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The sad, secular substitutes for Easter

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Perhaps no period of the year -- not even when Christmas is reduced to XMAS -- tells us better how impoverished are the sad, searching celebrations presented as stand-ins for Passover and Holy Week.

Like a journeyman basketball player who lacks the magic of Michael Jordan in his prime, these events, sent in as subs, lack the Mystery generated spontaneously by these feasts whose date is set by the first full moon after the spring equinox. They are born, so to speak, from the inexhaustible symbols whose energy affects the tides of the oceans as well as those that rise and fall within us.

The dating of these feasts flows from the ancient practice of attempting to coordinate the lunar and solar calendars, symbolizing the two modes of eternal life. At the vernal equinox, when dark and light are in balance, the sun and the moon stand across the sky from each other. The moon, as Joseph Campbell once explained to me, "represents engagement in Time, like throwing off death, as the moon its shadow, to be born again. The disengaged sun represents the Eternal, the moon's source of light and the source of light for all of us who live in Time."

Setting the date of Easter according to this interplay of sun and moon "suggests that life, like the light that is reborn in the moon and the eternal in the sun, finally is one." We actually experience this mystery in the plangent longings we feel inside ourselves when the light and warmth of spring return, why folk medicine offers prescriptions for "spring fever" and we speak of being "moonstruck."

We, therefore, feel within us the power of these feasts when symbolism so transcends such pale and fragile secular replacements as the Masters Golf Tournament or the eschatological flavor of the Final Four in college basketball. These distractions dissolve when we remember, at the overlapping feasts of Passover and Easter, that we are all called out of the house of bondage just as the Jews were called out of their bondage in Egypt. As Campbell expressed it, "We are called out of bondage in the way in which the

moon throws off its shadow to emerge anew, in the way that life throws off the shadow of death."

The Masters Tournament is scheduled for the same time on a golf course that, in its finely trimmed lawns and trees, its strict rules for enjoying its beauty and its swift ejection policy for breaking them, is a massive effort to recreate a secular Garden of Eden in which the question of whether it is good for man to golf alone, or whether to allow women, not to mention other religious and racial groups, seems to be the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil from which ordinary people like you and me are forbidden to eat. You don't have to say any penance to be born again in this faux Eden, but you do have to sign your scorecard and replace your divots.

The capital M Mystery of the Resurrection is this year replaced by the very small letter mystery of whether destiny will push aside the rock from his tomb and Tiger Woods will rise fully from the dead. Even the details mock genuine mystery as the announcers speak in hushed and reverential tones and, much as in the recent Roman consistory in which an elderly pope invested winners, so to speak, in crimson attire, the event concludes in a clubhouse gathering as closed as a consistory in which an elderly pope-substitute invests the winner with a green jacket.

These goings-on are actually termed rituals, but their sadness lies not so much in their effort to seem sacred symbols as in how they drown out the faintest echo of the spiritual resonance of Passover and Easter by their stifling don't-talk-during-the-putt silences. The sorrow lies in their failure to understand their own lush superficiality and in how they miss the real Mystery that, as Pope Paul VI expressed it, "imbues all of creation."

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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