

# THE SEASON OF ADVENT



## Submission To The Negativities Of Existence

The central paradox <sup>1</sup> of the Christian Proclamation is the assertion that the very personality destined to save men, man, history and the universe from estrangement and ambiguity terminally submits to the unbearable sorrow of estrangement and the full horror of ambiguity, maintains unity with the ground of his being, with God, while so submitting, and emerges from all possible negativities, including death, “reborn” as it were a new being in such intensified unity with God as to himself manifest the form of God in history, in the conditions of existence.

Man calls to God because he is unhappy. Man’s unhappiness is rooted in his awareness of what he knows is unmanageable tension and destructive discord between his own essential nature, his true self, which is in unity with God and his world, and his existential condition and experience, the

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<sup>1</sup> Greek *para + doxa*, against ordinary wisdom and expectation.

selves he thinks he is, which are not. From the wretchedness of this discord man calls to God for salvation.<sup>2</sup> God answers that call with a self-revelation that is the substance and the power of salvation for men, man, history and the universe.

This in outline is the structure of the Christian Proclamation. The content of the Christian Proclamation is that the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God, the personality at the center of history destined and sent by God to reveal God in his self as the power saving men, man, history and the universe. Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of God, the anointed health provider for all of history, past, present and future.

There will not and cannot be a Messiah or Christ other than the one who appeared as Jesus of Nazareth and God.<sup>3</sup> It is not possible for any personality, any self-revelation of God, in any time or clime, to exceed or replace Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ world-historically actualizing the power of God as the plenary saving answer to man's call for help to health.

Two central images communicate the central paradox of the Christian Proclamation and together constitute its essential symbolism. These images and symbols are the Cross and the Resurrection. All symbols in

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<sup>2</sup> Latin *salus*, health, wholeness, completion.

<sup>3</sup> This includes in other religions. The expectation of a *mahdi* in some orbits of Islam and a *mashiah* in some orbits of Judaism are vain, groundless fantasies and colossal wastes of precious time.

Christian Scripture and Tradition are subsumed in or belong to one or the other of these two central images.<sup>4</sup>

The image and symbol of the Cross expresses man's condition of estrangement from his essential nature, from his home in God. The image and symbol of the Resurrection expresses man's experience of God's victory over man's estrangement and man's reunion, because of that victory, with his essential nature, which is divine. The symbol of the Resurrection points to and indeed participates in man's experience of being taken home by God into Himself, who only can make this happen.

Advent belongs to the symbol of the Cross. It belongs to existence, which has the character of estrangement and ambiguity.

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin compound word *advenire*: *ad* (to) + *venire* (come). The English words *adventure*, *adventitia* and *adventitious* are based on *advenire*.

St. Jerome uses nominal forms of *advenire* to translate the Hebrew word *ger*, which refers to those who are [strangers in a strange land](#) to which they do not belong, outsiders who have come into a land they know not and that knows not them. Such people, although bereft of hostile intent,

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<sup>4</sup> It may be asserted that all symbols of all religions are subsumed in or belong to one or the other of these two central Christian images, but it is not our purpose here to elucidate that fact, which includes also the reality that each religion subsumes in one or the other of its central images all symbols of all religions. This mutual analogy through a common subsumption is a consequence of the unity and universality of God and his reality, which is Love.

are not allowed to put down roots and must be merely passing through on their way to somewhere else. They are sojourners, travelers, wanderers, outsiders on their way elsewhere, rootless ones. Jerome uses *advena* to describe the Israelites "sojourning" or "wandering" in Egypt.

When Jerome wishes to indicate that such a "sojourner" is also under the compulsion of persecution,<sup>5</sup> having been driven into the rootlessness of flight, he uses nominal forms of *peregrinari*, (to wander abroad away from home), from which we have the English word "peregrinate."

For example, for Deuteronomy 26:5, the seminal expression of Israelite identity, Jerome combines *peregrinatus* with *persequabatur*, (hunted down to persecution) to describe why the Israelites were "going down" (*descendit*) to Egypt. They were fleeing persecution at what they (but, clearly, not God) had thought was their home. Interestingly, and faithfully to the Hebrew, in the same passage Jerome indicates the ethnicity of Israelites with the word *Syrus* (Syrian) rather than the modern translators' preferred "Aramean," although the referent is approximately the same.

