

Christmas and the Borrowed Mythology of Jesus

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Over the last several years, many people have become more adamant about centering Christmas on Christ. Right-wing pundits bemoan the supposed “War on Christmas”. (Is everything a war to these people?) Billboards and signs have appeared stating, “Jesus is the **only** reason for the season”. This is simply wrong. Jesus is, in fact, a late-comer to celebrations at the time of the winter solstice. Moreover, many elements of the story of his birth, life, death and resurrection appear in the mythology of other gods and heroes that predate Christianity.

Winter in many parts of the world is cold, the days are short, and the ground is covered with snow. For all of recorded history, people have held mid-winter festivals celebrating life, imploring the return of the sun and warmth, and honoring the dead.

Prehistoric people were troubled when the sun sank lower in the sky each day. They feared that it would eventually disappear, leaving them in permanent darkness and cold. After the winter solstice, as they saw the sun rising again, they realized that the warm season would return. The winter solstice became associated with celebrations of birth and death/rebirth.¹ People would gather around central hearths with communal feasting and living. Not only was it cold outside, but also dangerous. People believed that evil forces were lurking just out of sight. The winter solstice was seen as an especially vulnerable time, with the fabric drawn between our world and the world of malicious spirits becoming torn, allowing the harmful ones to slip through to perhaps claim a victim or two. It became custom to hold a loud, cheery celebration at that time, in hope that the din would convince the lurking evil that there were too many humans gathered in this one place to take on. Charms and rituals became part of the tradition surrounding this party as a further way of protecting loved ones from evil. Divination rituals further became worked into the fabric of things because the fragility of the curtain between the two worlds might allow for a glimpse from this side into the wonders of that which would be. Chances were that if those holes were letting evil spirits through, people might be able to peep back through them to see into their world and learn something from it.² These reactions to an annual occurrence of nature, caused when the axial tilt of the earth’s polar hemisphere is farthest away from the sun (23° 26’), is the original reason for the season.

In several Mediterranean cultures, the time between December 25 (the winter solstice under the old Julian calendar, superseded by the current Gregorian calendar, adopted in 1752 in the British Empire and American colonies) and January 6 (Epiphany, or 12th Night, in the Christian calendar) was the period when the Earth Mother gave birth to a male god, destined to die and be reborn. Some cultures celebrated the birth date of Aeon, or the World, from Kore the Maiden, on January 6, the day that would remain known as Old Christmas Day to people until the 20th century. Those cultures also practiced rituals involving a virgin and a wooden image seated on a litter.³

In Greece, January 6 was considered the birthday of the god Dionysus, son of the god Zeus and the mortal woman Semele. He became the patron of wine and general ecstasy, and was known as Bacchus to the Romans. The Romans celebrated Saturnalia, feasts honoring the deity Saturn, the god of agriculture and harvest. Homes were decked out in holly and other evergreens, gifts were exchanged,

people mingled across class lines, and authority was supplanted by a temporary “Lord of Misrule” (a distant relative of Father Christmas and Santa Claus). There was an even older festival relating to the sowing of crops and involving the sacrifice of said lord to “give life to the world”.⁴ The winter solstice was also celebrated by the Romans as the birthday of Mithra (or Mithras), a popular sun deity that originated in what is now Iran and came to the Roman Empire in the 1st century BCE.

Saturnalia began as a feast day for Saturn on December 17 and for Ops (a Roman fertility deity) on December 19. About 50 BCE, both were later converted into two day celebrations. During the Empire, the festivals were combined to cover a full week, from December 17 to 23. By the 3rd century CE, there were many religions and spiritual mysteries being followed within the Roman Empire. Many, if not most, celebrated the birth of their god-man near the time of the winter solstice. Emperor Aurelian (270 to 275 CE) blended a number of pagan solstice celebrations of the nativity of such god-men/saviors as Apollo, Attis, Baal, Dionysus, Helios, Hercules, Horus, Mithra, Osiris, Perseus, and Theseus into a single festival called *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, or “Birthday of the Invincible Sun”, on December 25. (The French *noel* and Italian *natale* words for *Christmas* come from this name.) At the time, Mithraism and Christianity were fierce competitors. Aurelian had even declared Mithraism the official religion of the Roman Empire in 274 CE. Christianity won out by becoming the new official religion in the 4th century CE.⁵

