Vespers

I've had several occasions to teach the Bible, and often when I'm teaching other subjects that have any relationship to Christian thought, I digress into talking about the relevant Biblical stories. I've done this in public school settings, even in public school *math classes*. On that basis, I am the sort of teacher that a particular breed of conservative Christian believes to be unjustly persecuted, nay, extinct. Except I've never been admonished in any way for doing this. Because...ahem...I am *teaching relevant content*, not proselytizing. But the line between teaching and indoctrination is a fine one, I know.

With that in mind....Susannah and I just went to see the Mt. Holyoke *Vespers*, which is a joint production of their chorale, chamber singers, vocal jazz group, handbell chorus, and their ferocious glee club. It was about two hours of Christmas music, in English and Latin. Again, the aforementioned conservative Christians who think the liberalsecularconspiracy has banned people from teaching the Bible in high school probably would not believe *Vespers* occurred, either. No cutesy multiculturalism here. No Hanukkah music. No Kwanzaa madrigals. No mention of the solstice. Not even the secular Christmas world of snowmen and sleigh-bells and Santa Claus. This was straight-up Christianity until you drop. They did, for instance, two different versions of *Ave Maria*.

Now. In the usual metrics of indoctrination and spectacle, *Vespers* should have rated right up there with *Triumph of the Will*. It was visually and acoustically stunning, and the same series of points —several of which are manifestly untrue—were hammered in over and over, in two different languages and dozens of different arrangements: some melancholy, some manic, some comic, some lilting. This is how you market ideas, right? And the ideas were quite simple:

Christ is king (11x), and his birth fulfilled ancient prophecy (5x). His mother was a mild-mannered (3x) virgin (6x). She gave birth to him in the winter (3x), in a manger (4x), alongside an ox (3x) and ass (2x). There were shepherds involved (9x). Angels sang about it (7x).

And so forth.

The setup is perfect. It's like Fox News telling me how I should think and feel about Iraq. And yet....it doesn't have the *feel* of indoctrination. I really doubt anyone went and witnessed for Christ after watching *Vespers*, and I spent awhile afterward trying to understand why not.

My first idea was that our society is in some way inoculated against Christmas, or against Christianity, by over-exposure or evident hypocrisy or some other process. But...nah. It doesn't work. We aren't inoculated against the commercial presentation of Christmas (X-mas, as C. S. Lewis would say). And it is a totally indoctrinating force...secular Christmas music and decorations and advertisements every single place you go, for a month. And that shit *works*...we spends billions on it. But *Vespers* doesn't work.

So I think it's this....The reason that *Vespers* doesn't feel like indoctrination is that there is a clear severance between the message and the power structure that would ostensibly benefit from us internalizing that message. When I go to the mall and hear "Jingle Bells," and I have this sudden urge to buy someone a pair of socks with mistletoe embroidered on them, *I can do it right there*. In fact, three people dressed up like elves are there to help me. And I know that in advance, as does everyone else in the mall. We are being seduced, and they are more than happy to make good on the seduction.

But even though *Vespers* is completely on-message for Jesus the whole time, there is clearly no follow-up. Mt. Holyoke is not a Christian institution and no one in the audience is in much danger of thinking it is. If I went up to the glee club and witnessed for Christ, they would *freak out*. And everyone in the audience knows that.

OK, enough about *Vespers*. To what extent is this applicable in pedagogy? I am sensible of two different sets of critiques of indoctrination in pedagogy. One comes from the worlds of activism and

moral entrepreneurship, and focuses on specific "hidden curricula:" secularism, nationalism, multiculturalism, class and gender role socialization, the "homosexual agenda," and so forth. The other —which in my mind, at least, is quite distinct—come from a consensual-education perspective: teaching anything that the student is not interested in learning is indoctrination.

All of these criticisms feel slightly out of touch with reality. You can teach the Bible in high school, and even the most ferocious unschoolers routinely get seduced into learning things they weren't initially passionate behind. And, like *Vespers*, these moments don't feel much like indoctrination, although from a given point of view, they may *look* like indoctrination.

This is all exciting and troubling to me. More later, perhaps.

On TQ, where this was originally posted, my teacher Marc Estrin (lately the author of Insect Dreams *among other things) responded:*

Ethan,

Good to find your blog. I think the Vespers mystery is connected to a larger one, having to do with music. Why is it that puppeteers, for instance, can sing Sacred Harp music so fervently, when I can assure you that not one of them believes in the (most colorful) religious texts? One can sing, say, the B minor mass in latin with huge belief in its musical message -- if you don't know latin. (I have a passage on this in *The Annotated Nose*.) But I -- who do know the meaning of the text -- can still sing it -- sing "I believe in one God, the almighty Father..." when I don't -- without feeling any hypocrisy.

It's as if the music shields the literal meaning of the text from the rational mind, and allows its meta-values to proceed unhindered.

You are far more likely to sing Rudolf to yourself than to say, "Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose" as a truth-statement.

Donna and I have been watching Wagner's Ring over the holidays. It's amazing what one can sing and still be believed.

Anyway, I think the mysterious shielding of text by music is a big part of the issue. Why this should be is yet to be explored.

Marc