

A Fascinating History of Christmas and UUs.

UUFSSMA, Dec. 25, 2016

Jon Sievert

I haven't taken a poll but I'd guess that most Christians likely believe that Christmas began as a celebration of the birth of Jesus. But the roots stretch back thousands of years before that. Most ancient cultures celebrated the winter solstice, when the sun reaches its lowest point and begins to climb again in the sky. In ancient Rome, this festival was called *Saturnalia* and ran from Dec. 17 to Dec. 24. During that week, no work was done, and the time was spent in parties, games, gift giving, and decorating the houses with evergreens. It was, needless to say, a very popular holiday.

In its earliest days, Christianity didn't celebrate the Nativity at all. Only two of the four Gospels even mentioned it. Instead the church calendar was centered on Easter, still by far the most important day in the Christian year. By the time of the First Council of Nicea in 325, the Christian Church was making converts by the thousands. In 354, in hopes of making still more, Pope Liberius decided to add the Nativity to the church calendar and celebrate it on Dec. 25.

History doesn't tell us exactly *when* in the year Christ was born. But according to the Gospel of St. Luke, shepherds were abiding in the field and keeping watch over their flocks by night. That would imply a date in the spring or summer, when the flocks were up in the hills and needed to be guarded. In winter, they were kept safely in corrals.

So Dec. 25 must have been chosen for other reasons. It seems likely that by making Christmas fall immediately after the *Saturnalia*, the Pope invited converts to still enjoy the fun and games of the ancient holiday and just call it Christmas. Also, Dec. 25 was the day of the Sun God, Sol Invictus, who was associated with the emperor. By using that date, the church tied itself to the imperial system.

In the high middle ages, Christmas was a rowdy and bawdy time both inside and outside the church. In France, many parishes celebrated the Feast of the Ass. It supposedly honored the donkey that brought Mary to Bethlehem. Donkeys were brought into the church, and the mass ended with priests and parishioners alike making donkey noises. In the so-called Feast of Fools, the lower

clergy would elect a "bishop of fools" to temporarily run the diocese and make fun of church ceremonial and discipline. With this going on inside the church to celebrate the Nativity, one can imagine the drunken and sexual revelries going on

outside it to celebrate what was in all but name the *Saturnalia*. With the 16th Century Reformation, Protestants tried to rid the church of practices unknown in its earliest days and get back to Christian roots. Most Protestant sects abolished priestly celibacy, the cult of the Virgin Mary, relics, confession, and Christmas.

In the English-speaking world, Christmas was abolished in Scotland in 1563, and in England after the Puritans took power in the 1640s. It returned with the Restoration in 1660. But the celebrations never regained their medieval and Elizabethan abandon.

For the first two centuries of New England's predominately white, European settlement, most people didn't celebrate Christmas at all. It was systematically suppressed by the Puritans during the American colonial period. So much so, that it was actually *illegal* to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681. Shopkeepers were ordered to keep their shops open on December 25.

In the middle colonies, most Protestant groups forbade it. In New York, the Dutch Reformed Church didn't celebrate Christmas, but the Anglicans and Catholics did. The Puritans weren't fooled. They knew Christmas was a pagan festival with the thinnest veneer of Christianity painted over it. They would have none of that.

Christmas caroling was also roundly condemned by the Puritans, because it was generally done, as one Anglican minister noted, "in the midst of Rioting, Adultery, and Wantonness."

From 1620 to about 1800, the Puritans were largely successful in squelching the celebration of Christmas. Both because there was no biblical or historical basis for doing so, and because Christmas was then a long, unruly, drunken, licentious, rowdy festival of which the Puritans disapproved.

Enter the Unitarians and Universalists. The Universalists were in the forefront of the move to re-appropriate the celebration of Christmas. At the time largely a rural sect, the 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. In the early 19th Century, the Universalists

proselytized for Christmas more actively than any other religion.

The Unitarians were close behind, 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 wanted to celebrate the holiday not because God had ordered them to, but because they themselves wanted to.

The Unitarians and the Universalists actions revived interest in celebrating Christmas throughout England and the United States. Singing of carols, which had all but disappeared at the turn of the century, began to thrive again.

In 1848, after suffering a nervous breakdown, Unitarian minister Edmund Sears, returned to a church he had previously served in Wayland, Massachusetts. The breakdown had occurred in part because of his strong opposition to the U.S. entry into war with Mexico, and the resulting resistance he encountered in his new, more prosperous parish. Back among friends in Wayland, Sears wrote a new Christmas carol called, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." It became a landmark in Christmas music because it was the first Christmas hymn to proclaim: "Peace on Earth, good will to men." This was a radical departure from the standard Christmas message. Consider verse 3, for example,

But with the woes of war and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel-strain have rolled,
two thousand years of wrong,
and we who fight the wars hear not,
the love song which they bring.
O hush the noise of battle strife,
and hear the angels sing.