Autumn and winter solstice celebrations in northern Europe consisted of a series of celebrations from early November (now Halloween and All Saints’ Day) through February 2 (Candlemas, and eventually Groundhog Day). (In many places, all the Christmas plants, including the tree, were to be burned on Candlemas. The ashes were spread on the fields to insure a good harvest. If Candlemas was sunny, there would be 40 more days of cold and snow.)⁶ These celebrations involved decorating houses with evergreens, lighting candles and fires, and feasting. The twelve nights after the solstice were called *Jul* (Yule), from the Germanic *Iul* (wheel), because they believed that the sun was a wheel that cyclically rolled toward Earth for part of the year, then away. In some Germanic religions, December 25 was when Hertha, goddess of the home, came down through smoke from burning evergreens after a family dinner.⁷ Year-end feasting has its origins in pagan harvest festivals. (The word “pagan” is defined as any polytheistic religion and has nothing to do with the “devil worship” that many modern day Christians associate with the word.) Baked goods shaped like people and animals hark back to the pagan sacrifices at these feast times.⁸

There is no mention in the New Testament of when Jesus was born, although based on certain elements of the story, most scholars agree that it would have been in the spring. During the first two centuries of Christianity, Christians were unconcerned about Jesus’ birth date. Easter was considered to be far more important as the defining moment of Christianity. Different early Christian sects celebrated Jesus’ birth variously on January 6, April 21, and May 1.⁹ In an effort to lure people from the pagan religions to Christianity, the church co-opted their rituals. The idea of celebrating the Nativity on December 25 was first suggested early in the fourth century CE, a clever move on the part of Church fathers who wished to eclipse the December 25 festivities of Mithraism, which threatened the existence of Christianity. At that time Romans were still celebrating *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*. Since Roman patricians and plebians alike enjoyed large festivals, Christians recognized that they needed an alternative to this December celebration. They needed a celebration in which all participants — Mithraists, Christians, and all others — could take part. Accordingly, the Church officially recognized Christ’s birth, and to offer direct competition to the sun worshippers’ popular feast, the Church located the Nativity on December 25.

The festival was named “Christ’s Mass”, eventually “Christmas”.¹⁰ In 601 A.D. Pope Gregory the Great wrote a letter to Augustine of Canterbury instructing him to celebrate Christian feast days on the same days when the Anglo-Saxons were “wont to slay many oxen in sacrifice to demons”.¹¹

Legends began, such as that of St. Boniface (c. 680 - 755), who found pagan Germans honoring the Norse god Odin under a huge “Thunder Oak” at the solstice. He supposedly struck down the big tree, which split into four pieces to reveal a small fir growing from the center of the stump, giving rise to the tradition of the Christmas tree being an evergreen.¹²

There are many gods in ancient mythologies whose life stories match those of Jesus. For the purpose of this essay, we will examine those similarities that pertain to Christmas, although many other elements of their stories are also the same.

The Egyptian sun god Horus was worshipped around 3000 BCE.¹³ The son of a god, Osiris, he was born on the winter solstice of the virgin Isis-Meri in a manger in a cave. His conception was announced to his mother by Thoth, another Egyptian deity. Horus’ birth was accompanied by a star in the east and he was attended by dignitaries or “wise men”. He was known by such names as The Truth, The Light, God’s Anointed Son, The Good Shepherd, and The Lamb of God. After being betrayed by Typhon, Horus was crucified, buried for three days, and thus, resurrected. Horus and his father, Osiris, are frequently interchangeable in the mythos, as in the Christian scripture, “I and my Father are one.”¹⁴

