

“How the Unitarians Created Christmas”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Sermon

We find ourselves in the midst of a complicated season.

A poignant time of memory and longing and hope,
a festival of light and sound,
a feast of commercialism and over-consumption,
in every sense of the word.

All of it, as much a part of Christmas as any other.

But, nowhere is Christmas as complicated
as in a Unitarian congregation full of our different theologies.

And, so the question comes every December:
why would a Unitarian celebrate Christmas?

If we don't believe in the virgin birth, or that Jesus was God,
or that he was born and died to redeem a sinful world,
what business do we have with Christmas?

It's a fair question.

The answer, though, is that we have a lot to do with Christmas.

In fact, the Unitarian tradition has had such a significant hand
in shaping so much of what we know today as Christmas,
that it begs asking just why Christians celebrate Christmas,
given that it's so very Unitarian Universalist!

At the outset, it's important to say that Christmas isn't what it once was.

What we now know as Christmas
is not nearly as timeless as we might think it to be.

Down through time, it has changed and evolved,
appropriating earlier traditions and morphing them
into the mix of holiday and holy day we have inherited in our own time.

Now, Christmas itself wasn't celebrated in any meaningful way by Christians
until the 4th or 5th centuries, and even back then,
situating the birth of Jesus on December 25th
was recognized as pretty blatant piggybacking on the Winter Solstice—
not to mention the fact that December 25th
was also “the birthday of the invincible sun,” Mithras,
the Roman god with Hindu origins,
who came to redeem the world from sin,
and who also just so happened to be born in a cave to a virgin mother.

From the very beginning, the basic facts of what you might call
“Christian Christmas” have never been entirely settled,
and that's in large part because Christmas was built
on the foundations of mostly Pagan religions.

And, so there has seemingly always been an unresolved tension at the heart of
Christmas—a tension, if you will, between piety and partying.

By the time our religious forebears, the Puritans, came around
partying was winning out.

Christmas, in the English-speaking world, was a time of merry-making.

It was a festival marked by people blowing off steam and flaunting social
conventions in joyfully crude and rowdy ways.

At its most colourful, it involved “cross-dressing, public lewdness, and role
reversals of all kinds.”

Its central ritual involved the working poor calling upon the homes of the prosperous and demanding to be served the best food and alcohol in the house.

Turning the class structure on its head, the wealthy, on Christmas, would serve those who normally served them—all of this a safety valve of sorts that maintained the status quo and the balance of power the other 364 days of the year.

Now, as you might imagine, the Puritans didn't care one bit for a day devoted to public debauchery, especially in the name of Jesus.

Maybe you've heard the old joke that defines Puritanism as "the haunting feeling that someone, somewhere, may be happy."¹

(Actually, that's not quite fair to the Puritans, but I'm sure it felt that way when to others they began their battle against Christmas.)

In 1645, when the Puritan Oliver Cromwell came to power in England, he enforced an Act of Parliament banning the celebration of Christmas.

Making mince pies, hanging holly in your house, and attending Mass were all strictly forbidden until the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

Bah humbug, right?

The Puritans on this side of the pond were no more jolly.

In Massachusetts, Christmas was banned from 1659 to 1681.

Shops were open and churches were closed.
People worked and children went to school.
It was just another day.

Though there weren't such severe laws in place here, Christmas wasn't a big deal in Upper Canada either.

¹ Attributed to Henry Menken.

In her very detailed journals, Lady Simcoe didn't write anything special about December 25th, 1793.²

If she and her Lieutenant Governor husband bothered to observe their first Christmas in Muddy York at all, sources say it would have likely been with a meal made up of boiled black squirrel, porcupine, roasted passenger pigeon and raccoon.

There are accounts well into the 19th century that make clear that Christmas was a work day for many people in this part of the world.

At the same time, especially in the northern United States, there was a growing desire for Christmas to mean something more—a hope that it could be reformed into a time of reverence and moderation.

Stephen Nissenbaum, who has written a definitive history called *The Battle for Christmas* says:

In the forefront of [those leading this movement] were the Universalists. Largely a rural sect, Universalists openly celebrated Christmas from the earliest stages of their existence in New England.

The Universalist community in Boston held a special Christmas Day service in 1789, even before their congregation was officially organized.

[And,] the Unitarians[, he says,] were close behind.

Compared with Universalists, Unitarians were more genteel, and (for all their theological liberalism) more socially conservative.

Unitarians were calling for the public observance of Christmas by about 1800.

They did so in full knowledge that it was not a biblically sanctioned holiday, and that December 25 was probably not the day on which Jesus was born.

They wished to celebrate the holiday

² Bill Taylor, "Merry Christmas—now pass the porcupine," *The Toronto Star*, December 23, 2007.

not because God had ordered them to do so[, Nissenbaum says,]
but because they themselves wished to.
[If that doesn't sound like a bunch of Unitarians, I'm not sure what
does!]

[He goes on to say that] they celebrated it in the hope
that their own observance might help to purge the holiday of its
associations with seasonal excess and disorder.

