

“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.

Reading by Christopher Raible

Take Christmas.

Take the ancient, the medieval, and the modern.

Take what is sacred, secular, solemn, and silly.

Take Teutonic evergreen and Persian sun and Druid mistletoe.

Take Jewish flame and Greek feast and Roman presents.

Take a Bethlehem babe in a stable
surrounded by shepherds and kings
with a brilliant star overhead.

Take a mid-eastern saint transformed through the centuries
to a red-suited elf with a sack-full of toys
and a reindeer-drawn sleigh.

Take music from as many countries
as the imagination can grasp.

Take Amahl and Scrooge and Rudolph.
Take lighted tree and punch bowl and greeting card.
Take mittened carolers and charitable gifts
and candlelight services.

Take it all or take any part.
Take its courage, its hope,
its joy, its peace, [and] its goodwill.

Take Christmas—but to take it you must also add to its light.

Reading from Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*

An excerpt from Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, from a conversation where Bob Cratchit and his uncle Ebenezer Scrooge have been arguing about the merits of keeping Christmas.

Scrooge has famously said, “Bah Humbug” to it all. This is his nephew’s response.

“There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say,” returned the nephew. “Christmas among the rest.

But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round—
apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that—
as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time;

the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!”

Sermon: “How the Unitarians Created Christmas”

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 had 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 the centuries, 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 Mithras,
the Roman sun god with Hindu origins,
who came to redeem the world from evil,
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 traditions.

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 in a very big way.

Three and four centuries ago,
Christmas, in the English-speaking world, was a time of merry-making.

It was a festival when people blew off steam
and flaunted 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.

(“Now bring us some figgy pudding!”
... We won’t go until we get some.”)

Our carols still contain evidence of the threats that were made,
only somewhat in jest.

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.

You’ve probably heard the old joke that defines Puritanism
as that “haunting feeling that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”¹

(That’s not quite fair to the Puritans,
but I’m sure it felt accurate
when 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 one’s home, and attending Mass
were all strictly forbidden until the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

¹ Attributed to Henry Menken.

Bah humbug, right?

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

In Massachusetts, there was an outright ban on Christmas from 1659 to 1681.

All the shops were open and all the 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 English Canada either.

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 Upper Canada at all, sources say it would have likely been with a meal consisting 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 regular day for most 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.

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

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 25th was probably not the day on which the historical Jesus was born.

They wished to celebrate the holiday not because God had ordered them to do so, but because they themselves wished to.
[Now, if that doesn't sound like a bunch of Unitarians, I'm not sure what does!]

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

In a few short years, early Universalists and Unitarians helped lead a movement that transformed Christmas from a celebration that took place in the streets to one that unfolded primarily in the home.

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

Of course, it wasn't long before Santa Claus entered the scene, bringing an element of mystery to the family-centred Christmas—and a very convenient marketing triumph to retailers.

Though Santa Claus had been alive and well in Europe for a long time—as Sinter Klaas and Father Christmas—it was Thomas Nast, a Unitarian, whose popular illustrations gave us the iconic image we have of Santa today—the jolly, roly-poly man in a red suit with a white beard and a band of elves.

Nast is also responsible for settling Santa, once and for all, at the North Pole, meaning that Santa could be claimed by no one country, because Santa, at last, belonged to the world.

Though, of course, Canadians all know his workshop is in Canadian territory...

Early Unitarians made another key contribution

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 and ardent abolitionist, 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 Maria Sedgewick, another Unitarian, 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 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...the old-style Puritans... was the belief that human beings were not born [destined] 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

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 to others.

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 Scrooge and we meet the Cratchits, who, Dickens says, 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 what I'm calling our “Cultural Christmas.”

Finally, on this tromp through history, I want to tell you about

³ Nissenbaum, p. 202.

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 may have noticed there was no mention of Jesus.

It speaks instead of peace on earth and goodwill to all.
And, it speaks to the hard fact
that the world has long resisted what Sears called the “angel’s song.”

Earlier we sang a carol written by the poet 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 writing
“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 cherished traditions were valued
and all the challenges of this holiday were somehow simpler.

History would suggest there's never really been such a time.

Christmas is a work in progress.
There's always been a tension between piety and partying,
between "Christian Christmas" and "Cultural Christmas."

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

This is our holiday, too.
So celebrate it well.

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

What, after all, could be more in keeping with the message of Jesus than that?

So take Christmas.
So keep Christmas.
So transform Christmas, with the power of your own heart,
to bring more love and justice into being upon this good earth.

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

So Be It. Amen.

Closing Words **from Dicken's *A Christmas Carol***

“And it was always said of [Scrooge],
that he knew how to keep Christmas well...

May that be truly said of us, and all of us!

And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!”

A Merry Yule, and a Happy Christmas to you all.