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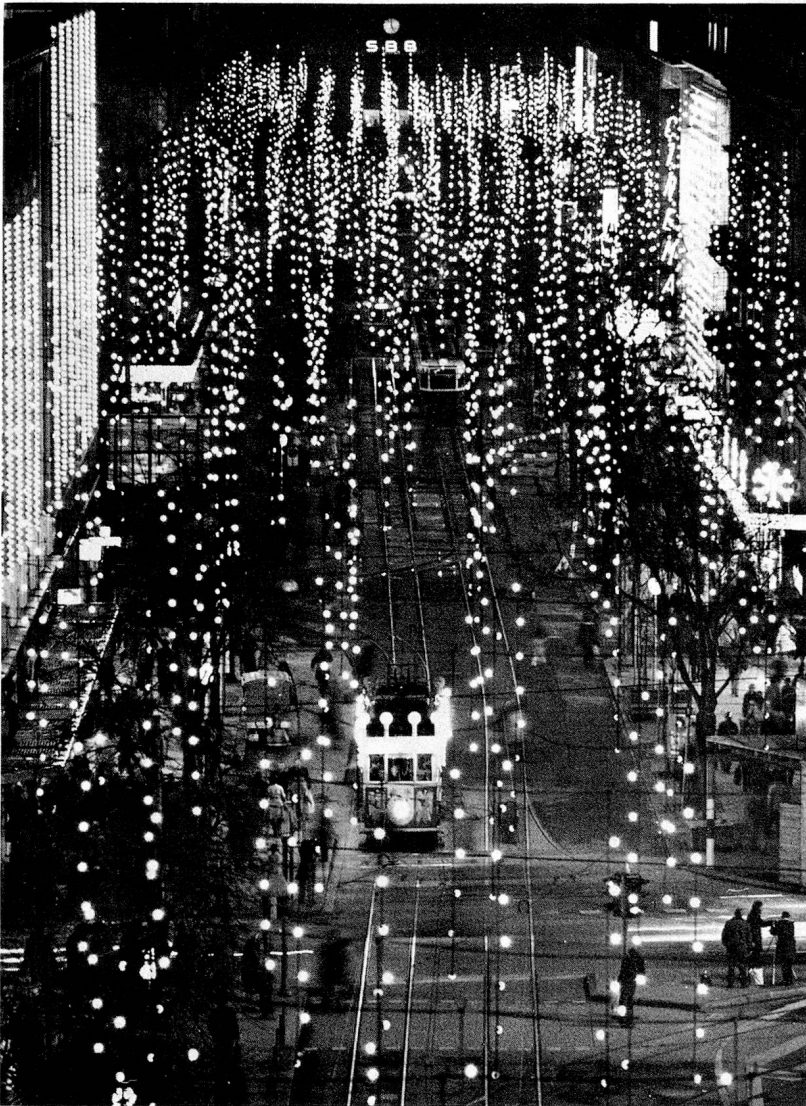
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Christmas Message

by the Rev. Michel Languillat, Minister at the Swiss Church, London



Santa Claus tram in Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich.

It is most difficult to perceive the meaning of Christmas living as we do in a civilisation sadly gifted for destroying the richness and live potentialities of the Message.

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. But Christ has been made into just another gadget. All depends on our fashions and our requirements. These days, he tends to be turned into a hippy or a revolutionary. The nineteenth century imagery of Jesus has even influenced fashions in the twentieth century with the result that the "Jesus Christ" hair-style, with beard and long hair, has become a universal trend in the Anglo-Saxon world. Jesus has become a star and a guide to our passions. In some cases, I dare hardly write it, he has been turned into an image, a screen separating us from real life, a kind of drug enabling us to live between two worlds. Others will be content with a more classical and insipid vision of Christ inspired from folklore, church bazaars and Sunday School. This Jesus is as irrelevant as the "in" Jesus. More sophisticated minds might be attracted to the metaphysical and abstract Christ which some theologians invite us to seek with bliss and enthusiasm. But such a cerebral Christ is emotionally no more relevant than a mathematical theory. Most of our representations of Christ are the result of our yearnings and desires, all of which are undeniably real.

Many among us consider that the Jesus issue is devoid of all interest. The problem being vain, there is no point in seeking an answer. "God is dead" was the phrase uttered without undue alarm until recently when some began claiming that man himself was but an illusion, the

