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# Ideas From a Manger

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PAUSE for a moment, in the last leg of your holiday shopping, to glance at one of the manger scenes you pass along the way. Cast your eyes across the shepherds and animals, the infant and the kings. Then try to see the scene this way: not just as a pious set-piece, but as a complete world picture — intimate, miniature and comprehensive.

Because that's what the Christmas story really is — an entire worldview in a compact narrative, a depiction of how human beings relate to the universe and to one another. It's about the vertical link between God and man — the angels, the star, the creator stooping to enter his creation. But it's also about the horizontal relationships of society, because it locates transcendence in the ordinary, the commonplace, the low.

It's easy in our own democratic era to forget how revolutionary the latter idea was. But the biblical narrative, the great critic Erich Auerbach wrote, depicted "something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life."

And because that egalitarian idea is so powerful today, one useful — and seasonally appropriate — way to look at our divided culture's competing worldviews is to see what each one takes from the crèche in Bethlehem.

Many Americans still take everything: They accept the New Testament as factual, believe God came in the flesh, and endorse the creeds that explain how and why that happened. And then alongside traditional Christians, there are observant Jews and Muslims who believe the same God revealed himself directly in some other historical and binding form.

But this *biblical* world picture is increasingly losing market share to what you might call the *spiritual* world picture, which keeps the theological outlines suggested by the manger scene — the divine is active in human affairs, every person is precious in God's sight — but doesn't sweat the details.

This is the world picture that red-staters get from Joel Osteen, blue-staters from Oprah, and everybody gets from our "God bless America" civic religion. It's Christian-ish but syncretistic; adaptable, easygoing and egalitarian. It doesn't care whether the angel really appeared to Mary: the important thing is that a spiritual version of that visitation could happen to anyone — including you.

Then, finally, there's the *secular* world picture, relatively rare among the general public but dominant within the intelligentsia. This worldview keeps the horizontal message of the Christmas story but eliminates the vertical entirely. The stars and angels disappear: There is no God, no miracles, no incarnation. But the egalitarian message — the common person as the center of creation's drama — remains intact, and with it the doctrines of liberty, fraternity and human rights.

As these world pictures jostle and compete, their strengths and weaknesses emerge. The biblical picture has the weight of tradition going for it, the glory of centuries of Western art, the richness of millenniums' worth of theological speculation. But its specificity creates specific problems: how to remain loyal to biblical ethics in a commercial, sexually liberated society.

The spiritual picture lacks the biblical picture's resources and rigor, but it makes up for them in flexibility. A doctrine challenged by [science](#) can be abandoned; a commandment that clashes with modern attitudes ignored; the problem of evil washed away in a New Age bath.

The secular picture, meanwhile, seems to have the rigor of the scientific method behind it. But it actually suffers from a deeper intellectual incoherence than either of its rivals, because its cosmology does not harmonize *at all* with its moral picture.

In essence, it proposes a purely physical and purposeless universe, inhabited by evolutionary accidents whose sense of self is probably illusory. And yet it then continues to insist on moral and political absolutes with all the vigor of a 17th-century New England preacher. And the rope bridges flung across this chasm — the scientific-sounding logic of utilitarianism, the Darwinian justifications for altruism — tend to waft, gently, into a logical abyss.

So there are two interesting religious questions that will probably face Americans for many Christmases to come. The first is whether biblical religion can regain some of the ground it has lost, or whether the spiritual worldview will continue to carry all before it.

The second is whether the intelligentsia's fusion of scientific materialism and liberal egalitarianism — the crèche without the star, the shepherds' importance without the angels' blessing — will eventually crack up and give way to something new.

The cracks are visible, in [philosophy](#) and [science](#) alike. But the alternative is not. One can imagine possibilities: a deist revival or a pantheist turn, a new respect for biblical religion, a rebirth of the 20th century's utopianism and will-to-power cruelty.

But for now, though a few intellectuals scan the heavens, they have yet to find their star.