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**"Christmas and the Elementary
Forms of the Spiritual Life"**

Paul G Schervish

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explain them away rather than explain their content, causes, and consequences.² This paper offers a novel theoretical and methodological framework for examining the most deeply seated features of cultural and emotional life, what in more common parlance is called spirituality. My purpose here is to explore the common American experience of Christmas, while at the same time developing a mode of sociological analysis that takes people's spiritual experiences as seriously as the personal and social effects produced by those experiences.³

In the first section of the paper, I explore what sociological inquiry needs to add to its analytic arsenal in order to adequately interpret profound meaning. In the second section of the paper, I analyze several passages drawn from among the sixty interviews we conducted in conjunction with a recent Boston College study, *The Contradictions of Christmas: Troubles and Traditions in Culture, Home, and Heart*.⁴ In the third section, I chart the rudiments of a social-psychological theory of spirituality, emphasizing the elementary spiritual contradiction between nurturing *mysterium* and debilitating *onus*.

An Adequate Understanding

According to Max Weber the goal of sociology is to obtain what he calls a causally and subjectively adequate explanation of human behavior.⁵ Sociologists can properly explain the trajectory of social life, that is, only by locating those variables that are *socially potent enough* to produce the chain of outcomes one wants to explain and *emotionally potent enough* to motivate actors to forge or move along the links in that causal chain. My complaint about contemporary sociology is that it simply does not provide causally and subjectively adequate explanations.

Christmas and the Elementary Forms of the Spiritual Life

Paul G. Schervish

I think it's the most wonderful time of the year and the most difficult time of the year. I think it is the worst of holidays and I think it's the best of holidays. I really do. (Elizabeth Chobit)¹

For this command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you . . . It is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts . . . I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live. (Deuteronomy 30)

Spiritual experience is the most silent and perhaps most silenced variable of sociological analysis. If sociologists pay attention to spiritual experiences at all, it is to

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It curtails its analysis just when things are getting interesting.

One of the enduring insights of sociology is that it is possible to uncover the underlying institutional and cultural forces that explain why people think and act the way they do. Whether it is Emile Durkheim explaining social suicide rates by the level of group solidarity or Karl Marx explaining the dynamics of capitalism as deriving from underlying class antagonisms, sociology aims to produce a relatively adequate explanation of what people think, feel, and do. Sociologists claim to understand at least partially the dynamics of racism, poverty, crime, church attendance, social movements, gender relations, and family life—to name only a few areas of research. Nevertheless, when people reflect in their own hearts or with friends, spouses, ministers, or therapists on their daily round they think, feel, and speak in a language much more akin to the discourse of Deuteronomy 30, on the blessings and curses of life, than to that of contemporary social science. Also, as we will hear, the respondents in the Christmas study evince an intuitive and self-reflective understanding of the distinction between blessing and curse, the need for vigilance directed at discerning the boundaries between blessing and curse, and the need for a set of workable strategies for advancing happiness and deterring distress. It is doubtful, then, that sociology can forge adequate explanations without bringing to light the elementary feelings that mobilize people's lives, or studying the strategies people take up to advance life and resist death.

What, for instance, is the ability of current sociology to provide a causally and subjectively adequate explanation of verses 11-20 of Deuteronomy 30 (extracted in the second epigraph at the beginning of the paper)? Very little, I regret to say, unless it develops the theoretical capacity

to deal with the following three realities. The first is the experience of ultimate concern. The passage clearly assumes that people experience at least some aspects of their lives as choices between the ultimate principles of life and death, blessing and curse, and not merely as choices for or against particular moral mandates. The second reality is that the metaphysical order is knowable. The passage asserts the epistemological position that ontological reality is neither distant nor alien but known to people's hearts and enunciated in their words. The third aspect of life that social science must be able to understand is those acts of human agency that individuals carry out in order to advance blessing and deter curse. For according to the author of Deuteronomy, individuals are expected to exercise vigilance about and pursue strategies for seeking life and eschewing death.

