

Will God Deliver the Goods?

During the Second World War the Allied forces established military bases on several islands in Melanesia. These isolated islands were ideal havens for harbouring warships because the coral atolls were able to provide protection against torpedo attacks by the Japanese. Supplies to these military bases came primarily by air, and the locals were able to observe the abundance of goods that were constantly being parachuted in. It so happened that events became particularly impressive in the minds of the local people because the apparent “alien” source of the goods was consistent with one element in an important local myth. Although told in a variety of forms, its central theme was that one-day the great ancestors would direct big ships to the islands carrying a cornucopia of goods, and creating a new society of plenty, thus ending the troubles and conflicts of life on the island.

Although the myth of the “Cargo Cults” had actually been waning, the experience of seeing the magical manner by which supplies were delivered saw a resurgence of belief in the cults. The central tenet of cargo cults is that material well-being will usher in a new age in tandem with the return of the ancestors, either in the form of the traditional cloud gods or, as a result of the work of missionaries, Jesus Christ. Cargoism came to be associated with an improved material,

organizational and spiritual welfare; in that would redress the inadequacies of the existing culture.

The resurgence of these cults manifested in several forms of behaviour. Groups began to wear imitation colonial police or armed forces uniforms. Actual or symbolic airstrips were built along with, wharves and warehouses to accommodate the anticipated bounty. Dummy agricultural and military equipment was built in the hope that it would be transformed into real equipment. Requests for goods to the United States President were routinely made via telephones made of tin cans and string. Traditional material resources were sometimes neglected, and traditional means of guaranteeing livelihoods were abandoned. Gardening ceased and animals were destroyed.

Although largely irrational, what is interesting about this behaviour is that it contains elements that are found in the more generic idea of “millennialism.” Millennialism has a long history and has captured the spiritual human imagination in a variety of forms regardless of cultural background. Because it has sprung up spontaneously in diverse of cultures throughout the world it can be said to be a predisposition or aptitude in the human psyche. Millennialism can therefore be said to be an archetypal or universal pattern inherent to the psyche of humankind, structuring certain collective experiences in this way.

The common element of millennialism is the presence or belief in a prophetic-type of personality. In Christianity it can be seen in the New Testament belief of Christ's return, whilst Judaism holds the belief in the return of the Messiah. Similar notions The phenomenon appear in many other religions – Islam, Orphism, Zoroastrianism, Rastafarian, Black Muslim, Adventists, Mormon, African, Australasian and Meso-American religions, to list but a few. On the darker side are the religious movements involving leaders like Jim Jones, Marshall Applewhite and Heaven's Gate, and David Koresh of the Branch Davidians. The spirit of millennialism has also manifested in non-religious movements like Utopianism. The ideal of a commonwealth of people living under seemingly perfect conditions is championed in works ranging from Plato's *Republic* to H.G. Wells *A Modern Utopia*. The New Town movement of the 1970's can also be seen as a manifestation of the same high ideal.

Millennialism denotes the promise of a perfected, blissful and trouble free order of life in the future and includes a "belief in the approaching realization of a perfect age or perfect land."¹ the details of which can be seen in a variety of contexts. The anticipated result is always an "imminent, total, ultimate worldly collective salvation"².

¹ *Millennial Dreams in Action*, S.L. Thrupp (Ed), The Hague, 1962, p.11.

² "Millenarian Movements," in *Archives Europeenes de Sociologie*, 7, Y. Talmon, 1966, p.159

The main difference between “Cargo Cults” and the more general notion of millennialism is the role of material goods. A central tenet of Cargoism is that material well being and spiritual well being are inextricably linked. You cannot have one without the other. In a “cargoist” psychology the highest value and meaning of life is projected onto another object or being. In a case such as this we would be living in dangerous psychological territory because we would be living in a state of *participation mystique*. This would mean that we would feel that we would be identical with the events of the outer world - as events in an individual’s world go, so do I, and the course of the outer event will dictate the mood and situation of that individual. It is like the sport’s fan. If the team wins, he/she feels on top of the world, if they lose he/she feels downhearted. Or, if our partner is in a bad mood, it has an inordinate negative effect on us. The outer person or object thereby determines my emotional state. Applied to the “cargoist” worldview, if the external object is not delivered (the cargo) the purpose and meaning to life can be lost. In other words, spirit cannot exist unless matter is in abundance. In this state life is lived unconsciously because it is projected, and as long as this state prevails we will have no personal standpoint.

