

Epiphany in diaspora

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [January 3, 2001](#) issue

I live in a city of candles. At one end of Main Street, there's a little jewel box of a shop that sells pure beeswax candles along with aromatherapy supplies, bath salts and hand-milled soaps that promise to impart an aura of serenity to the mundane affairs of the daily toilet. A few doors down, perfumed candles fill the New Age bookstore with the scent of generic spirituality. At the three-story emporium across the street, a kitchen store stocks votive candles for chafing dishes and long leggy tapers for the table, and a bed-and-bath boutique offers candles in the shape of angels and candleholders in the shape of stars. And now there's a new shop on Main Street devoted to nothing but candles, a wax world of candles to match the seasons (Spring Lily, Pumpkin Patch and Candy Cane), create pleasing moods (Friendship, Cinnamon Buns and Baby Fresh) and restore body and mind (Stimulating, Balancing and Relaxing).

One can find candles for nearly every occasion— except the occasion for which I was shopping last month. I walked Main Street from end to end, but could find no source to replenish the violet- and rose-colored candles for our Advent wreath. The shopkeepers had never heard of Advent candles, and in any case I'd have been hard-pressed to describe the mood they should evoke: a violet mood of eschatological vigilance, of penitence, of hushed expectancy for the coming of the Savior—and a rose mood of exultant joy (“Shout for joy, O daughter Zion!”).

It troubles me that the paraphernalia of ordinary Christian devotion are so hard to come by in a town that sets great store on spiritual self-realization. What does it signify that bit by bit we are losing the small rituals, sounds and smells, signs and symbols associated with Christian life? We still have the Bible, after all, in more versions than ever. Even the New Age bookstore has Bibles aplenty. We still have theology, and with online book ordering as close as our fingertips, we are better furnished than any previous generation with the wisdom of the past. Above all, we still have our sins to contend with, God's grace to overcome them, and our neighbors and kin to love and serve. Nonetheless, to be a Christian in this society sometimes feels like a diaspora, a people in exile living in a strange land.

I've learned something about diaspora religion from my friend Dechen, an émigré from Tibet who was exiled some 40 years ago from his village and monastery. Dechen married, settled down in America and built a temple in his family's small condo, sacrificing the master bedroom to create a sanctuary for meditation and prayer. When I climb the narrow staircase up to Dechen's sanctuary, I walk into a dense crowd of crimson-clad figures and images of deities, celestial Buddhas, incarnate tulkus and holy lamas arrayed hierarchically on step-like platforms, honored by silk and brocade, flowers and fruits, and the daily devotions of this Buddhist family.

I feel as though I have stepped out of the shopping mall and into the real world. It's not Dechen's deities that I find real, but Dechen's culture: a fully realized religious culture the likes of which I have never known in my own life. Yet it is decidedly a culture in exile, forced to wonder, like Israel during its Babylonian captivity, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" and in real danger of forgetting the spiritual homeland: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."

The Jewish mystical treatise called the *Zohar* tells us that "whenever Israel goes into exile, the Holy One, blessed be he, is in exile with them, for the Shekhinah [Divine Presence] never leaves them." This, I believe, is the peculiar significance of Epiphany, the ancient Christian feast that compresses, as if into a single gem of adamant density, the birth of Jesus, the journey of the Magi, the baptism of Christ and the miracle at Cana—all episodes in which the divine-human Christ is made manifest. Born hidden in a lowly manger, recognized by foreign kings who are powerless outside of their own realm and must return by another road, baptized in the muddy waters of the Jordan, Christ "the sun of righteousness" appears radiantly but always under conditions of diaspora and partial occultation (something that especially comes to mind in a year when we witnessed a solar eclipse on Christmas Day).

Why should it surprise us, then, that the celebration of Christ's appearance should be at once so dazzling and so elusive that the luminous traditions of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Candlemas should have fallen under a cloud of forgetting? Why should it surprise us that makeshift practices like the winter solstice celebrations and illumination nights that are proliferating in our town should be more visible than the original and authentic mysteries of which they are derivative

reflections? These are the conditions of the cultural diaspora in which we have to live—and these are the conditions of Epiphany in diaspora, the manifestation of Christ incarnate turning exile into pilgrimage and darkness into light.