

Christmas 2021

The Light of Enlightenment

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Light and Enlightenment

Christmas is the festival of light and lights.¹ The light is not only needed for orientation (lighting) and is a symbol of hope in the dark of night. Light is also a symbol of inner enlightenment. "It dawned on me" means I got a knowledge, an insight, a new clarity.

However, enlightenment is often understood as the highest level of the spiritual purification and as the wisdom of saints and gurus who become enlightened. Enlightenment is experienced as an insight that comes to me (accidentally, unintentionally), a received gift (Ein-gebung), an unexpected in-spiration (the innovative, divine spirit). Every world religion has a festival of lights: Christmas in Christianity, Divali in Hinduism, Pavarana in Buddhism, Mev-lid Kandili in Islam, Hanukkah in Judaism etc.

Here I would like to bring back the meaning of enlightenment in our everyday life, using the example of Christmas and connecting it to an interreligious context.

Christmas: Enlightenment for People like You and Me

Mary, the young, unmarried girl is unexpectedly pregnant. An angel's voice turns the terrible news into enlightenment (Lk 1.28ff): Mary can recognize and accept the meaning of this pregnancy and can thank God for it (Lk 1.46-55: Praise to Mary).

Joseph considers leaving his pregnant beloved (Mt 1:19). Another angelic voice (enlightenment) makes him decide to stay with Mary (Mt 1:20-24).

The shepherds, on the lowest level of social order, poor, without dignity, on barren land, receive an enlightenment from a "crowd of angels" to look for this illegitimate child. Enlightenment as a mission, a new meaning in life and a new dignity. (Lk 2,8-20)

The kings / wise men (rulers and intellectuals) are convinced that they know what they want. They single-mindedly travel to the secular ruler Herod in order to pay homage to the newborn king's successor in good time, i.e. to secure and lobby their interests for the future. However again, an enlightenment (angel) throws their system of values upside down: What is below is suddenly above; a poor child in a slum is said to be king.

Angels are a symbol of the energy that - often unexpectedly - brings enlightenment.

¹ This text is translated from German to English by corrected google translation.

Enlightenment as Breaking In or as a Continuous Path

Enlightenment arises in dialogue, in encounters with people or as inner voices ('ambassadors', called angels): Mary with the angel and Elisabeth, shepherds with angels, the rich kings with poor Mary, etc. Enlightenment is not a Sunday walk. Enlightenment is a shock, a mind-boggling questioning, a call to reorientation. Therefore, there is excitement, but also resistance against such shaking enlightenment: 'I can't, I don't want to' (example Jonah, Paul etc.). 'To protect myself, I prefer not to expose myself to this truth' - until 'it' breaks out and one has to be confronted with this enlightenment.

Others, on the other hand, search specifically, throughout their lives, step-by-step, through meditation, study of the sacred texts and exercises. All religions know this practice of the way to enlightenment, the Dharma religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, Jainism) with clear stages, the Abrahamic religions more through faith and metanoia/reorientation.

Christians and Buddhists Support Each Other on their Way to the Light of Enlightenment

For some time now, I have had - often by chance - interesting dialogues with Buddhists from Vietnam in Geneva: Anh Tho was an employee at Globethics.net, now retired and the editor with me of a series of books on Vietnamese ethics, Hong was head of communication at the Geneva Agape Foundation, her Sister Huong, artist, studying the ancient Tibetan scriptures, and Ithi, the reflexologist, who gave me the "Bouddha et Jésus sont des frères", written by the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. All four are married to European Christians. They are interested in better understanding the Jesus' path of enlightenment and ethics through me and I am interested in better understanding the Buddhist path to enlightenment through them. Modern mission: not as a conversion of the other to one's own faith, but to deepen one's own faith through the encounter with those of different beliefs, with a lot of respect, curiosity and care. This also occurs in the musical interplay of «Beyond. Christian and Buddhist prayers » (see at the end), where the singer Regula Curti from Zurich found her way back to the early Christian classical chants through her encounter with the Tibetan Buddhist Dechen Shak-Dagsay from the Tibetan Center at Rikon / Zurich.

In Buddhism, Budh in Sanskrit means waking up, recognizing, understanding. Buddha is the awakened, enlightened one. The eightfold Buddhist path is the way to light, to enlightenment. A central virtue here is empathy, compassion: Empathize with others, «pratiquer le regard profond», recognizing people behind the surface in their needs, fears and joys. This compassion connects people with Buddhist and Christian beliefs even though there are differences. Christmas is an expression of God's immense empathy for people's need. Love through understanding, accepting and overcoming is common to both approaches.

Enlightenment is not a detached spirituality from the hereafter, but means releasing the energy and power of love, awakening the "child within us" and letting it shine, as my Buddhist colleagues say. In addition: Finding the child Jesus is a beginning of the path to enlightened love, like it was for the shepherds and kings searching the light-love of this new-born.

Enlightenment through Reason

The Age of Enlightenment (French: Lumières, lights) relied on the light of reason against the 'dark' Middle Age. Reason was and is important for rational decisions in all areas of life, especially today in this crisis, as the Covid pandemic shows. However, reason and so-called rational arguments are not enough in times of crisis and have never

been enough in history either. Many people reject rational arguments, e.g. scientific vaccination knowledge, and take refuge in conspiracy theories, the delusion of pursuing different thinking and blind beliefs in miracles.

How can we now go forward to light and enlightenment? Through the combination of reason and faith. Jesus has already shown the way: In the face of a hungry crowd, Jesus commanded the disciples quite rationally to buy food in the next village (Mark 6:37) instead of hoping for a supernatural miracle. At the same time, he had the profound trust and faith that there is enough food for all if they share it. At the beginning of his path, Jesus was also tempted and tested by the devil to jump unreasonably off a wall to prove his supernatural divine energy. Jesus sent the devil away and resisted the temptation (Luke 4:5f). Jesus combined reason and wisdom in the love of God, the protection of oneself and the care for the neighbor.



Enlightenment through Science and Wisdom

The faith in science has deep cracks today, not only in Africa, Asia and South America, but also in North America and Europe. Postmodernism is among others a critique of reason as the only source of light and enlightenment. For millennia, researchers have combined reason and faith, e.g. in Hindu, Buddhist and Christian monasteries around the world.

The path of enlightenment has always led great thinkers and scientists to great modesty: "I know that I know nothing" (Socrates), "Modesty is appropriate for the scholar, but not for the ideas that live in him" (Marie Curie). "The universe is not only more alien than we think, but more alien than we can even think" (Werner Heisenberg). "Politics of Being. Wisdom and Science for a New Development Paradigm" is the name of the upcoming book by the French environmental scientist and Buddhist, who asked me as a Christian ethicist a few days ago to comment on his book. "Justice and peace kiss each other" (Psalm 85:11). Knowledge and wisdom embrace each other.

The Light of Enlightenment: Love

The holistic path of enlightenment combines rationality and spirituality, science and belief. This path is united in the one, unifying and comprehensive perspective of love. It then shapes all decisions in science and research, business and politics, family and leisure, sport and art.

Christmas is the festival of light. The light shows the way to enlightenment. Enlightenment is shown in love. Love is shown (not in a great moment of enlightenment, but) in small, everyday steps.

Song: "Mache Dich auf und werde Licht, denn dein Licht kommt" (Open up and become light, because your light is coming) as [Zoom Choir](#) (Badischer Jugendchor)

Music: Beyond. Buddhist and Christian Prayers. Album Regula Curti, Dechen Shak-Dagsay, Tina Turner. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DlncFpixF4> <https://beyond-foundation.org/music-production/beyond>
