



*Rev. Dr. Derek Suchard*

## Contemplating Easter and the End of the World

Netherlands UU Fellowship  
5 April 2015

Today, in churches all around Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, and Australia/Oceania, Easter is being celebrated. The Christian Easter. For those who somehow missed the details, it's a tale of redemption for the sinful nature of humanity. Back in the day, shortly after the creation of the world on 22 October 4004 B.C., at 6 p.m., according to Irish Bishop Ussher, the first two humans had sinned. In fact they had sinned so badly that they completely corrupted all of humanity such that no one was worthy of going to heaven and everyone should have gone to hell. Fortunately for the world, so the story goes, redemption followed 4037 years later when God sent Jesus to be crucified, die and rise again after three days, thus making it possible for people to be saved. Through those actions, the Christians believe, humanity could be liberated from the burden of sin that Adam and Eve had unwittingly loosed upon the world.

It was therefore fitting that the denouement of this story take place when it did, for it coincided quite nicely with the Jewish festival of Pesach – Passover – which is also a liberation story. That recounts the time that Moses, the son of Hebrew slaves in Egypt who was raised in the palace of the Pharaoh (which Pharaoh is never made quite clear) until one day he rediscovered his Jewish roots and started on the journey that would ultimately result in him leading the Jews out of bondage in Egypt and into freedom in what would eventually become the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Today is the third day of Pesach – there are seven days in total – and, as quite often happens with Jewish festivities, eating is involved.

Easter has evolved somewhat in the course of history, and a whole bunch of new images has crept in. We now have easter bunnies – both chocolate and furry – baskets of brightly coloured easter eggs, and the chocolate hens that laid them, apparently, and lots of primary colours and bright springtimey frolicking lambs and other newborn creatures, because, well, it's spring. And spring is happy and gay. The original kind of gay. And spring is sweet and innocent, not yet touched by the ravages to come.

It's just nice, after that nasty winter, isn't it....to go out (soon) without your coat on. And soon it will be rokjesdag....skirt day....the first day when, completely spontaneously and independently, women all over the Netherlands go out in skirts.

But spring hasn't always been so frolicky and nice. The archetypal story of spring isn't nice at all.

That, of course, is the story of Demeter and Persephone, a story so old that it predates the Roman and Greek pantheons that we know. Demeter was the Greek (or originally Albanian) goddess of the harvest. I have it on good authority, that her name in Albanian means

Mother Earth. She was also the mother of Persephone, by Zeus. Now Persephone was apparently divinely beautiful, and so Hades, god of the underworld, where the dead people live, lusted after her in his heart and abducted her to Hades. According to one version of the story, Persephone's father, Zeus, permitted the kidnapping because he didn't think that Demeter would have agreed to allow her daughter to go to Hades. Demeter was so picky. She had even rejected Apollo and Hermes as suitors. One must have standards, after all. So it was really a kind of arranged marriage, wasn't it?

Demeter was heartbroken. She searched the world over looking for Persephone, without success. But during her search, she neglected her own divine duties and the earth ceased to bring forth fruit. Eventually Helios, the divine, personified sun, who sees everything told Demeter where Persephone was and, after some pressure from Zeus, who was under pressure from the prayers of the people and some of the other gods, told Hades to return Persephone to her mother.

He did, but tricked her into eating some pomegranate seeds – the food from the underworld - from Hades, and, for reasons known only to the inscrutable gods, that meant that she had to live part of her life in Hades. In the original story that was for 3 months. Other writers later expanded it to six.

So now, at the beginning of winter, Persephone has to return to Hades, where she is apparently queen and is responsible for carrying out the curses that are made against living people by other living people.

I find it somewhat interesting that the Christian Easter story and the Greek story of Demeter and Persephone share a number of elements: Divinities who go to Hades/Hell at the instigation of the uppermost God, and then come out again, and when they come out, mankind is saved from a physical or a spiritual death.

The Celts also had a similar story, this time involving Bride, or Brigid, the goddess who brings Light and Life to the land. According to a Scottish version of the tale, spring is when Bride emerges from the earth, just like Persephone did, and, getting stronger with each passing day, brings life through the offspring of the livestock and the sprouting of the grass, wheat and other plants necessary for sustenance.

In old Scotland, February had a name that reflected a similar sentiment.... *a' marbh mhiòs*, the Dead Month.

In the Demeter story, Demeter is heartbroken again every year when Persephone has to go down to Hades, and so she allows the crops to fail and off we go again. Facing starvation.

Well, not us, of course. That's the beauty of modern technology and agriculture, and globalisation and whatnot. We are not really in danger of starving at all, most of us. And we have canned goods and daily shipments of oranges from Spain, and pineapple from Hawaii, and bananas from Guadeloupe, and so on.

That's a relatively new development, though. For far and away most of the time that people have been around, and certainly for those of us whose ancestors were stubborn enough and/or brave enough to leave the tropical forests and savannahs that were our original starting place and move to the temperate zones – or worse – where seasonal variation also

meant sharp variations in the availability of food, the onset of winter also meant the onset of a long period of uncertainty. Even the threat of death.

We should be glad of that, shouldn't we. I know I am. Starvation is horrific. I don't know that it's the worst way to go, I mean, we have such a wide variety of choices don't we. But it's certainly not a barrel of laughs. And, apart from the death from actual starvation, the health issues associated with reduced caloric and vitamin intake are not a great deal of fun, either. My first conscious awareness of the possibility of starvation was in 1968, I think, when the images of the starving children in Biafra, Nigeria as a result of an uprising there came onto my southern Ontario TV screen. Since then, we've had more than enough examples. Cambodia, Somalia, Ethiopia, and on and on and on.

