

**General Topics :: The Origin and Practices of Christmas: Christian or Pagan ?****The Origin and Practices of Christmas: Christian or Pagan ? - posted by Denny (), on: 2006/12/8 14:40**

The Origin and Practices of Christmas: Christian or Pagan ?

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS AND CALENDARS - AN ENCYCLOPAEDIC HANDBOOK, 1993

Christmas Day
December 25

Christmas is the day on which Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The Roman Catholic Church designates it as a day of holy obligation on which members of the Church must attend services.

Originally, the birth of Jesus was commemorated in the East on the Feast of Epiphany (January 6) but by 354, the Christmas Feast had taken hold in the West and was observed on December 25. Since the fifth century, most Eastern Orthodox Churches have celebrated the Nativity on December 25; however, some Eastern congregations, called "Old Calendarists," still use the Julian calendar and honor the birth of Christ thirteen days later, on January 7. The Armenian Church continues to celebrate "Old Christmas" on January 6.

As with many traditions surrounding Christmas, the selection of December 25 as a commemoration of Jesus' birthday may be an example of the blending of Christian ideas and the pagan traditions they replaced. December 25 was the date of the Mithric observance of the "Birthday of the Invincible Sun." This also coincided with Saturnalia and the Winter solstice during the period when Mithraism was practiced in Rome. Since the day was already being kept as a holiday, Christians may have adjusted the symbolism of the day, declaring it the birthday of their "Invincible Son." According to events in the Gospel of Matthew, the date of Jesus' birth may actually have taken place much earlier in the year.

The word "Christmas" means "the mass of Christ," and originated in the 11th century as a name for this feast. It was one of the most popular and universally celebrated holidays in Europe during the Middle Ages. During the Reformation, however, the celebration of Christmas began to decline in importance. Reformers engaged in complex doctrinal arguments in an attempt to prove the celebration of Christmas was unscriptural.

In some countries, the Protestant reforms brought about a ban of Christmas celebrations. By the time of the Restoration in 1660, however, the celebration of Christmas as a much more secular holiday was revived in these countries. In New England, Christmas remained outlawed until the mid-nineteenth century, and in Boston classes were held in the public schools on Christmas Day until 1870, with pupils who missed school that day being punished or dismissed. The mass immigration of Irish Catholics to New England brought about the reinstitution of Christmas celebrations.

"Christmas.", DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA, 1990

Both the northern European and North American custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas... are possibly related to pre-Christian celebrations at the close of the year. The celebration of Christmas has sometimes been opposed as pagan by religious leaders. New England Puritans* considered Christmas "popish" idolatry, and the Massachusetts General Court in 1659 passed an act against its celebration, though the law was repealed in 1681."

"Christmas", THE WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA, Vol. 3, "C-Ch", 1997

"The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar. The celebration of this day as Jesus' birth date was probably influenced by pagan festivals held at that time. The ancient Romans held year-end celebrations to honor Saturn, their harvest god; and Mithras, the god of light... As part of all these celebrations, the people prepared special foods, decorated their homes with greenery, and joined in singing and gift giving. These customs gradually became part of the Christmas celebration."

"In the late 300's, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire... The popularity of Christmas grew until the Reformation, a religious movement of the 1500's. This movement gave birth to Protestantism. During the Reformation, many Christians began to consider Christmas a pagan celebration because it included nonreligious customs. During the 1600's, because of these feelings, Christmas was outlawed in England and in parts of the English colonies in America."

"Christmas", COLLIER'S ENCYCLOPEDIA, Vol. 6, 1992

"... The suppression of the Mass during the Reformation led to a sharp change in the observance of Christmas in some countries. In England, the Puritans condemned the celebration and, from 1642 to 1652, issued a series of ordinances forbidding all church services and festivities. This feeling was carried over to America by the Pilgrims and it was not until the nineteenth-century wave of Irish and German immigration that enthusiasm for the feast began to spread throughout the country. Objections were swept aside and the old traditions revived among Protestants as well as Catholics."

