

Holiday Season, 2006

Dear Friends,

I apologize if this note of explanation is unnecessary, but not all of my readers may be familiar with that branch of speculative fiction known as *alternate history*. In such stories, history has unfolded in a way different from how it has unfolded in real life. Sometimes the stories take place at the moment of historical deviation; in other stories, the action takes place in the present day, a different world from the one we know, several centuries after the deviation. A frequent setting for alternate history, for example, is a world in which the Confederacy won the U.S. Civil War. Many stories attempt to justify the deviation by having a minor event take a slightly different turn with devastating consequences. One must suspend one's disbelief in such stories because major events generally don't turn on one single happening. (As it was explained to me, the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand instigated World War I, but do you really think a new world of peace and prosperity would have been ushered in had Ferdinand merely ducked?) DC Comics, when I was a kid, had the best approach I think. Earth-3 was a world on which history had unfolded very differently. Columbus was an American who discovered Europe. President John Wilkes Booth was assassinated by actor Abraham Lincoln, that sort of thing. There was no explanation of why these events happened that way—they just did—and if the stories on Earth-3 were not terribly well researched—or even internally consistent—nobody really cared. With this in mind, the following is an account of one of the most observed holidays on Earth-3.

THE HISTORY OF PILATEMAS

Nearly a third of the world consider themselves adherents of the philosophy of Pilateanism, not only in the Americas and Europe but throughout Asia and Africa as well. As a result, every schoolchild, even those outside of Pilaten-dom, knows the story of the first Pilatemas, of how even the gods were present in human form, not just at his birth but as his conception as well. No historical evidence exists any longer of Pilate's parents, whoever they may have been, but only the Modernists preach that he was of human birth. The Jovians maintain that he was the offspring of a human woman and Jupiter; the Minervans maintain that his mortal father had a dalliance with Minerva. There is a minor branch of Pilateanism calling itself Deism that maintains that both of his parents were of the pantheon. (Most Pilateans dismiss this view, as it suggests that Pilate was not fully human.)

Pilate's life as an itinerant laborer and philosopher might have gone unremarked—he was hardly unique in his profession at the time—were it not for the fact that his native Italy was, like the entire Mediterranean region, under the control of the Judean Empire. (This narrative deliberately refrains from referring to the controlling power with the epithet “Tyranical Judean Empire” or “TJE,” as it is dubbed in Pilatean congregations across the globe. Historically, the Judeans appear to be no more or less brutal than the Egyptians, the Persians, the Mongols, the Mayans, or really any other conquering power. That the worldwide spread of Pilateanism has resulted in global anti-Judeanism is no secret to thinking persons, and while the author cannot hope to correct the problem, he can at least endeavor not to perpetuate it.) For whatever reason, Pilate found himself in the custody of the Judeans; Pilatean tradition insists that the reason pertained to the espousing of philosophies unpalatable to the state. (If true, this tradition exposes a strange inconsistency in Judean politics. The Judeans never forbade any sort of worship of the pantheon, and, of course, Pilate didn't even worship the pantheon, not exactly (although adherents of many of the active branches of Pilateanism would disagree). Pilate's skepticism is what made him famous.) Allegedly, when he was questioned by the Judean Governor of Rome, a minor functionary named Jesus of Nazareth (whose historicity we can confirm only due to the fortunate happenstance that the ancient Judeans routinely identified themselves with their place of birth), who taunted him with “If you are truly the Great Philosopher, tell me a Great Truth,” Pilate looked his tormentor square in the eye and responded “What is truth?” So the story goes, Jesus was so impressed by this answer that he allowed Pilate the rare privilege of washing his hands before being led away to his execution.

Historically, the rapid spread of Pilateanism resulted in even the Judeans adopting Latin, the language of Pilate, for all purposes, civic and social. The language spread to Judean colonies throughout Europe, giving us the modern languages of French, Spanish, Italian, and others. In fact, it is the Latin word *papa*, father, from which is derived the title Pope, the head of Orthodox Pilateanism.

Legend has it that Pilatemas was first established by the very first Pope, Julius, who studied philosophy at the feet of Pilate himself. However, this is legend only; although they are few in number, every piece of legitimate historical

evidence of Pope Julius indicates that he died some time before Pilate was even born. Similarly, the other early Popes, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero, may have only been local religious figures. Indeed, they may not have been Pilateans at all. Unfortunately, Robert Graves's fictionalized accounts of the early days of the papacy, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius The God*, have been treated by the general public as accurate history, no doubt a result of the engaging PBS miniseries.

The most famous (and most engaging) of these legends deals with an early Pilatemas on which Pope Nero, after passing by a group of poor orphans huddling around a bonfire, charitably placed his own prized fiddle on the bonfire to keep the flame going that much longer. (The story is certainly mythical as many, including the writers of *Saturday Night Live*, have pointed out that it would have made more sense to sell or exchange the fiddle for food and lodging for the youths.)

No, Pilatemas likely did not start as a result of papal decree. It evolved gradually over time, borrowing from the Scandinavian Yule, the Celtic Solstice, and even the Judean Chanukah traditions. Pilatemas was very popular in medieval Europe largely because local celebrations were based upon previous festivals celebrated during the season. Even the Judean Popes, who have dominated the papacy for 1500 years, have encouraged the celebration of the holiday despite the fact that Pilateanism has traditionally been unkind to that group of people. Recently, in fact, Pope Ehad caused controversy by issuing a formal apology to the Judean people without specifically mentioning that he is Judean himself, giving the impression to non-Pilateans (as well as to the non-Orthodox) that he is embarrassed of his own ancestry, invalidating the apology.

Finally, in recent times, Pilatemas has been a source of controversy. While 90% of the American population observes the holiday, including 99% of the Judean population, there is a minority of Judeans who follow the pre-Pilatean Judean faith. And, of course, Pilatemas isn't observed by the Hindus or the Confucians, either, just to name a few. With this in mind, should Nativity scenes be displayed at all? And, if so, whose Nativity? The Minervan-operated scenes almost never portray Jupiter as being present, for example. And everyone remembers the controversy when Macy's displayed a Nativity scene with Yahweh present in the pantheon! While Macy's insisted they were only trying to be multicultural, there is some evidence that they had received a significant donation from the Judean Pilateans for Judaism (J4J) fringe organization, which does assert that the pantheon coexists with Yahweh.

At any rate, Pilatean or not, secular or Orthodox, the author encourages everyone to heed the words of the Great Philosopher while engaging in mindless commercialism, while listening to talk radio, even while attending religious services honoring the holiday. Whatever people say, however true it sounds, be sure to ask yourself at all times, "What is truth?"

A CAPPELLA POSTSCRIPT. I also wanted to mention to my fans, many of whom are, as I am, *a cappella* aficionados, that the Manhattan Transfer has just released an excellent Christmas album, *An Acapella Christmas*. I am disappointed that the group cannot spell "*a cappella*," but sadly, they are not alone. The album is excellent, and, to my non-Christian readers, I'll point out that the album is completely secular. None of the songs contain any mention of Jesus. (To my Christian readers, well, um...sorry? It's still an excellent album.)

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