I believe that sociology and social science can provide an adequate understanding of cultural and emotional life only if they explicitly attend to the *elementary forms of the spiritual life*. This term is meant to be evocative of the purposes and accomplishment of Emile Durkheim's classic book on the social origins of religion, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.⁶ By elementary forms of the spiritual life I mean those units of intellectual, emotional, and kinetic knowledge that are consoling and attractive or disconcerting and repulsive. Life-giving ideas, sentiments, and behaviors are *mysterium*. Debilitating ideas, sentiments, and behaviors are *onus*. If *mysterium* is wisdom, compassion, and care; *onus* is deception, disregard, and negligence. If *mysterium* is modified, as Rudolf Otto recommends, by the adjectives *tremendum* (worthy of worship) and *fascinans* (enticing), *onus* is modified by the adjectives, *debilitans* (debilitating) and *conficiens* (destroying or terminating).⁷ *Mysterium* is represented by the chain of signification, life-blessing-virtue-sacred-good-

consolation-joy-union-foregiveness while *onus* is represented by death-curse-vice-propane-evil-desolation-sorrow-estrangement-retribution. This conceptual scheme can be developed further by examining some passages from our Christmas interviews.

The Contradictions of Christmas

Eleanor Lindsey, a thirty-eight year old married mother of three, articulates the contradictory meaning of Christmas as expressed by many respondents. Note her distinction between *mysterium* and *onus*, and how both of these contrasting knowledges emerge from the same realms, and how *mysterium* and *onus* impinge and encroach on each other.

I think back to the Christmases that I had as a child. They were so perfect and wonderful. And now without my father there,

they're not the same. For me, more than any time of the year, Christmas highlights his absence. The holidays really are a family time. For me, that's the best part of Christmas, so the fact that my father isn't there is far more obvious.

For me the most bothersome part about Christmas is also the family that's so wonderful. It's a family time and, you've seen my house, you know that there's always family around, lots of family. And as much as that's really wonderful, to feel their love and to see everybody, there are times when that's difficult. So I think that Christmas really brings a mixed bag, and I think that Christmas is always a Catch-22.

I think I notice some of that conflict in people just in going out Christmas shopping. There seems to be two extremes which happen to the people that I encounter trying to

get my errands done. Either the people that you encounter will be very happy, very pleasant, will go out of their way to find you that one item in the store that I'm looking for; or they're absolutely miserable. For me, I don't seem to notice an in-between.

When it's all over, one part of me is very relieved because it then means the end of a lot of people staying at my house, which, you know, then means less laundry, less cooking, less cleaning; and the house then is a little bit quieter. And that's refreshing. But it's also a little sad. It's a little sad to see people leave and realize that, with the winter coming, we may not see them until the spring. It's a little sad to think it's another Christmas that has gone by without my father, it's another Christmas where the kids are getting a little older.

What can be said about Lindsey's memoir? First, she concretely expresses her contradictory experiences. Second, Lindsey clearly knows the difference between which aspects of family and shopping bring happiness and which induce distress, and she can express this dilemma with a good degree of self-reflection. Third, the deepest enjoyment and profoundest distress emerge from two sides of the same reality rather than from different realities. It is not that family brings consolation and shopping brings debilitation. Both family and shopping are inherently contradictory, each with a trajectory to life and death. Fourth, Lindsey not only enunciates the contradictory tendencies of Christmas in her reflection that Christmas is the "most wonderful" and the "most difficult time of the year." She also understands how the life-giving and depressing experiences of the holiday remain on either side of an emotional fissure. "I don't seem to notice an in-between," she observes. Finally, while the generative and

debilitating aspects of Christmas are experienced as being on opposite sides of an emotional fissure, their domains encroach upon each other. Lindsey's greater enjoyment of her children as they get older is encroached upon by her dread of fleeting time. The happiness derived from decorating her house and making it a center of hospitality is invaded by the added drudgery of housekeeping. But then this latter feeling, too, is displaced by sentiments of affection directed toward friends and family whom she will not see until the Spring.