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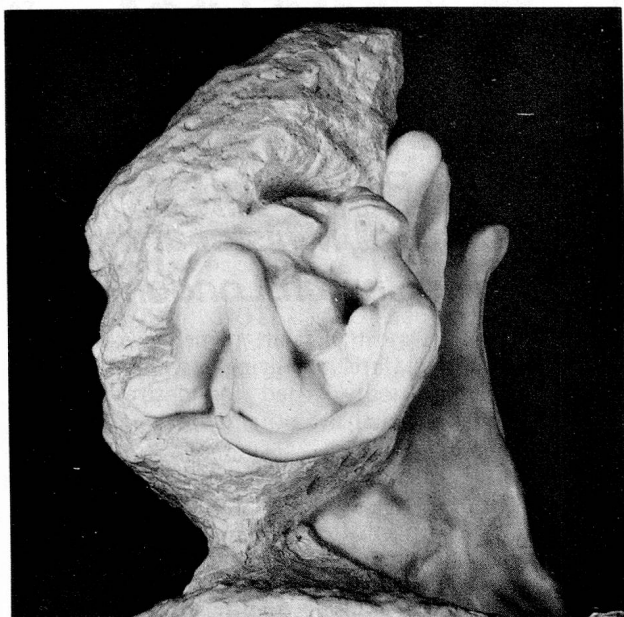
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The 'Hand of God'
by Rodin Cital.

resultant of impersonal forces building up to something essentially futile and absurd.

We should nevertheless strive for a better appreciation of the person of Jesus Christ and attempt to extract a live meaning from the depth of all this "folklore". We should deprive Christmas of all its fantasies and marvels, because the Gospel is anything but a fairy tale.

We must reject all images and be ready to face the Light. I will naturally not suggest yet another portrait of Jesus, which could at best be a complementary one. What is required, on the contrary, is to find the general meaning of Christmas, and for this we must turn to the Gospel.

Its Christmas message is *Peace on earth to men of good will* (Luke 2-14). Peace, a strange word indeed! It is a word that brings about disillusioned smiles. "Everyone cries peace! peace! peace! and yet there is no peace" said a prophet. Every country is trying to prove with the utmost conviction that a shaky peace can only be maintained with the threat of violence and a deterrent. Yet peace has a bearing on the world's very existence. An old Hebrew proverb which Christ doubtless knew said that "*Peace is as important as the existence of the world itself*". This means that peace alone justifies existence, *our* existence. Christmas is the celebration of peace. Its meaning is not only that we should

believe in peace, but that we should desire it, work for it, and thus give the world meaning and justification.

Of course, many would reply that to believe in peace is to believe in Father Christmas. The Gospel is a beautiful moral tale associating naiveté with powerlessness. Not all, fortunately, speak in this way. There are countless men of every religion yearning for peace and striving for it. They are the men of good will of whom the Gospels speak. It is of course not enough to talk about peace, one should do something about it. The message of Christmas is that Peace should and can live in our world.

Here we should recall the biblical meaning of the word "peace". Our translations restrict its full significance, which is both "peace" and "happiness". This precision is certainly not pointless because peace without happiness can be frightfully boring, and because nothing could be more wrong than to imagine that biblical peace is unrelated to plain, earthly, human happiness. It is true that certain Christians consider human happiness as something suspect. They should learn to read their Bible.

Whether we are Christians or not, we should ask ourselves a few searching questions on the root of our being and the meaning of our lives. Are we determined to be happy and give rise around us to a spirit of peace with our small and limited means? To resolve to be

happy and create happiness around us would indeed be a fresh way of celebrating Christmas. To be sure, we are not omnipotent, but we are not helpless either. If we can't displace the Matterhorn we can at least remove a chair! But we should learn to be master of ourselves. We may be aware of our technical ability for happiness, yet we have the feeling of being manipulated by worldly and political forces outside us. We are also paralysed by our absence of wisdom. We have the greatest difficulty of creating happiness both for ourselves and others. But to be happy we must discover the power which is ours and which will not yield to the powers of this world. We must learn to communicate and to be in harmony with the most simple things and events of our everyday lives.

We must however know how to limit our ambitions to our immediate and daily surroundings because we can have little influence on the happiness of a gold miner in South Africa or of a beggar in Calcutta. The unhappiness of others will always exist. Hunger, violence, racism and wickedness are realities of this world always present in shared and unselfish happiness. We are confronted with the pieces of a puzzle which have no individual meaning but which linked together represent a picture. We feel sure that our human society is not in accord with our aspirations and those of others. We know that our world should be different. To celebrate Christmas truly is therefore to remember this also and to suffer from it.

Nevertheless, Christmas reminds us that we must make a *decision* for peace and happiness. Deciding is indeed a central biblical notion. It is that which differentiates man from beast. If we have not taken the personal decision of living for happiness in its fullest sense, we may still be deluding ourselves about Christmas. There are of course different ways of being happy. The Greek hermit Diogenes offers a good example of a certain happiness and a certain peace: to live in a barrel and bask in the sun. But we must opt for something larger and more intense — for the peace and happiness told in the Christmas message.

Finding happiness is not a question of fatality, but of willing it ourselves. By committing ourselves to peace and happiness on this coming Christmas we will be deciding consciously to take our lives into our own hands. We will not bear life like a burden but strive for a richer and more real existence despite all our problems, our wounds and our loneliness. We must not kill our desires and the promise and allow ourselves to fall into a life of boredom and inactivity.

The message of Christmas is true to all men — Christians and non-Christians alike. If they do not live in faith, they can at least live with confidence. We can all cultivate happiness and peace both of which are like the infant the shepherd of Judea held in their hands, so frail and yet so much alive.