



Vision and Viewpoint

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On the Goodness of Flesh

For many people, religion has something to do with fighting the flesh, taming it, beating it down, bringing it to submission so that the spirit can soar untrammelled by anything so mundane as a body. The flesh becomes the enemy of religion, the impediment to goodness, the pulsing, impulsive, lively gift that we're all meant to fear.

That's where Christianity comes in. Christianity is based on the goodness of flesh. Or to put it another way, if human flesh was good enough for Jesus, who of us can afford to reject it? To be human is to be flesh. To be holy is to glory in it.

The very scandal of Christianity lies in the fact that it sees divinity in humanity. It's a hard idea to swallow, after all. Every major religion recognizes the role of the Creator in the development of life, of course. But in it? Part of it? Identified with it? Gods everywhere look down from the heavens of the world religions and pronounce laws or grapple with demons or pass judgment from on high. Only Christianity argues that the Creator has taken on the flesh and blood of creation in order to bring us to assert the divine in ourselves.

In the Christmas story, we see God become helpless, become like us, become subject to the tensions of growth, become flesh so we might have the confidence to recognize that we have the stuff it takes to become like God.

So what is this about renouncing the flesh? How can we call the way God made us inherently bad as philosophers have done since the time of Aristotle?

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning says of it, "Earth is crammed with heaven."

The flesh, in other words, is all we have. It is our glory. It is our power. It is sweet. It is beautiful. And it is the clay out of which we shape a better tomorrow.