Krishna, the Hindu god worshipped in India from about 1200 BCE, was born of the virgin Devaki with stars signaling his coming. He performed miracles with his disciples, and upon his death was resurrected.¹⁵ He is an incarnation of the sun god Vishnu, who rises or awakens on the winter solstice. He was born in a stable, was of royal descent and was a prince (in the same way that Jesus was descended from King David of Israel). He was born in a “cave-like dungeon” and placed in a “basket for winnowing corn”, similar to a manger. Great signs and wonders occurred, including the appearance of a bright star. His birth was attended by angels, wise men and shepherds, who presented him with gifts, including gold and incense. His foster father was in the city to pay taxes when he was born. He was persecuted by a tyrant who ordered the slaughter of infants, and was carried across a river.¹⁶

Buddha, whose worship began in India around 600 BCE before moving on to China and Japan, was born of the virgin Maya, who was considered the “Queen of Heaven”. He was of royal descent and was a prince. At his birth there appeared a “marvelous and powerful light”. After Buddha was born, a “slaughter of the infants was ordered by the tyrant Bimbisara”. When he was a babe, a saint prophesied he would be great, as did Simeon concerning Christ (Luke 2:25-35). He was called the Good Shepherd, the Carpenter, the Savior of the World, and the Light of the World.¹⁷

A Greek/Phrygian god who was later worshipped in the Roman Empire beginning in around 200 BCE was Attis. He born of the virgin Nana on the winter solstice, crucified on a tree to bring salvation to mankind, placed in a tomb and after three days, was resurrected.¹⁸

We have already mentioned Mithra, the Persian sun god who was worshipped in ancient Rome. Believed by some to be born of the virgin Anahita on the winter solstice, he was wrapped in swaddling clothes, placed in a manger, and attended by shepherds. He was considered the Way, the Truth and the Light, the Redeemer, the Savior, the Messiah. Being the sun god, his sacred day of worship was

Sunday.¹⁹ Upon his death he was buried for three days and resurrected.²⁰ He had to go through a number of trials including baptism and a sacramental meal in order to achieve salvation for the world.²¹

Justin Martyr, one of the first Christian defenders (c. 103-165 CE), acknowledged the similarities between the stories of the pagan gods and Jesus. He wrote, “When we say that he, Jesus Christ, our teacher, was produced without sexual union, was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascended into Heaven, we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those whom you esteem Sons of Jupiter.” In a different writing, he said, “He was born of a virgin, accept this in common with what you believe of Perseus.”²² He countered these charges that Christianity copied earlier pagan myths by instead claiming that these stories were the work of the devil who anticipated this future Christian mystery and copied it in the past. He wrote, “When I hear that Perseus was begotten of a virgin, I understand that the deceiving serpent counterfeited also this.”²³

Christmas as we know it contains traces of almost every winter festival ever known to man, and popular Christmas traditions descend from these ancient celebrations. Most Christmas traditions have little to do with Christianity. In fact, many of the tenets of Christianity, like the elements regarding the birth of Jesus, were co-opted from earlier religions and rituals.

Many pagan cultures cut boughs of evergreen trees in December, moved them into the home or temple, and decorated them to recognize the winter solstice. Even though deciduous trees, bushes, and crops died or hibernated for the winter, the evergreen trees remained green. They seemed to have magical powers that enabled them to withstand the rigors of winter, and were symbolic of enduring and renewed life. Bringing them into the house was a magical rite to ensure the return of vegetation at winter’s end.²⁴ Not having evergreen trees, the ancient Egyptians considered the palm tree to symbolize resurrection. They decorated their homes with its branches during the winter solstice. Greek and Roman deities had their special trees and groves that were hung with strips of cloth or garlands for celebrations. The Greeks decorated an evergreen tree as part of their worship of the god Adonis. Romans placed lighted candles on small trees to honor Saturn. They also decorated trees with bits of metal and replicas of their god, Bacchus.²⁵ Druids tied apples, animal-shaped cookies, and candles to oak trees to thank the gods for their bounty.²⁶ They also lit candles for the sun god. These customs all dated back to pagan people who lit torches and fires on the hilltops at the time of winter solstice to imitate the light and warmth of the sun, hoping to awaken and lure it back.²⁷

In Rome, Saturnalia led to Kalends, the Roman new year. Kalends involved giving gifts, which originally was the exchange of green boughs, supposedly taken from the grove of the goddess Strenia. This later expanded to include giving pastries, coins, and especially candles.²⁸

