, mythically, on December 25. (By mythically, I mean we don't know his birth date.)

But we also want to point out that Carl Jung says of sentimentalism, *You scratch the surface of sentimentalism and you get violence. Violence and sentimentalism are the convex and the concave of the same surface.* So that too has to be underscored. The appeal to violence, which is obviously what ICE is incarnating and demonstrating on a daily basis, and the politicians who are shouting for this kind of violence, that sentimentalism is built into that. And that's why you want to shed light on sentimentalism: you want to call out about sentimentalism. Because this is part of the pathway to deconstructing violence, getting to the deeper passions in our soul, which are not to harm others (or need not be), but our passions of compassion and of justice. We are born with a yearning for justice and for caring and for peace.

So she lays out what I call the Seven Sins of Sentimentalism. The first is Materialism, that is to say, subject/object relationships, which is essential to consumer-oriented society. These give rise to energies of sentimentalism. She says, *Advertising is the only faith for a secularized consumer society. It is a faith. It is a belief system.* And women, especially are taught to *buy or direct the buying of everything from shoes to shingles. The feminine occupation of shopping, Douglas says, constitutes the dream life of the nation.* The dream life of the nation. Thomas Berry also talks about that: the illusions, the illusionary world of consumerism.

The second dimension to sentimentalism is Anti-Intellectualism. Indeed, the loss of critical caring or thinking requires, is required in sentimentalism, what she calls the *death of the critical instinct. Ideas matter, and without them, there are no communal values or*

goals or thinking. There is no common good being debated. But religion without ideas, is mere window-dressing for the sources which really want to control society, she says. Window dressing.

And she quotes from magazines of the 19th century: *The Christian Parlor* magazine of June 1846 engraves *The Good Shepherd* that pictures Christ in a fashion that resembles nothing so much as *Little Bo Peep*. Jesus as *Little Bo Peep* in a major Christian journal in mid-19th century, right before the Civil War.

And she quotes a person when it comes to the rise of Evolution in the late 19th century: *I think it is a good deal easier to believe the Garden of Eden story, because that's pretty and poetical, and is in the dear old book that is so sweet and comfortable to us.* That was a response to Darwin in the late 19th century. The Bible is just so sweet and poetical, and we don't need this Evolution thing.

A third sin, if you will, of sentimentalism is Anti-Aestheticism. *In a sentimentalized culture, art lacks any intellectual dimension, and its search for truth is thrown out the window, becomes mere entertainment, the reduction of art to entertainment, to titillate, and not an engine for truth.*

Another dimension to sentimentalism that Douglas names is Anti-Body. It fits into the Victorian attitude that wanted to pretend that people were not bodily. And sentimentalized. religion obliged: *In a true Christian civilization, Sarah Hale wrote in 19th century, the men must become more like women and the women more like angels.* And in numerous women magazines, the point was really to have no body. *Physicality itself is painfully absent. The constant reiteration of feminine purity. There's not only a denial of patriarchal values, but of matriarchal wants as well.* And here's a passage from a lady's magazine in 1830: *See, she sits, she walks, she speaks, she looks on honorable things. Inspiration springs up in her very paths. It follows her footsteps. A halo of glory encircles her, illuminates her whole orbit.* And as Douglas observes, *This sounds an awful lot like a doll, and not a woman that is being described. And clergy, too were sucked into that arena of being passive and acting like a victim or an immolated one, and they had far too little to say about the violent injustice issues of the day, such as slavery.*

So she goes on, and my article is several more of these, the shadow sides to sentimentalism. Let our Christmases and our Hanukkahs be non-sentimental. May they be a search for truth and for justice.

Amen. See you next week.