

Response

Midsummer Christmases

May I offer a few observations on one point in the thought-provoking paper of Nicholas Lash on *Friday, Saturday, Sunday* (March 1990)?

In the first of two comments on the liturgical year, he asks: 'How do you celebrate Christmas where there is no winter, no dark point to the turning year, or Easter in a country where it is never spring?' That this is not just a question seeking information is suggested by his continuing, 'And if someone were to say that it simply does not matter, that Christian truth and celebration are unaffected by their natural context, I should suspect that person of having a most impoverished and dissociated sense of what it is we seek to celebrate, at Christmas and at Easter' (p. 110).

Only someone living in the tropics, I suppose, could answer his question straight. But I am now used to celebrating Christmas at midsummer, and Easter in the autumn. So I can give a general answer to Professor Lash's question on how you can celebrate the Christian liturgy outside the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere (which is something presumably envisaged by divine providence, the Christian tradition being universal at least in intention): you adjust.

The person who says it simply does not matter is certainly wrong: but not entirely so. The natural context of our worship does matter; but our worship is not irrevocably tied to any particular natural context. The symbols of winter and spring are not so interwoven with the mysteries of Christmas and Easter that those mysteries simply make no sense apart from those symbols.

On the one hand, wherever you live in the world, you surely have to continue celebrating Christmas in December and Easter in March/April, because as a Christian you are heir to the calendar of Israelite religion, and that was a calendar of the temperate northern hemisphere. But even Israelite liturgy in that calendar was already shaking itself free from being totally tied to the seasons. It was historicized, so that Passover became more a celebration of the exodus than of the spring.

The Christian liturgy has gone even further in loosening the connection of what it celebrates with the seasons of the year; its use of their symbolism is free, not a matter of ritual necessity. I can illustrate this with the liturgy of Holy Week. I am sure the same thing could be done with the liturgy of Christmas and Advent.

Holy Week, then, liturgically speaking, is not only the Christian Passover, the spring festival of the Jews; it is the Christian New Year, Atonement and Tabernacles as well, the great series of autumn festivals of the Jews. Palms on Palm Sunday, Creation narrative at the Vigil, streams of water at the Vigil, the darkness and fasting and sombreness of Good Friday—echoing respectively Tabernacles, New Year, Tabernacles and Atonement. So I find nothing jarring in celebrating Easter as summer is passing and winter looming ahead. And in the same way it is not too difficult to fit the significance of Christmas—especially its eschatological significance as completing the expectations of *Advent*, into high summer. 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near' (Mk 13:28).

Edmund Hill OP
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