We are however, social animals with a duty and obligation to invest energy in cultural achievement, work, family and other matters of our “outer” lives.

However problems can arise when we over-invest or over-identify with these roles.

If we take away our material identity, our “cargo,” what is left? Take away the

house, income, relationships, job and social persona, who are we? When our identification with these traditional breaks down and no longer serves our purposes we inevitably end up in crisis – euphemistically, a mid-life crisis. This dilemma is well illustrated by character portrayed by John Cleese - a merchant banker dressed in a traditional City of London banker's garb, with his brief case, conservative suit and tie, bowler hat and broly, bouncing into a meeting and introducing himself: "Hello, I'm a merchant banker..." He paused with a confused look on his face and continued: "I don't know what my name is, but I am a merchant banker!"

C.G. Jung asked himself the question: What are the human instincts? He came up with five – sex, hunger, movement, creativity and reflection. It is in the last that is lacking in the merchant banker. He is in a *participation mystique* with his profession, and if it was to be taken away from him he is left a shell of a man. He is like Darth Vader, the agent of the Empire who, when unmasked was without a fully formed face. In other words, he is shown not to have an individual identity. As long as he was to project his value onto his role as an agent for the universe, his individual personality would remain unformed because there has been no personal reflection. For Jung projection and reflection were opposites.

In Mark 13 we are told about the signs of Christ's return. It starts out by a disciple saying to Jesus "Look, Teacher, what wonderful buildings!" with Jesus

replying, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be one left here one stone upon the other, that will not be thrown down.” In the same chapter Christ warns the disciple that many prophets will come in His name, saying, “I am he!” And they will lead many astray.” Christ also tells us that wars and rumours must take place, and this is followed by the dire prediction that “Brother will deliver up brother to death, and father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.” Then the prophecies turn even darker: “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heaven will be shaken.”

Through these dramatic images we are told that before a new spirit can appear, the Second Coming, there has to be a complete breakdown of values we have built so conscientiously and identified with. In other words, cultural achievement will not herald in a new spirit. Each “sign” of Christ’s return symbolizes the collapse of a highly held external or collective value. In the passages we are told about the breakdown of the status quo: the economic system (the stones,) the political system (war and rumours,) the social system (brother against brother,) as well as the traditional ways of seeing the world (the darkened sun.) The dire images only seem to reinforce the dramatic and painful turn around in our culturally influenced perspectives that is demanded if spiritual change is to take place.

Koyannisqatsi, a word used by the Hopi seems appropriate here. It means crazy life, a life out of balance, and a way of life calling for another way of living. Not

only is this the call of Christ in Mark, but it tells us how extreme the sacrifices must be if a new spirit is to be ushered in.

To see how close we are to this breakdown one only has to hold the passages of Mark in your right hand and the daily newspaper in the other and ask in all

honesty, how close are we? As Jesus tells us in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas:

“Men think that I have come into the world to bring peace, but they do not know that I have come to bring to the world discord, fire, sword, war. The result of all this disharmony is that people will be lifted up to the state of being solitaires.”

Here we are being told that through a separation from identification with external values we will discover our individual destiny. When the spirit is lost in matter, it will be through our battle with the demands of the world, that we will find ourselves as “solitaires” or individuals. The Gnostics seem to understand this dilemma when they referred to the problem of what they called “the noise.” For them the noise of everyday life drowns out the voice of God, resulting in a barren life being lived on earth.

Later on in the Gospel of Matthew (16:24-26) Christ tells us how to find ourselves when he says: “If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his safety is lost but if a man let himself be lost for my sake, he will find his true self. What will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self?” In

other words if a person will sacrifice his or her ego identifications (fame, fortune, power – the merchant banker) for the sake of the highest value, that person will find him/herself. This is the challenge that Christ met when he was tempted in the desert and resisted the demands of channelling his spirit into political and worldly fame. A spirited life is not found in a “cargoist” attitude to life.

To paraphrase much of what Jung has written about, it seems that Christians must sooner or later face the question of what we are we to understand about the “life of Christ.” Are we supposed to copy his life or, in the deeper sense, are we to live our own lives as truly as Christ lived his in its individual uniqueness? It is no easy matter to live a life that is modeled on Christ’s, but is unspeakably harder to live one’s own life, as truly and as ethically as Christ lived his.