Before long, early Universalists and Unitarians had helped to lead a movement
that transformed Christmas from a celebration that took place in the streets to
one that unfolded primarily in the home.

The presents that had once been demanded of the rich by the poor
pretty quickly became the gifts given from parents to their children.

Of course, it wasn't long before Santa Claus entered the scene,
and though not tied to Unitarians,
he brought an element of mystery to the family-centred Christmas
and a convenient revisionist marketing triumph to retailers.

A few years later, early Unitarians made one of their key contributions in the
form of the Christmas Tree.

Though there are, of course, Pagan origins to decorating a tree at the Solstice, it
was Charles Follen, a Unitarian minister,
who brought the tradition from Germany to North America.

At Christmas in 1835, Follen decorated a tree with fruit and toys and little
candles as a surprise for his children.

His friend, the Unitarian writer, Maria Sedgewick wrote about it in a widely
read book, and within a few years, the tradition had taken hold far and wide.

Concerned with the growing commercialism of Christmas, though,
and the prospect of their children becoming selfish and spoiled,
Unitarians embraced a tradition of children exchanging gifts with their parents.

The ritual became a way to teach a moral lesson about giving and receiving
while reinforcing the bonds of the family.

This, more than the introduction of the Christmas tree itself, may be one of the most enduring and unique ways that Unitarians have shaped the holiday.

Nissenbaum says that:

Child-rearing practices were linked to theological beliefs.

Whether parents chose to beat their children or lavish attention on them at Christmas was linked to whether they believed in original sin.

A central tenet of early 19th century Unitarians—and one that distinguished them from both the old-style Puritans... was the belief that human beings were not born [bound] for damnation.

Puritans and most evangelical Protestants, in contrast, believed that people were inevitably stained at birth by an original sin that corrupted them at their very core by causing them to be willful and selfish.

Such a defect[, Nissenbaum says,] was so deep-seated that it could be removed, if at all, not by any act of will, no matter how strenuous (because the will itself was part of the problem), but only through a free gift of divine, arbitrary and irresistible grace. ...

Puritan-minded parents... therefore felt that it was their obligation to break a child's will as early as possible.

Unitarians on the contrary, believed that the will should be trained rather than broken; it might be imperfect, [they thought,] but it was not fundamentally corrupt.

Unitarians strenuously believed that human beings were responsible—utterly responsible—for their own actions.³

³ Nissenbaum, p. 202.

That belief figured into another significant shift rooted in Unitarian theology—the move beyond a Christmas solely celebrating the birth of Jesus to a season of charity and social outreach.

This spirit is easily recognized in the classic work of Charles Dickens, again, another Unitarian.

Written in 1843, *A Christmas Carol* derides the changing class structure and a society being rapidly reshaped by the Industrial Revolution.

It challenges the notion of poverty somehow being a form of divine punishment rather than a social problem that must be solved. In the story, we meet the Scrooge and we meet the Cratchits, who, though poor, “are cheerful because they cannot help it, and because they all love one another.”

In a single, compelling story, Dickens reinforced the central role of the family at Christmas while also teaching lessons about charity and compassion and human connection.

Yet, Dickens wasn’t so much describing a tradition as creating one—one that resonates to this day as the larger context of our Cultural Christmas.

Finally, on this tromp through history, I want to tell you about two of the carols we are singing this morning, both, of course, written by Unitarians, both written as a response to the horrors of war, and both ultimately representing the choice of hope over despair.

“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” was written by Edmund Hamilton Sears in 1849 as a response to the Mexican-American War.

While it’s been sung throughout the world for a century and a half, many Christian churches have yanked it from their hymnals for what it doesn’t say.

You’ll notice that there is no mention of Jesus.

He speaks instead of peace on earth and goodwill to all.
And, he speaks of the hard fact
that the world has long resisted what he called the angel’s song.

Our closing hymn was written by the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

He had only recently lost his wife in a tragic accident when he received word that his son had been injured in the American Civil War.

He poured out his anguish into “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.”

We hear his disillusionment with the world:

And in despair I bowed my head,
there is no peace on earth, I said,
for hate is strong and mocks the song
of peace on earth, goodwill to all.

And, yet, Longfellow just like Sears, transforms his bitterness by choosing to set it aside and embrace hope instead.

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
with peace on earth, to all goodwill.

These carols were radical for their day—in choosing the story of striving after peace and goodwill over the story of the nativity.

And, these carols remain radical in our own day, as well—asking us how we contend with our despair, asking in what we place our deepest trust, asking how we invest our hope.

Christmas is not what it once was.

And, the open secret is that it never has been, though we so often seem to long for some perfect moment in time when traditions were valued and all the challenges of this holiday were somehow simpler.

I’m not so sure there’s really ever been such a time.

Christmas is a work in process.

And, so, if anyone asks why we would celebrate it,
I would say because we can lay at least as much claim to Christmas as anyone
else.

This is our holiday.
So celebrate it well.

Make of it a season that brings joy into your heart,
and more peace into this world.

Because someone else, a century or so from now,
may be standing here preaching about how the Unitarians created Christmas,
and, well, they might just be talking about us.
Blessed Be.