Other respondents portray their experience of the radical difference between *mysterium* and *onus*, but also of the convertibility of these two experiences, the ways in which what was once *mysterium* later becomes *onus*. "It just seemed like love was radiant in those days," says John Sommers, recalling his childhood. "When you walked out of church at Christmas time it just seemed like everyone was radiant. Whereas today, it isn't the same" because people are so frazzled. Equally common is the transformation of *onus* into *mysterium*. For so many years, recounts Janet Eliot, nobody "acknowledged around Christmas time that it was Christ's birthday. Nobody really acknowledged God at Christmas until my grandmother was dead. Until this year. We sang the carols together. We sat around the tree, realizing what the Christmas tree really is. I've honestly found out it's a symbol of life. You bring it indoors so you have life inside the house. I remember reading that, but I was surprised [to finally realize it]."

To say that people recognize the difference between *mysterium* and *onus* is not to claim that they are able to formulate this distinction discursively. Despite the effort

to express *mysterium*, the experience remains largely ineffable. For John Sommers, the glow of Christmas is hard to define but, for all that, no less real:

When family members walk in the house on Christmas, it just seemed like a halo. You can just see a halo. There's just something about them that's different, like somethin's hoverin' over 'em. I will just say it. They seem like different. Let's put it this way, they seem like they're different people, but they're not. You know, they're the same people, naturally, but it just seemed like they're different. It seemed like they were on a pedestal. Sometimes it seemed like they're just walkin' on air, if that makes any sense. Like they're light-hearted. Just walkin' on a cloud, maybe.

Roberta Morrow also has trouble putting her finger on exactly what is moving about Christmas, and settles simply on the word "magic":

Everything about Christmas is good I think. I don't know, you see family, you get together, you have fun, you see friends you haven't seen, people are nicer. I don't know, it's just a feeling. The Christmas spirit I guess. Good will towards men. I don't know what it is. It's magic.

As I noted earlier, *mysterium* and *onus* exist in close proximity. But, interestingly, there is a somewhat better ability to describe *onus*. Patricia Leary is quite clear about what is bothersome about being single at Christmastime:

Christmas is a very lonely time for me and I think that maybe part of my cynicism comes from that. I hate the season, I hate the fact

that I'm not with my family, I hate the fact that everybody else I know is, and I'm sick and tired of hearing people say "Holidays must be so hard on you."

But mothers surrounded by children are just as capable of locating Christmas's difficult side. For Laura Hoban it is not just the commercialism that bothers her but how much things differ from the "actual spirit of Christmas":

I really hate all the advertising on the television leading up to Christmas. Giving children high expectations of things, putting tremendous pressure on their parents for them to go and spend a hundred dollars on this and a hundred dollars on that. It's something that parents just can't afford. And I think that is awful. Children are ungrateful, you know, and if you haven't got the money, you haven't got the money. And I suppose that's where the actual spirit of Christmas has gone—into [buying presents] rather than being happy spending time with your family. You measure how good a Christmas you have by how many presents you've got, which is really awful.

We find that Christmas with its failed or achieved focus on the birth of the God-man, tends to be experienced with a heightened awareness of *mysterium* and *onus*. Both are experienced acutely and in sharp contrast: Laura Hoban, for instance, explains that "what Christmas does is it heightens everything":

All the bad things in society are heightened at Christmas, so there are lots of drives, giving Christmas parcels to the elderly, providing Christmas dinners to children's homes, finding shelter for the homeless, and there

are lots of, you know, money-raising activities before Christmas. And don't forget that in those families where abuse is likely to occur, it's then [at Christmas] when it's going to occur. I mean, the kid is gonna get a thrashing over Christmas, when the parents are just really frustrated, or drunk, when they've had enough of their families. So, lots of families break down.