At the time, this was gutsy social criticism. Outside the church, many people contemptuously said that Sears' carol was just the kind of thing you might expect from a Unitarian. Over the years, however, "peace on earth, good will to all" has become one of the most important themes in our annual Christmas holiday celebrations.

Sometime in the 1830s, the Reverend Charles Follen, a Unitarian minister and German immigrant, wanted Christmas to be more joyous and magical for his kids. So he revived a tradition from

his homeland. He saved whole eggshells, painted them gold and filled them with candy. He bought candles and candleholders, colored paper, string and small figures, and spent hours turning these items into small decorations. The day before Christmas he went into the forest, dug up a small pine tree, placed it in a tub, and brought it into the house when no one was looking. He covered it with the candles and handmade decorations. His kids loved it. Today the Christmas tree is synonymous with Christmas, and it started in the United States with a Unitarian who was bucking Puritan sentiment.

The desire for a more joyful Christmas celebration in England produced the first commercial Christmas card in London in 1843. Universalist Henry Cole was a civil servant when he decided he was too busy to write individual Christmas greetings to his family, friends, and business colleagues. So he asked his friend, the painter John Callcott Horsley, to design a card with an image and brief greeting that he could mail instead.

The card was lithographed on 5 1/8" X 3 1/4" stiff cardboard in dark sepia and then colored by hand. An edition of 1,000 cards was printed and sold at Felix Summerly's Treasure House in London for a shilling each. Of those cards, twelve exist today in private collections, including the one Cole sent to his grandmother.

Something else occurred during this time that had a dramatic affect on western society and culture. The Industrial Revolution swept through Europe and America, creating a new class of wealthy people in the manufacturing industries. Unfortunately, the only goal in life for many of these people was the accumulation of money and possessions. Their quest for material wealth created a much larger and deeply impoverished lower class that would never have any power over their destinies.

Meanness, hardness, and lack of compassion engulfed the new merchant class. Against this backdrop of selfishness and greed, a young English writer named Charles Dickens emerged to make the written page his platform for exposing societal exploitation and cruel treatment of the lower classes. He became a significant voice for change in society.

His book "A Christmas Carol" was published in 1843, and played a major role in reinventing Christmas into the holiday it has become today. A day that emphasizes family, goodwill, and compassion, rather than the traditional communal celebration and hedonistic revelry. After more than 175 years, "A Christmas Carol"

continues to be relevant, sending a message that cuts through the materialistic trappings of the season.

Although he was brought up an Anglican, Dickens became conflicted about the preaching vs. the practice of religion. By age 30, he felt he had to make a decision to either accept or reject Christianity. In his short life he had witnessed too much suffering and cruelty, and too many people who refused to extend warmth and compassion to others. He was disturbed by professed Christians who dismissed the teachings of Jesus in their life practice.

Dickens was already a successful author when he traveled to Massachusetts in 1842. There he met the city's literary elite, including Unitarian poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Rev. William Ellery Channing, a famous Unitarian preacher. Channing so impressed Dickens that when he returned to England, he joined an English Unitarian chapel. Dickens discovered that Unitarianism was, in his words, "a religion which has sympathy for men of every creed and ventures to pass judgment on none; who would do something for human improvement if and when it could; and would always practice charity and toleration." Dickens became a Unitarian because he saw in Unitarianism an attempt to live the real Christian message.

"A Christmas Carol" became the author's most celebrated work and the most read-aloud book ever. It is the story of a Christmas conversion. There are no traditional Christian figures in it because Dickens did not believe in them. He did believe that we are all haunted by ghosts of our better and worse selves, and in this story he lets the ghosts provide the vehicle by which one man would be redeemed to his better self.

"A Christmas Carol" is a Victorian morality tale of an old and bitter miser, who undergoes a profound experience of redemption over the course of one evening. It is truly a Unitarian story. It doesn't teach a creed or dogma. Jesus is never mentioned. But the importance of social justice, which Jesus preached, is the essence of the tale. Dickens also believed that the shared love and joy of celebrating Christmas could help all of us become our best selves.

On June 26, 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant signed a bill into law that made the secular Christmas a legal holiday, because its celebration had become almost universally adopted in the country. Christmas is now celebrated in countries all over the world, including places where Christians are few, including Japan. It is as much a

cultural holiday as it is a religious holiday.

As we've seen, Unitarians and Universalists played a major role in re-appropriating and re-fashioning the Christmas holiday after its eclipse in colonial times. With Dickens's and Bowring's compassion for the poor, and Sears' and Longfellow's "Peace on earth, good will to all," we have contributed significantly to some of the holiday's most important and enduring themes. Compassion for the poor, and "Peace on earth, good will to all" continue to be practices we would expect of ourselves as Unitarian Universalists today.

It is up to each of us to finally decide just what we feel and believe about Christmas. As UUs we are free to sort through all of the various elements—Santa Claus, the singing angels, the presents, the virgin birth, the lights, the mistletoe, and the pointing stars—to sift out those messages of joy and hope, wonder and love, compassion, and peace that we each personally want to affirm.