"Christmas," COMPTON'S INTERACTIVE ENCYCLOPEDIA, 1997

THE CHRISTMAS WREATH

The use of evergreens and wreaths as symbols of life was an ancient custom of the Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews, among other peoples. Tree worship was a common feature of religion among the Teutonic and Scandinavian peoples of northern Europe before their conversion to Christianity. They decorated houses and barns with evergreens at the new year to scare away demons, and they often set up trees for the birds in winter. For these northern Europeans, this winter celebration was the happiest time of the year because it signified that the shortest day of the year--about December 21--had passed. They knew the days would start

to get longer and brighter. The month during which this festival took place was named Jol, from which the word yule is derived. Yule has come to mean Christmas in some countries.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Trees and decorations. Ancient, pre-Christian winter festivals used greenery, lights, and fires to symbolize life and warmth in the midst of cold and darkness. These usages, like gift giving, have also persisted.

CHRISTMAS GIFT GIVING

Gift giving is one of the oldest customs associated with Christmas: it is actually older than the holiday itself. When the date of Christmas was set to fall in December, it was done at least in part to compete with ancient pagan festivals that occurred about the same time. The Romans, for example, celebrated the Saturnalia on December 17. It was a winter feast of merrymaking and gift exchanging. And two weeks later, on the Roman New Year--January 1, houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and gifts were given to children and the poor. As the Germanic tribes of Europe accepted Christianity and began to celebrate Christmas, they also gave gifts.

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"Christmas," THE WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA, 1966 Edition

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

There are several stories about the origin of the Christmas tree. People in Scandinavia once worshipped trees. When they became Christians, they made evergreen trees part of Christian festivals.

The Custom of decorating homes and churches with evergreens began in ancient times. The Romans exchanged green tree branches for good luck on the Calends (first day) of January. The English took this custom over for Christmas.

THE YULE LOG

The custom of burning the Juul (pronounced yool) came from the Norse and Anglo-Saxons. They burned a huge oak log once a year to honor Thor, the god of thunder. After the Norse became Christians, they made the yule log an important part of their Christmas ceremonies. The Scandinavians adopted the word yule to mean Christmas. In Lithuania, the word for Christmas actually means log evening. The yule log became equally important in England. The English considered it good luck to keep an unburned part of the log to light next year's yule log.

MISTLETOE

Mistletoe decorates many homes in the United States, Canada, and Europe at Christmastime. No one knows exactly how mistletoe became connected with Christmas. Ancient Celtic priests, called Druids, used to give people sprigs of the plant as a charm. Hundreds of years ago, some

people in Europe used it at religious gatherings.

HISTORY

In A.D. 354, Bishop Liberius of Rome ordered the people to celebrate on December 25. He probably chose this date because the people of Rome already observed it as the Feast of Saturn, celebrating the birthday of the sun.

EXTERNALS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1917, page 134,
authored by John F. Sullivan

SOME CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

"When we give or receive Christmas gifts, and hang green wreaths in our homes and churches, how many of us know that we are probably observing pagan customs? We do not wish to assert that they are not good customs; but they undoubtedly prevailed long before Christian times. The Romans gave presents on New Year's Day, and our bestowing of gifts at Christmas is a survival of that practice, as well as a commemoration of the offerings of the Magi at Bethlehem. The Yule-log, a feature of Christmas in old England, goes back to the days of the pirate Norsemen. Holly and mistletoe and wreaths of evergreen have been handed down to us by the Druids. And even our friend Santa Claus, that mysterious benefactor of our childhood days, existed in one form or another long before Christianity had attributed his virtues to St. Nicholas; for the god Woden, in Norse mythology, descended upon the earth yearly between December 25 and January 6 to bless mankind.

But, pagan though they be, they are beautiful customs. They help to inspire us with the spirit of "good will" even as the sublime services of our Church remind us of the "peace on earth" which the Babe of Bethlehem came to bestow. May that spirit fill the heart of each of us on every Christmas Day!"

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