

# Christmas

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, the longest night of the year had special significance for Europeans. They celebrated December 21, the winter solstice, as the point at which the worst of the winter was behind them, and they could look forward to longer days and more sunlight.

Toward the end of December, cattle were slaughtered, in part so they wouldn't have to be fed. It was the only time of year when many Europeans had a supply of fresh meat. It also happened to be the time at which most of the wine and beer made earlier in the year was fermented and ready to drink. So, in general, it was the perfect time for celebration.

In Scandinavia, the period from December 21 through January was known as *Yule*, representing the return of the sun. Norse men took home large logs, which would burn for about 12 days, during which people feasted. Each spark from the fire represented a pig or calf that would be born during warmer months.

Germans honored the pagan God Oden this time of year, primarily out of fear. Oden was believed to fly around checking up on people during the night, and this reconnaissance was used to decide who would live and who would die. Not surprisingly, many Germans opted to stay indoors.

Beginning the week before the winter solstice and continuing for a month, Romans celebrated *Saturnalia*, in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. Roman social order was flipped upside down, with slaves becoming masters, peasants running the city, and nobody going to school or work. They also celebrated *Juvenalia*, honoring Roman children, and the birthday of Mithra, an infant god, born of a rock, the god of the sun. For some Romans, Mithra's birthday, December 25, was the most sacred day of the year.

There was no Christmas holiday prior to the 4th century, when church officials decided that Jesus'

birthday should be celebrated. Pope Julius I chose December 25 for what was originally known as the *Feast of the Nativity*. Although Jesus' birthday is unknown, and although it certainly was not December 25, that day was chosen because church leaders wanted to blend the new holiday with the pagan Saturnalia festival. The decision to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity at the same time as traditional winter solstice festivals meant that the new Christian celebration would be quickly accepted, but it also meant that the church could not dictate just how it would be celebrated.

Christianity gradually replaced pagan religions. Believers in the Middle Ages attended church on Christmas day, then quickly proceeded to get rip-roaring drunk in a Mardi-Gras style atmosphere. Each year the poor would go to the homes of rich folks and demand their very finest food and beverages. If the wealthy citizens failed to comply with those demands, they would likely find themselves victims of mischief and terror, similar to our modern trick-or-treat tradition. Most of the rich willingly participated in the tradition, however, because it gave them an opportunity to repay their debt (real or imagined) to society by giving to those less fortunate. (It was similar to our modern American federal government, except that modern progressives pay their debt to society using other people's money.)

The Christmas celebration spread first to Egypt by 432, then to England by the end of the 6th century, then to Scandinavia by the end of the 8th century. In 1645, Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans were determined to rid England of decadent and hedonistic traditions, and Christmas was cancelled. But when Charles II was restored as King of England, Christmas returned.

The pilgrims who arrived in America in 1620 were even more Puritan than Cromwell had been, so Christmas was not celebrated in early America. The celebration was against the law in Boston from 1659 to 1681, where displays of the Christmas spirit were subject to a fine of 5 shillings. Christmas

was celebrated in Jamestown, however, where colonists apparently knew how to behave themselves while having a good time. After the Revolutionary War, Christmas was abandoned, along with most other English customs. It wasn't declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.

New York City organized their first police force in 1828 in response to a Christmas riot. This prompted members of the upper classes to begin changing the way Christmas was celebrated. Aided by Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the focus shifted toward charity and goodwill to all mankind. Americans and Brits were also becoming more sensitive to the emotional needs of children, and Christmas provided an opportunity to lavish attention and gifts on children without the appearance of spoiling them. Christmas evolved into a family holiday.

But the evolution didn't stop there. Americans looked at old customs and new immigrants to help determine how the holiday should be celebrated. They adopted pieces of many customs and traditions, adapting and molding them into a uniquely American blend of celebration that includes decorating Christmas trees, sending Christmas cards, and giving Christmas gifts. In the process, they managed to convince themselves that this new Christmas style was actually the way it had been for centuries.

Eggnog made its American debut in the Jamestown settlement, 1607. (Nog comes from the word grog, which refers to any drink made with rum.) The Salvation Army began sending out Claus-clad collectors in the 1890s. In 1828, Joel R Poinsett, an American minister to Mexico, brought a red and green plant from Mexico, and that's how that poinsetta thing got started. Robert L May wrote a poem in 1939 to help lure customers into Montgomery Ward department stores. That's how the Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer story got started. The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree tradition was started in 1931 by construction workers.

You may notice that throughout the evolution of the Christmas holiday, very little of it derived from or was influenced by any consideration of Jesus or the Bible. Yes, theoretically it is all because of Jesus'

birth, but very little of the celebrations, customs, and traditions have even the remotest connection to Jesus or Christianity. Even the day is wrong.

Some Christians desperately want to believe that Jesus is the only reason for Christmas. But history proves that wrong. Jesus was never the only reason for Christmas. If church leaders in the 4th century had wanted Christmas to be only about Jesus, they would never have chosen December 25 for its celebration. Jesus isn't even the primary reason for Christmas as we know it.

If Jesus were to truly be the only reason for Christmas, all the other stuff would have to go. That's because all that other stuff has absolutely nothing to do with Jesus or his birth. Worse, all that other stuff seriously distracts from Jesus, and Jesus simply cannot compete with Santa Claus, at least for children. For a few Christians, Jesus figures more prominently in the Christmas festivities. But across the nation, Christmas is a secular retail event, not a religious holiday.

At bedtime on Christmas eve, there is not a kid in the world who is thinking only of Jesus. They are thinking of Santa Claus. When they get up on Christmas morning, there is not a kid in the world whose little mind is focused on Jesus. Adults don't decorate the Christmas tree, or go shopping at the mall because they think that's what Jesus would do or want them to do. Those customs have absolutely nothing to do with Jesus. I find it very difficult to understand how anyone could honestly believe that Christ would want his name associated with American Christmas celebrations, customs, and traditions.