At first glance, the Christian season of Advent, the four weeks preceding Christmas, marks *the coming* of the Christ to individuals, groups and history for the purpose of saving and fulfilling each. Ordinary piety is pitched in this direction. The vector of "coming" is said to be from the Christ to man and indeed the whole creation.

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<sup>5</sup> Including in a land to which they thought they did belong.

An attitude of introspection and expectation is encouraged “in preparation” for the Feast of Christmas, which celebrates *the coming of the Christ*. The expectation is of movement by the Christ towards us, a “descent” of a form of God’s fulfilling creativity to “be with us.” The image employs a spacial metaphor in which God is “up” and man is “down” and the two are separated and not the same. <sup>6</sup>

Truly, however, the vector of Advent runs the other way, in the opposite direction: man and creation move towards the Christ, rather than the Christ moving towards them. The essence of Advent, as of all religious seasons, is the creation’s attraction to God, as metal to a magnet, not its reception of God. After all, who is God, He who is One-Without-A-Second, that He needs “to be received” much less “to come?”

*Vocatus Atque Non Vocatus Deus Aderit* <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This instance and all symbolic language, including the word “God,” should not be taken literally or with the concepts of empirical cognition. Literalism is the bane of the study of scriptures and of religious communication generally. Symbolic language points to experience and itself participates in the experience to which it points. It does not define structures of empirical reality. The so-called “creation stories” in the book of Genesis, for example, do not define the origins of species. They have another purpose altogether, one about which science has nothing to say and no contribution to make. Symbolic language and empirical language are in separate realms of human cognitive activity. They do not communicate one with the other nor do they impinge one with another except as one claims supremacy over the other. Such a claim, of course, cannot be legitimated because empirical interest and religious concern do not cross paths.

<sup>7</sup> “Invoked or not invoked, God is at hand.” Karl Jung had these words inscribed over the door to his home in Kusnacht, Switzerland.

The initiative in the economy of salvation as in the economy of life generally is with God. Man is along as His playmate, he whose company He enjoys and who, for his health, should enjoy His company.

Because the direction of Advent is from man to God in the Christ, the attitude of man in the condition of Advent is analogous to that of Moses in the condition of the Burning Bush or Isaiah in the condition of the Vision of God: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"<sup>8</sup>

This attitude in the condition of Advent may be called self-awareness. It may be distinguished but not separated from the attitude of self-examination, which characterizes the Season of Lent.

Whereas self-examination brings to mind one's sins, which are mistakes requiring and susceptible to correction, self-awareness brings to mind the condition of Sin which is the basic character of one's existence. Mistakes can be overcome and corrected. Those are sins with a small "s." However, the basic condition of man's existence can be neither overcome

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<sup>8</sup> Jerome translates from the Hebrew: *et dixi vae mihi quia tacui quia vir pollutus labiis ego sum et in medio populi polluta labia habentis ego habito et Regem Dominum exercituum vidi oculis meis*

nor corrected because it is what his existence is. This condition is called Sin with a capital "S." <sup>9</sup>

Existence is estrangement, separation from essence. That which exists experiences itself as estranged from itself, from its world and from its ground or root of being, which is its essential nature. That which exists unavoidably labors in, fosters, harbors and expresses the delusions of distance, self-sufficiency and independence. Existence by necessity of its origin <sup>10</sup> is delusional and deluding.

The ontological condition of estrangement (the reality religion calls Sin) is the source of anxiety, <sup>11</sup> which, on account of its ontological basis, should

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<sup>9</sup> Significantly, Islam recognizes the phenomenon of sins but not the reality of Sin. This is a characteristic of all legal systems, including the Islam of jurists and the Judaism of rabbis, which by their nature recognize the existence only of such things as they potentially or actually approve or anathematize. Because of their non-recognition of the existential condition of estrangement (Sin), Islamic jurists are bereft of internal checks and cannot by any substantial and successful means foster religion, culture or morality. Their jurists' legalism alienates Muslims from existential or situational awareness and condemns them to mean, petulant unreliability and insignificance other than through the *hubristic*, destructive hegemonism of aggressive, messianic collectivism.