Carols originated as pagan round dances (holding hands, singing, and dancing in a circle), performed during festivals, to show appreciation for a good crop or the desire for one the next year. In the Middle Ages, sometimes caroling parties, fueled by alcohol and unrestrained lust, became riotous. The church denounced caroling and warned people to “flee wicked and lecherous songs, dancing, and leapings”. When they realized that they could not stop this tradition, once again, it was co-opted. St. Francis of Assisi was assigned to attach pious lyrics to tunes with “worldly or worse” themes, such as feasting on the boar’s head.²⁹

The tradition of the Yule log, which was supposed to burn for all of the twelve days of Christmas, is one of the most ancient winter customs, involving the mystery of fire and the need to preserve it through the long, cold, dark time. Ancient Mesopotamians made a wooden image of the “monsters of chaos” that threatened to overthrow the sun god each year and burned it in a bonfire. Sacred bonfires were lit by the Romans for Saturnalia and the Persians for Mithra.³⁰ Mistletoe was sacred to the Druids. Pieces were hung over doors to indicate the end of old quarrels, and it was offered to the gods. Mistletoe was presumed a powerful charm against witches and lightning. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe may echo a sacred form of prostitution³¹, or it may have something to do with mistletoe’s rumored powers in matters of conception.³² Holly was used in ancient Britain for divination. The Druids believed that it stayed green so the world would remain beautiful when the sacred oak lost its leaves. Holly was sacred to the Roman god Saturn. Romans gave holly wreaths as gifts, carried clippings in processions, and decorated images of Saturn with it.³³ Holly was celebrated for its protective powers, like mistletoe, being said to be especially effective against witches and lightning.³⁴ Christians connected holly to Christmas by saying it represented the crown of thorns worn by Christ, the red berries vestiges of his blood.³⁵

Manger scenes have their roots in the dioramas of dolls and statuettes long used as props in midwinter celebrations, often replacing live sacrifices. Romans gave each other figurines at Saturnalia. A Middle Eastern festival predating Christmas featured a wooden doll placed in a crib. Nearly every culture has made ceremonial images of its subsistence animals.³⁶

The doors of a home used to be flung open at midnight on Christmas Eve to let out any trapped evil spirits. A Christmas candle was customarily left burning in the window all night to guarantee the household’s good luck in the coming year.

Many people want to bring back Jesus as the center of Christmas, but for most of its history, this has not been the case. When December 25 was declared as the birth date of Christ in the 4th century, there was no central Christian authority. It took centuries before the tradition was universally accepted. Eastern churches began to celebrate Christmas after 375 CE. The church in Jerusalem started in the 6th century. Ireland started in the 5th century, while Austria, England and Switzerland began in the 8th century. Slavic lands did not celebrate Christmas until the 9th and 10th centuries.³⁷

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Christmas revelries had become quite raucous. During the Reformation, many Christian authorities began to rebuke these sometimes riotous Christmas celebrations. Polydore Vergil, a 16th century Christian in England, said “Dancing, masques, mummeries, stageplays, and other such Christmas disorders now in use with Christians, were derived from these Roman Saturnalian and Bacchanalian festivals; which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them.”³⁸

The English Puritans condemned a number of customs associated with Christmas, such as the use of the Yule log, holly, and mistletoe. Oliver Cromwell preached against “the heathen traditions” of Christmas carols, decorated trees and any joyful expression that desecrated “that sacred event”.³⁹ In 1642 he tried to outlaw Christmas, ordering churches closed and shops open. This caused riots in Ipswich, Canterbury and Kent.⁴⁰

In 1659 Puritans in Massachusetts outlawed Christmas, imposing a five shilling fine on anyone “observing, by abstinence from labour, feasting, or any other way, any such days as Christmas Day”.⁴¹ Congress was in session on December 25, 1789, the first Christmas under the new constitution. Congress continued to stay open on Christmas Day for most of the next 67 years. Christmas wasn’t declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.

