

"Deck the Halls"
Led by Rev. Steven A. Protzman
December 1, 2013

First Reading Myths of the Season- A Pagan Christmas by Richard S. Gilbert¹
Second Reading 'Tis the Season by M. Maureen Killoran

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Christmas, like many other Christian holy days, was a date picked in the calendar to replace pagan celebrations. This merry romp through the season's rituals will explore the world's traditions, most of which have nothing to do with the actual event of Jesus' birth, but are based in far more ancient celebrations.

I read an article that said Black Friday has now officially been renamed Black and Blue Friday to acknowledge all the injuries sustained by shoppers who will stop at nothing to get their money's worth, especially when they have so little of it. Black Friday was big news this last week. Everything from how to score the best deals shopping to plenty of controversy about stores that are open on Thanksgiving to riots in Walmart over a \$39 tablet to a book titled "Men Who Love Women Who Start Shopping on Black Friday at 4 am". Survival these days means getting in and out of a store during the holiday season with your purchases and no injuries. Or planning ahead as one man said: "My wife and I never go to the same Black Friday Wal-Mart sale, so if one of is trampled to death for a low priced off-brand tablet PC the other will be around to raise the kids." There, as my colleague Kat Hussein Liu says, is the hunter-gatherer shopping urge at its peak!

Yes, as Maureen Killoran said in the second reading, 'tis the season of advertisers run amok and ambitions amplified beyond belief, of post-inebriated Santas blocking with consumer guilt the way to one-too-many holiday-mad stores and when glad tidings of busyness keep from us the news that nostalgia ain't what it was. Some writers and pundits would have you believe that this holiday is in mortal danger, threatened by secular forces who are waging a war on Christmas. In the Pacific Standard, Daniel Luzer writes: Former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin recently came out with a book about the Christmas season, *Good Tidings and Great Joy: Protecting the Heart of Christmas*. It's both a tribute to the winter holiday—there's a recipe for Christmoose Chili and Rice Krispie Treats—and a screed reflecting her perception of an American attempt to destroy the December holiday season. As she writes: "*Amidst the fragility of this politically correct era,*" Palin said when introducing the book, "*it is imperative that we stand up for our beliefs before the element of faith in a glorious and traditional holiday like Christmas is marginalized and ignored.*" She continues: "*The war on Christmas is the tip of the spear in a larger battle to secularize our culture, and make true religious freedom a thing of America's past. The logical result of atheism, a result we have seen right in front of our eyes in one of the world's oldest and proudest nations, is severe moral decay.*" Luzer goes on to say that if Christmas is really under attack, this is news to most Americans, who celebrate the holiday to ridiculous excess. Americans spend some \$3

trillion a year on Christmas shopping and celebration. Almost 20 percent of all industry sales in the entire country come from holiday shopping. Some 12 percent of Americans start Christmas shopping in September, and many stores this year will open on Thanksgiving Day to give Christmas shoppers a head start on their buying. If there's really a war going on, Christmas is winning.²

The winter holidays are in no danger of not being celebrated although they have changed through the centuries as human understanding of the cycles of life and our need to make meaning have changed. Christmas has certainly evolved since the birth of Jesus. The early Christian church did not celebrate Jesus' birthday. There is no historical or biblical reference to the actual date of birth and celebrating birthdays was a pagan custom the early church did not practice. When Christians did celebrate Jesus' birth it was usually on January 6th, although it was also celebrated to coincide with spring in late March or early April. In the fourth century, Pope Julius, wanting to replace the pagan celebrations with a Christian feast, designated December 25th as the Mass of Christ, Christmas.³ By 1100 Christmas had become the major festival in Europe. Between the years 1500 and 1800, the Christmas season in Europe was understood to be a time to let off steam, to feast and to party. According to Stephen Nissenbaum, people frequently blackened their faces, cross-dressed, or disguised themselves as animals in order to party more anonymously. Ordinary behavioral norms were ignored with relative impunity and the existing social order was sometimes reversed with servants and their masters exchanging roles.

In 1647 in England, Christmas festivities were banned by Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell, who considered feasting and revelry on what was supposed to be a holy day to be immoral. Anybody caught celebrating Christmas was arrested. A 1686 satire of the Puritan repression of Christmas was "the Tryal of Father Christmas," featuring Puritan jurors named Mr. Cold-kitchen, Mr. Give-little and Mr. Hate-good. The ban was lifted when the Puritans lost power in 1660. Early in American history, the Puritans did not celebrate what they saw as an "unruly, drunken, licentious, rowdy festival". The New England cleric Cotton Mather described it in 1712: "The Feast of Christ's Nativity is spent in Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, and in all Licentious Liberty ... by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, [and] by rude Reveling..."⁴ It was actually illegal to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681 and you could be fined a very hefty five shillings if you were convicted.