<sup>10</sup> This is expressed in the symbol of a "fall" from union with essential nature.

<sup>11</sup> Latin *angustus*, meaning narrow. English "anxiety" and "angina" and German "angst" refer to the phenomenon of narrowing and the experience of being closed in and constricted or strangled. The experience of narrowed (eventually to one's extinction) arises from self-awareness of one's finitude and therefore the threat of one's being not. Counseling cannot bypass the reality of one's finitude and therefore it cannot eliminate anxiety, although it can moderate compulsive anxiety.

be understood as a necessary and unavoidable fact of life itself and a universal experience of all creatures.

Anxiety is caused by awareness of finitude and the threat of nonbeing, of nothingness. Man seeks awareness but the awareness he seeks awakens in him the realization of his personal and communal finitude and potential nonbeing. Counseling cannot eliminate anxiety or lessen its effects on the personality because anxiety is ontological rather than emotional or intellectual.<sup>12</sup>

Anxiety is an unavoidable consequence of being “thrown into existence.”<sup>13</sup> The only way to avoid anxiety is to eliminate existence, chemically and/or catastrophically. Even if this is done, however, anxiety persists because existence does. The self cannot escape anxiety without losing itself, without ceasing to be a self.

Self-awareness of one’s finitude and all that follows from it is the purpose of the Season of Advent. During Advent one should penetrate as best one may with the tools of one’s own intellect and with rumination and meditation upon the commendations of saints and sages the skeins of

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<sup>12</sup> Anxiety should not be confused with dread or fear, which are momentary reactions to danger, real or imagined. Counseling can alleviate fear, although it cannot eliminate fear because dangerous situations do not cease coming one’s way. Anxiety is a consequence of having existence, of participating in finitude.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger.



delusion that intervene to separate one from one's own essential nature, which is divine nature. <sup>14</sup>

Advent is a season to delve deeply into the self and realize as many aspects of one's truth as one may discover. This is a terrifying journey but there is no way around it to maturity and peace. The Christian Liturgical Year establishes Advent as the time to face the threat of nonbeing, of being not, and to enfold that experience as one's self in one's self. <sup>15</sup>

The Christ, Who is recalled and remembered in the Feast of Christmas, is the answer to the threat of nonbeing which man experiences in self-awareness of his own finitude and the finitude of existence *per se*. The Christ has power to reunite the self with its essential nature, man with God, because He participates fully in the conditions of existence without losing His unity with God.

God has not left man to the ultimately inadequate power of his own resources. He who is estranged, ambiguous and anxious has to be brought forward to God, attracted to "travel" towards Him who is his home. The movement is from man to God. It is both initiated and fulfilled by God.

Man's relationship to God is analogous to that of a kitten who is picked up and moved about by his mother. Verbs describing man's relationship to God are in the passive voice. This is the great discovery of the

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Luther's phrase for believers as "little Christs." This phrase recognizes the high status of human nature in its essential reality and its existential ethical potential.

<sup>15</sup> On the subject of *being* ontological anxiety, cf. Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*.

discipline of self-awareness which is nourished by the Season of Advent during the Christian Liturgical Year.

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## **A Collect For Advent** <sup>16</sup>

Almighty God,

We are drawn to you as iron is drawn by the magnet.

We drive to you as a moth drives to the flame.

We see you as the infant sees its mother.

We hear you as the mother hears her child.

We love you as the wife loves the husband.

We bow to you as the student bows to the teacher.

We weep before you as the unworthy weep before the worthy.

We fear you as creatures fear the wild fire.

We delight in you as waves delight in the sea.

Embrace us to your heart.

And may we always be devoted to you.

Amen



A.M.D.G.



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<sup>16</sup> This prayer also serves as a Pastoral Prayer for Easter.