In contrast, Michele Taylor is as pleased by the intensifications of Christmas as Hoban is dismayed. "There's magic about Christmas because it's one of the happiest days of the year. Everybody's happy—religiously. Families are happy and there's la . . ."

For her part, Julie Longo sees things from both sides. "Oh, it's a very emotional time of the year, so, it drags up a lot of emotion that I don't always want dragged up," she explains. "It drags up a lot of relationships gone sour, a lot of sadness as far as world problems—homeless people. I mean, it just seems like everything surfaces at that time of the year more so than at other times of the year. But, maybe that's why the holiday is so important to me, for the sheer fact that the joy around it and the happiness override the severe sadness around it as well."

Such intense contradictory emotions of Christmas require a vigilance aimed at turning a potentially debilitating circumstance into a rewarding one. Care is taken to advance *mysterium* and ward off *onus*. Even gloomy Michele Taylor appreciates this. "They say there's so much sadness. Lot of suicides and depression at that time. Well, I think if you keep yourself busy, you don't have time. I'm alone here. I could get depressed very easily." According to David Whitkens, vigilance means being careful to imbue the holiday with just the right amount of specialness. "We don't want to detract from the season, we don't

want to overdo the season. It's a season. It's not the season. It's a season. So, not too much emphasis, not too little either. Make it special without overdoing it. It's a hard balance. I've got to be honest with you, it's hard sometimes, it is hard."

My object of study is spiritual life. By this I simply mean what most people mean by symbolic life. But by speaking of spiritual life I emphasize the fact that life is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and material and that at every moment of consciousness people are discriminating between *mysterium* and *onus* and setting their course on the basis of what they discern. For this reason I speak of material realms of spiritual life rather than of separate material and spiritual realms. For instance, I consider all the social interactions involving money, gifts, food, decorations, family, cards, music, travel, weather, death, time, work, and worship as material realms of spirituality—which evoke the complex experiences of *mysterium* and *onus*.

Spirituality itself is the ensemble of knowledge, sentiment, and behavior with which one carries out strategies to advance one's involvement with *mysterium* and curtail one's involvement with *onus*. Since *mysterium* and *onus* exist only as material incarnations, strategies for advancing *mysterium* never revolve around abandoning the material aspects of the holiday but in transforming one's relationship to them. For instance, giving gifts can be nothing else than a material reality; the question is whether such gift-giving brings happiness or debilitation. For Margaret Daniels authentic spirituality comes not from renouncing gifts but from appreciating them. Teaching this to her kids is her strategic spirituality:

I like to get things for my husband, I like to get things for my children, I like to get things for my family. I like to get things for my extended family, my husband's family. We all want to try to remember people at Christmas time. But the onslaught of the commercialism can really get to you. It really can. My mother-in-law and I had a really interesting conversation about a year ago about Christmas. She thought that because I now have children, the commercialism might change how I feel about [gifts]. And I said it doesn't, it doesn't. The biggest problem I have is as the kids get older and they start attending school, and it's a thing of where everyone says "well gee, what are you going to get?" You want to make sure that you install in the children's mind, that this is not what it's completely about. There's a lot more to it. It's about family, it's very, very much about family.

But still there is something very wonderful about seeing happiness in a child's eye . . . there is that, that, that sort of look in a child's eye, the wonder of looking at a tree, the wonder of the lights, yeah—the wonder of looking at the presents underneath the tree, too. Yeah, there is that. Uh, then of course, there's, like I said, there's, there's hopefully that, as they get older, they, they will learn what the meaning of Christmas is, and that as I see them grow, I'll see them grow spiritually as well.

Bill Wendt devises his Christmas strategy around making Christmas "a good day," "a good memory":

You have to make it the best day your family can have—no matter what. No matter how you're feeling, how you think. If you're up, if you're down. You have to make it a good

day. You got to make a good memory. Cause if you make a bad memory, it's gonna bother you, it's gonna bother you. It'll be in your mind much more often than the good. That bad one there will keep recurring [in your mind] and you'll be sorry for it. Christmas is a day when what you do will affect you for the rest of your life. If a guy goes up, if a guy comes home drunk on Christmas and he hits his wife in the head and he's any kind of a decent man, he'll regret it for the rest of his life—every year.