Not close to me, though. For which I should be grateful, I suppose. And I am. And I try to contribute to alleviating the suffering there, too. By donating to relief programmes and such like. Even locally, like the Amsterdam Food Bank. Stuff that's within my power. I may not be able to do everything, but that doesn't mean I can't do anything.

Fortunately, I – and you – are living in the Golden Age of Humanity. Given the recent headlines, that might sound somewhat strange to hear, but I'm serious.

The Dutch Golden Age, Golden Century, actually, covered roughly the 17<sup>th</sup> century and marks a period in which Dutch trade, science, military might and art were among the most acclaimed in the world. It was a great time to be Dutch. Not for everybody, of course. There was a huge part of the population that was almost incomprehensibly poor, below subsistence level poor, and communicable diseases were rampant. And violence, both state-run and private, was common.

Corrected for inflation, the average income per capita was approximately 5% of what it is today and social inequality, the difference between the 1% and the 99% was even worse than it is today. Even children had to work to try to scrape a living together. To try to survive, people had to be willing to take on very hard work, like shipping out with the Dutch East Indies Company, with a good chance of dying on the voyages or while working in the east. Life expectancy was not great for most people. Although figures are hard to come by, researchers believe that average life expectancy at birth was between 28 and 32 years old. For most, that was a direct reflection of the calories that they were, or more often, were not, getting. In the 1775-1815 period, things got even worse, with life expectancy at birth for most people being 26 years.

On the plus side, Rembrandt painted some very nice pictures.

Fortunately, those days are well behind us. Almost everywhere in the world. The average lifespan is increasing almost everywhere. Most people are getting enough calories to survive and thrive. Not everyone. Not yet. But the developments are going in the right direction. You might think that the current hostilities prove that this could not be the Golden Age, but that is only a façade. We have more peace today than we have ever had. The hostilities today are concentrated in a relatively small area, and that area is getting smaller all the time.

By almost every measure I can think of, this period will almost certainly go down as the Golden Age of Humanity. In terms of the economy, public health, housing, education. And on and on. Are we completely there yet? No. But well on our way. But there is no guarantee

that that will continue, which is why we may look *back* on this as the Golden Age. Because it could, and some people think very likely will, come to an end. For the threats are real. Climate change is a big one. And the impending crisis of fresh water. And the likelihood of a major infectious epidemic.

Some of you may know of my, what shall we call it..., not quite an obsession, how about intense interest in extinction level events for this planet. I was thinking about that as I was contemplating this sermon and I finally understood how my fixation on these extremely threatening scenarios, such as the supervolcano under Yellowstone National Park in the U.S., the possibility of computers reaching a singularity and becoming sentient, getting consciousness, and deciding that we are a nuisance and therefore expendable, or antibiotic resistant bacteria kicking off an epidemic that we cannot stop, or a meteor crash such as has happened in the past, how my interest in those subjects was actually a spiritual discipline.

Spiritual disciplines are a way of focusing one's attention on what is important.

Some of them are surprising.

One that I found on Spiritual Practice of the Day was returning to a door if you had slammed it and closing it properly and gently and apologising to it. Same if you had reacted angrily to any other inanimate object....your computer, say.

Another is consciously and deliberately slowing down and observing what's going on around you if you find yourself getting impatient.

Express the Namaste feeling – the ' I salute the divine within you' – by bowing, either inwardly or outwardly, to everyone you meet.

At the end of the day, write down three things that went well or made you feel happy that day.

And reading and thinking about the extinction level event that could mean the end to life as we know it, Jim.

How is that a spiritual practice? you ask.

For me, that is a spiritual practice because of what it tells me. Let me illustrate first with another example.

Some years ago, I began taking some time before starting a meal – not all the time, and sometimes not even visibly – to contemplate the steps that had to be taken to ensure that the food actually made it to my plate.

If you do that, you really understand how we really are all part of an interconnected web. For example, last night, I made lasagne from scratch...nearly from scratch....I cheated by using store-bought noodles this time.

For that lasagne, I used noodles made from wheat grown by a farmer in Italy and then converted into noodles in a factory there, then brought, probably by transport truck from Italy to the wholesalers in the Netherlands, then put on another truck to get it to the store where I bought it. The meat came from a cow, origin unknown, but could have been anywhere from Ireland to Argentina. Canned tomatoes from Israel, olives from Greece. A lot of people had a hand in that very simple meal. It puts it in perspective.

It's similar when I contemplate the tsunami that might – or might not – be released when the western side of Grand Canary Island falls into the Atlantic Ocean and heads to the U.S. east coast. And what I found is that it is a way for me to recognise the fragility of life. Mine and others. One good meteor strike and we're done. How fragile is that? And how much should we then cherish the moments that we have, and the people in our lives that we can share them with for however long.

Which brings me back to Easter and spring and Demeter and Persephone.

I think it's time we dispensed with the enthusiastic lambs and the cute little bunnies and remember what spring celebrations are really about.

They are enthusiastic alright, but that's the enthusiasm of the death-row prisoner whose been reprieved in the nick of time by the governor. We need to remember that the joy of spring is the joy of having made it through a winter that should have killed us, and in the past, very well may have done.

Don't just smile contentedly because the sun is out. Revel in the fact that you live in an age that allows you to almost take for granted the fact that winter no longer means an uncertain future and possibly death from starvation and cold.

Personally, I think that the carnival celebrations are an unconscious acknowledgement of that fact, and that is the level of enthusiasm, though not necessarily of excess that we should strive for.

That is the liberation that we have achieved as a group.

-----/

© 2015. All rights reserved.