It wasn’t until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. Americans re-invented Christmas, changing it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia. As Americans began to embrace Christmas as a perfect family holiday, old customs were unearthed. People looked to recent immigrants and Catholic and Episcopal churches to see how the day should be celebrated. Over the next 100 years, Americans built a Christmas tradition all their own that included pieces of many other customs. Although most families quickly bought into the idea that they were celebrating Christmas in the way it had been done for centuries, Americans had really re-invented a holiday to fill the cultural needs of a growing nation.⁴²

By the same token, secularists who want to see the removal of all Christmas-related decorations, such as Christmas trees, removed from public space are also giving undue credit to the supposed religious center of Christmas. Besides the evidence examined here, it is clear that Christmas as celebrated in America has long been a secular holiday in addition to a religious holiday. It is a celebration of peace, love, warmth, acceptance, family and friends. Unfortunately, it is also a marketing bonanza for retailers. For any faction, including Christianity, to try to lay total claim to the holiday is an arrogant usurpation of centuries of tradition from a multitude of cultures.

Notes

Most of the statements in this essay can be found in many sources.

¹ http://www.religioustolerance.org/xmas_menu.htm

² <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/superstitions.asp>

³ “Where Christmas Came From”, by Monika Bauerlein, Will Hermes, and Jennifer Vogel, *City Pages* (Minneapolis), December 7, 1994, p. 17.

⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

⁵ http://www.religioustolerance.org/xmas_menu.htm

⁶ Bauerlein, pp. 30-32.

⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

⁸ Ibid, p. 28.

⁹ http://www.religioustolerance.org/xmas_menu.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/jesus.asp>

¹¹ Bauerlein, p. 27.

¹² Ibid, p. 19.

¹³ Joseph, Peter and D.M. Murdock, *The Zeitgeist Sourcebook, Part 1: The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Stellar House Publishing, <http://www.stellarhousepublishing.com/>, p. 14.

¹⁴ Murdock, D.M., *The Origins of Christianity and the Quest for the Historical Jesus Christ*, Stellar House Publishing, <http://www.stellarhousepublishing.com/>, p. 12.

¹⁵ Joseph, p. 41.

¹⁶ Murdock, pp. 14-17.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 9-11.

¹⁸ Joseph, p. 35.

¹⁹ Murdock, p. 13.

²⁰ Joseph, p. 50.

²¹ Bauerlein, pp. 17-18.

²² Joseph, p. 92.

²³ http://www.religioustolerance.org/xmas_menu.htm

²⁴ <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/superstitions.asp>

²⁵ http://www.religioustolerance.org/xmas_menu.htm

²⁶ Bauerlein, p. 24.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 26.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 22.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 30.

³⁰ <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/superstitions.asp>

³¹ Bauerlein, pp. 30-32.

³² <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/superstitions.asp>

³³ Bauerlein, pp. 30-32.

³⁴ <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/superstitions.asp>

³⁵ Bauerlein, pp. 30-32.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 32.

³⁷ http://www.religioustolerance.org/xmas_menu.htm

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Bauerlein, p. 18.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 10.

⁴² <http://www.history.com/topics/christmas>



You don't need to believe in

Yule, the Scandinavian fertility god, to enjoy the tradition of Yuletide carols and greetings.



You don't need to be a

Wiccan to enjoy the tradition of wreaths or decking the halls with holly.



You don't need to be a

Druid to enjoy the tradition of hoping for a kiss under the mistletoe.



You don't need to believe in the god

Saturn to enjoy the tradition of decorating a Saturnalia tree in your home.



You don't need to believe in

Thor, Odin, or St. Nicholas to enjoy the tradition of a visitor bringing gifts at night.

You don't need to believe in

Sleipnir, Odin's flying 8-legged horse, to enjoy the tradition of listening for the sound of hooves on your roof top.



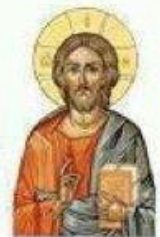
You don't need to believe in

Mithras to enjoy the tradition of celebrating the sun's rebirth on December 25th.



And you don't need to believe in

Jesus Christ to enjoy the tradition of renaming this ancient holiday to Christ's Mass.



All you need to enjoy these winter festivities is to be merry.

Merry Christmas



*Axial Tilt is the
Reason for the Season*