Finally, it is clear that what is *onus* for one person can be *mysterium* for another. Elizabeth Chobit, for example, blissfully pursues a Christmas regimen that would weary the spriest elf:

For me it was the thrill of the hunt. You should have seen what I did for Cabbage Patch Dolls—it was like crazy for me. I went to Maine, I went to Connecticut, I went everywhere, I was bound and determined that there'd be two Cabbage Patch Dolls under my tree that year, and I didn't care where I had to go. Black market, California, I didn't care. It was the thrill of the hunt, I mean adrenaline! I used to wake up at night and plan my map. Okay, we're gonna hit Zayres, and we're gonna do this and we're gonna do that. And by God, Christmas morning, there were two Cabbage Patch Dolls under there.

Well, see that's what I do at my parish, Saint Francis. I lug for Jesus, I tug for Jesus, I pour for Jesus, I chop for Jesus, I squeeze for Jesus, I mean I do. Well, that just means that everybody has their ministry. And my ministry is the liquor cabinet. My ministry is the chopping, the dicing, you know, that's what I do. I am, like the Martha. I am Martha. You know, come in,

come in, come in. So I lug for Jesus, chop for Jesus, dice for Jesus.

Toward a Sociology of Spirituality

My attempt to formulate a sociological framework that takes people's elementary spiritual experience seriously is akin to the goal of intellectual inquiry suggested in 1819 by Arthur Schopenhauer *The World as Will and Representation*:

Intuitively, or *in concreto*, every [person] is really conscious of all philosophical truths; but to bring them into . . . abstract knowledge, into reflection, is the business of the philosopher, who neither ought to nor can do more than this.⁸

Schopenhauer suggests an agenda and perhaps a vocation for social science as well: to take the intuitive truths of our respondents and their incipient philosophical reflection and bring them into theoretical perspective.⁹ That is, to do what Howard S. Becker years ago advised me is the task of the sociologist: to say something more than a respondent would be able to say, but something the respondent upon reflection would be able to recognize as instructive. In regard to the study of Christmas, this means bridging the gap between the intuitive spiritual experiences of people like those I have quoted above and the theology of Deuteronomy by developing a more adequate analytic framework for social-psychological investigation. What are the rudimentary elements of such a framework?

In our larger research effort my colleagues and I situate our analysis in two contexts. The first entails a reformulation of Freud's notion of desire. We accept Freud's views

on the mobilizing power of desire as the yearning for completion. But we reject Freud's position that such desire is always backward looking, seeking fetal reunion with the mother, and that this yearning must be sublimated. Our position is that such perpetual desire is forward looking and worthy of encouragement as the inherent mobilizing force inclining people toward *mysterium* and away from *onus*.

The second intellectual context of the argument is Durkheim's Kantian approach to the categories of sacred and profane. The distinction between *mysterium* and *onus* is fundamental to life in general just as the distinction between sacred and profane is fundamental to religious life. Stated differently, sacred and profane are ways of speaking about contradictory categories of reality in religious discourse while the categories of *mysterium* and *onus* are ways to speak of the elementary contradictions in the broader discourse of spiritual life.

As our respondents intuitively know, we always have before us, as Deuteronomy 30 indicates, the dichotomies of life and death, prosperity and doom, blessing and curse. The contrasting concurrence of *mysterium* and *onus* is a defining aspect of the human condition, and to favorably negotiate this contradictory state of affairs is one of the great challenges of individual and collective life. This formidable task is further complicated by the fact that many of the symbols, events and relations of the world are opposed not only one to the other, but in themselves produce contradictory emotions, as we have already heard. The task is never simply to embrace blessing over curse, and thus conclude the matter. Rather, the challenge is to acknowledge the ineluctable presence of both

blessing and curse, and to achieve a transformation to or enhancement of blessing.

