

Songs of Christmas: A Search for Meaning

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Christmas Day is fast approaching, and the shopping centers of East Asia shine with festive lights and echo with the sounds of “Jingle Bells” and “Santa Claus is Coming to Town”. Yet just as in many other parts of the world, it is hard to find among the decorations any evidence of the real meaning of Christmas—the birth of Jesus Christ. College students in Taiwan prefer to spend the night of December 24 socializing at all-night parties and dancing to hip-hop, not praising God in song at Compline and Liturgy.



While American Christmas carols are played in public places, few who hear them know much more of their meaning beyond Santa Claus, giving gifts, and celebrating. There’s nothing inherently bad about enjoying these secular songs, and some may even have a useful message. “Rudolph, the Red-nosed Reindeer,” for example, tells what all parents and teachers know—that every child has a talent and, just as Santa does with Rudolph, our job is to find that talent and help the child develop his talents and to build his self-esteem.

Religious carols are also heard along the busy city streets. I enjoy singing along with these rousing songs—“Joy to the World”, “O Come, All Ye Faithful” and the like—while I prepare the Christmas goodies. They focus on the basic events of Jesus’ birth and what we should do to show our gratefulness.

“Joy to the world the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room. And heaven and nature sing.”

“O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant; O come ye to Bethlehem.
Come and behold Him born the King of angels. O come let us adore Him.”

The music is happy and inspirational. However, while these texts direct our minds in the right direction, they fall short in terms of theology.

We Orthodox receive our theology through the texts of the Vespers and Matins for each feast, some of which are repeated in the Liturgy. To the Orthodox Christian the birth of Christ is a great mystery, as stated in the 9th canticle of the Christmas canon (also sung in place of the Hymn to the Theotokos during the Christmas Liturgy):

“I behold a strange but very glorious mystery:
Heaven—the cave;
The throne of the Cherubim—the Virgin.
The manger—the receptacle in which Christ our God,
Whom nothing can contain, is lying.”

(English text from <http://home.it.com.au/~jgrapsas/pages/main.htm>)

These are amazing contradictions. How can a cave encompass the whole of heaven? How can a Virgin become the throne of the Cherubim? How can a lowly manger contain God?



Or from the Ikos at Matins: “Bethlehem has opened Eden... There the unwatered root has appeared, from which forgiveness flowers forth: there is found the undug Well, whence David longed to drink of old. There the Virgin has borne a Babe, and made the thirst of Adam and David to cease straightaway. Therefore let us hasten to this place where now is born a young Child, the pre-eternal God.” (English text from the Festal Menaion, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, Faber & Faber, 1969, p. 278)

Here we have more metaphors containing apparent contradictions—an unwatered root producing flowers and an undug well producing water to quench the thirst of people mentioned in the Old Testament. God Who is pre-eternal is born as a child. The many references to the Old Testament come not just from Isaiah, whose more straightforward prophecies about the birth of Christ are also familiar to most Christians. The reference to David in the Ikos comes from the Book of Kings; other texts either come from the Prophets or the Psalms or make reference to them.

All our services contain psalm verses, from the Sunday antiphons to various refrains from Vespers and Matins. We need only to look at the Introit (verse at the Small Entrance) of the Christmas Liturgy to find verse 3 from Psalm 109: “From the womb before the morning star have I begotten Thee.” (Festal Menaion, p. 287) This refers to Jesus Christ as “born of the Father before all ages” in the Nicene Creed, begotten by the Father before the dawn of time. Jesus Christ has always existed, before His birth as a human in Bethlehem. Or the Communion verse of Christmas from verse 9 of Psalm 110: “The Lord has sent deliverance unto His people.” (Festal Menaion, p. 289)

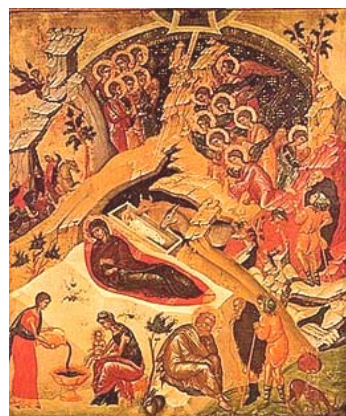
I am fortunate to have grown up as a hyphenated American, with grandparents who immigrated to the USA from a part of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire that is now East Slovakia. In the Carpathian Mountains, people love to sing. In the church, one man (or a group) leads the singing, and all the people sing the Liturgy. On the street, people go house to house at Christmas singing carols and performing a partially religious and partially secular play. Many of the same songs are sung, with regional variations, from East Slovakia through Ukraine and Russia—anywhere Orthodox live and worship.

Perhaps the quintessential Slav carol is *Boh predvičnyj narodilsja*—God pre-eternal is born (Slovak transliteration used here for those who do not read Cyrillic). How can someone eternal be born? Or the well-loved *Divnaja novina*; the first verse translates as “Wondrous news, now a virgin gives birth to a Son in Bethlehem.” How can a virgin give birth? The second verse continues “Not in a king’s palace but amidst the cattle, in a cave in a manger, to be known to all.” Another contradiction—a king born in the poorest of places, attended by the animals.

Other carols reflect the connection with the Old Testament. *Skinija zlataja kovceh zaveta* refers to Mary as the golden tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the precious vessel that contains and nourishes God the Son. *Nyni, Adame, vozveselisja* exhorts Adam to rejoice and Eve to cease her weeping, for the one they have waited for and sought after has appeared and is born. *Stan Davide z huslami* tells David to rise up with his lyre and happily sing and play that Christ our Creator is born.

These texts sung by ordinary people in their houses and on the streets reflect those we sing at Vespers and Matins—the wondrous mysteries of a Virgin giving birth, God pre-eternal being born as a human, a mighty king appearing as a helpless baby among the animals. This is different and far deeper and richer compared with the focus of other Christian churches, where we hear about the poor little baby Jesus shivering in the cold, manifested in songs such as “Away in a Manger no crib for His bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head...”

Christmas cards, too, often portray a baby Jesus with curly blond hair, a feature that would be statistically rather rare in a Jewish baby. Yet to the Orthodox Christian the physical features of Jesus the child and man are irrelevant. Our icons portray Christ Jesus not as a baby, but as a small man, fully God in the body of a child. What is important is what He did, and this WHAT is full of mystery and apparent contradiction to human logic, as the texts of the religious services and the carols of Slav people express.



In my childhood, American carols were part of my American identity—in the schools and in the shops. Many of them made me think of characters out of Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.” To me, they are “English” songs. But at home and in church there were other songs and carols not in English and far different in content. This year I’ll still enjoy “Silent Night,” but it’s only really Christmas when we sing *Boh predvičnyj narodilsja*—God pre-eternal is born.

*More about the meaning of the texts can be found at *Christmas Hymns in the Orthodox Church*, by Alexander A. Bogolepov at the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia at <http://home.it.com.au/~jgrapsas/pages/main.htm>

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