

The New York Browning Society, Inc. Newsletter

Founded in 1907

The National Arts Club
15 Gramercy Park South
New York NY 10003

Monthly Meeting, 1:00 PM
Wednesday, December 12, 2018
Annual Holiday Poetry Reading



Every year in December, the New York Browning Society welcomes its members and visitors to share with each other a favorite quote from the poetry of Robert Browning or Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In the spirit of this festive celebration, I would like to place a central tenet of Browning's philosophy in the context of the Victorian idea of Christmas.

Interestingly, before the early nineteenth century, Christmas was not a widely celebrated holiday in England. The biggest Winter holiday was the Feast of the Epiphany, or Twelfth Night, on January 6th, and Easter was the most important holiday on the Liturgical Calendar. Christmas was not a popular holiday because the Puritans had disapproved of a celebration that was aligned with a Pagan Winter festival; furthermore, since the Catholic worship of saints' days was banned during the Reformation, the link between St. Nicholas and Christmas implicated this holiday in contested theological debates. In Germany, however, the sacredness of Christmas was still emphasized by the very instigator of the

Protestant Reformation himself, Martin Luther.

In his 1530 Christmas Sermon, Luther emphasized the importance of honoring Christmas as a celebration of God's divine love, *agape*, which is embodied in the birth of Jesus. Thus in Protestant Germany, St. Nicholas was replaced with the Christ Child, *das Christkindl*, whose gifts reflected the gift of love from God that is Christ. This emphasis on divine love and incarnation, rather than on Easter and atonement, ushered in a new symbolic focus on children.

Friedrich Schleiermacher's popular *A Dialogue on the Celebration of Christmas* (*Die Weihnachtsfeier: Ein Gespräch*), published in 1806, and E.T.A Hoffman's *Nutcracker and Mouse King* (*Nussknacker und Mausekönig*), published in 1816, reinvigorated Protestantism in the early nineteenth century and defined the holiday afresh as an inward experience centered in the family. It is Schleiermacher's conviction that Christmas makes everyone a child again; that is, it elicits a feeling that

heightens our perception of the religious idea that is embodied in Jesus. Each speaker in Schleiermacher's dialogue reveals the significance of Christmas to lie in an inward spiritual idea rather than in a celebration that is anchored in the literal and external historical narrative of the Nativity, or even in a Church service. Thus for Schleiermacher the idea of God that is embodied in Christ can be apprehended through the love of a mother for her child, through spiritual feelings, or through music.

The German Romantic idea of Christmas, as a spiritual experience embodied in family, was introduced to England through Prince Albert, who studied with August Wilhelm Schlegel at the University of Bonn. In 1848 the *Illustrated News* published a drawing of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria celebrating Christmas with their children around an adorned Christmas tree, which served to solidify Christmas as a new sacred national celebration: the German Christmas tree became a key component of this new holiday; German Christmas carols were translated into English by Catherine Winkworth, including Luther's own Christmas songs, and became once again a focal point of English celebrations; and of course, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* would cement the new symbolic significance of Christmas in the Victorian imagination.

Christmas for the Victorians is a holiday of love, and Browning, we might say, is a poet of love. Browning's idea of love is derived from Plato and from the Christian concept of love of which John speaks in his First Epistle—the concept that God is love and that to love is to know the divine. This for

Schleiermacher was the essence of Christmas.

Browning was not a strictly orthodox religious thinker, believing along with Elizabeth Barrett Browning that the spiritual truths of religion are not known through theological doctrines but inwardly through feelings; likewise, they both believed that it was not possible to apprehend spiritual realities through the logic of the intellect but only through imagination and love. In *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, Browning's speaker takes the reader on an imaginary journey on Christmas eve to a dissenting chapel in London, a Catholic church in Rome, and to a university lecture in Göttingen. The speaker criticizes aspects of all three religious positions, but, more importantly, he apprehends the transcendent through the human expression of love—a love and faith that is shared by all three celebrations on Christmas Eve.

We hope that you will be able to join us on December 12th for our holiday celebration.

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