To denote the opposed poles of blessing-curse and consolation-debilitation at the most fundamental level of experience, we have adopted the terms *mysterium* and *onus*. In addition, I note the instability of *mysterium* and *onus*. What is *mysterium* today can become *onus* tomorrow, as a result of a deeper insight or new circumstances. Indeed, the prophetic tradition strives to specify the Deuteronomic principles enunciated above. Prophecy is an historically concrete, novel discernment of *mysterium* accompanied by a pronouncement that what is commonly conceived of as *mysterium* is in fact *onus*, and what is in the popular mind considered *onus* to be *mysterium*. This does not mean that any and all prophetic statements, then or now, are equally valid; but the formal nature of all prophecy revolves around this task of discerning contradictions.

As suggested by the analysis of the comments about Christmas here, consolation is neither mysterious nor remote, but is as close as Christmas and our own mouths and hearts. Consolation is within and around us. So too, however, is debilitation. The blessing and the curse, feelings of consolation and debilitation, are equally near at hand; simultaneously, we take solace in the nearness of the blessing and take caution from the nearness of the curse. About the propinquity of blessing and curse the spiritual person is invariably aware and unceasingly vigilant. The guides to such discernment are the thoughts, emotions, and actions that attract us to *mysterium*—what theology calls actual grace. The destiny of such discernment is union with ultimate *mysterium*—what theology

calls sanctifying grace. In order to adequately study these guides to and experiences of union with *mysterium*, sociologists must hammer out a new analytic rhetoric.

The theoretical framework I propose for the study of spirituality—what I have called the *deeply-seated features of cultural and emotional life*—can be summarized in seven propositions. First, as simple as it may seem, people know and record the difference between *mysterium* and *onus*, and attempt to discern which is occurring in any particular circumstance, are vigilant about keeping the realm of *onus* from impinging on that of *mysterium*, and carry out strategies for advancing *mysterium* and diminishing *onus*. Second, *mysterium* and *onus* are contradictory. That is, they emerge from the very same circumstances and are mutually encroaching, imperialistically nibbling at each other's undefended borders. Third, the contradictory relation of *mysterium* and *onus* occur in culture, home (or everyday life), and heart. What we apprehend at the macro-level as a cultural contradiction, we perceive at the micro-level as a mixed emotion. Fourth, the dynamics of *mysterium* and *onus* are more fundamentally constitutive of our biographies and our societies than almost all the other variables social science, political discourse, or the popular media identify as consequential. Fifth, because people not only know, feel, and act in regard to *onus* and *mysterium* but can express such experiences in words and other symbolic artifacts, social scientists are able to explore the workings of *mysterium* and *onus*. Sixth, while it is possible to study *mysterium* and *onus* in any situation, it is theoretically important and methodologically advantageous to study their workings in symbolically dense and emotionally intense occasions such as Christmas. Finally, by carrying out such explorations we learn about the elementary forms of spiritual life not just in and around Christmas but throughout "ordinary time" as well.

NOTES

- 1 As with respondent Elizabeth Chobit here, all names of respondents mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.
- 2 Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969). The most comprehensive effort to date by a sociologist to provide a theoretically sound account of spiritual experience as an authentic phenomenon in and of itself is provided here. But Berger does not approach spiritual experience as a sociologist. Rather, for this task he puts on the disciplinary "hat" of a theologian.
- 3 I am grateful to Raymond Halnon and Karen Bettez Halnon whose thinking and writing have substantially contributed to this paper.
- 4 The Christmas research project was generously supported by T. B. Murphy Foundation Charitable Trust.
- 5 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 4-28.
- 6 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Spiritual Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1965).
- 7 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).
- 8 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2d ed., vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 383.
- 9 Also Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Spiritual Life*, 492: "The prudent man is the one who has a very clear sensation of what must be done, but which he would ordinarily be quite incapable of stating as a general law."



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