We owe much of our modern celebration of Christmas to Unitarians and Universalists, who not only promoted the return to public celebrations of the holiday and recreated some of the traditions we practice today but who also gave new meaning to the holidays with our addition of the social gospel's message about peace and goodwill toward all. The holidays we now celebrate this time of year are, as the Puritans correctly realized, a mixture of the Christian story and many pagan traditions. They have their roots in what is probably humankind's oldest celebration. As our ancient ancestors left their tropical homes and settled in northern climates, they noticed that as it grew colder, the days grew shorter and the nights grew longer. Animals and plants went into hibernation and food supplies dwindled. This would have caused our ancestors to feel fear and anxiety. What if the sun disappeared completely and never returned? What if they had to survive in a cold, dark world? As the ancients figured out that there was an annual cycle as the earth

revolved around the sun, fear and magic rituals to bring about the return of the sun turned into opportunities for music and dancing, feasting, and spending time with our loved ones. Early humans also created many stories and myths to explain the solstice events.

One of the most famous stories is the Japanese goddess Amaterasu, who is ashamed at the bad behavior of her brother and hides in a cave, leaving the world in darkness. The legend is that the Spirits gather in front of the cave and they do such comical and obscene dances that the goddess becomes curious. As she opens the door and looks out, the Spirits hold a mirror so that she can see herself and she comes out, returning light to the world. Author Katrien Vander Straeten writes: Around 2000 BC, the Ancient Mesopotamians marked the Winter Solstice with a festival celebrating their god Marduk's victory over darkness. The Egyptians welcomed Ra's triumph over death. With the Daygan festival, the Persian Zoroastrians dedicated the day after the Solstice to Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom. On the Winter Solstice, the Romans honored Saturn, the God of farming, with the Saturnalia.⁵ During these eight days of celebration, the army rested and business and schooling were suspended. People decorated their houses with greenery, gave gifts to one another, held lavish feasts, and kept lamps burning to ward off evil spirits. Eventually in ancient Rome the births of so many gods and heroes were celebrated, including Apollo, Attis, Baal, Dionysus, Helios, Hercules, Perseus, Theseus and Mithra, that in the third century, the Emperor Aurelian established a single festival for all of them on December 25th and called it "Dies Natalis Invicti Solis", the birthday of the invincible Sun. This is the pagan festival that became Christmas after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire.

Another commonly heard name for the Winter Solstice Festival is Yule, which is thought to have its origins in a midwinter Viking feast that honored Odin. The word Yule probably comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word that means "wheel", as in the wheel of the year, which is the sun. This celebration is about producing heat and light, two things we miss most in the darkest and coldest days of the year. One of the oldest customs is burning the Yule log. The huge log is kindled with holly and everyone gathers to sing and dance to awaken the Sun God from his winter sleep. People also gaze into the fire to visualize the return of the summer and the summer days, for the Yule log is the counterpart of the bonfires at the Summer Solstice. A more common symbol of the season is the evergreen, the tree that stays green, does not lose its leaves and seems to be immortal. Many ancient cultures, including the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Chinese, and the Hebrews had sacred trees that symbolized eternal life. The Germans set up an evergreen Yule tree inside their houses or near the entrance and eventually decorations were added. There are several evergreens associated with the season- holly and ivy are traditional favorites in Europe. Mistletoe was sacred to the Druids, for it was supposed to have healing powers. It was also a symbol of peace - enemies would stand beneath a spray to make peace compacts, sealing them with a kiss. Making seasonal wreaths of evergreens that symbolize the wheel of the year is an ancient tradition. Mary Harrington tells us that the original Norse Yule wreath was made of iron, decorated with evergreens and had a candle placed in the center to represent the returning sun.⁶

In the first reading, Richard Gilbert reminds us that this time of year is also about the birth of divine saviors. Along with Jesus, there is Krishna, the Hindu god-man; Buddha, the Enlightened One; Confucius, sage of ancient China. The Egyptian god Osiris was supposed to have been born on December 25. All of these god-heroes were said to have been born of a virgin. Gilbert says that: "I cite these miraculous religious birth legends, these pagan practices of winter solstice, not to belittle the birth of Jesus 2000 years ago, nor the Christmas celebration they have prompted, but to remind us how deeply we believe in the hope symbolized by the birth of a baby; how deeply etched in our bones is a communion with the workings of the earth; how fundamental is our need for festivity, ritual and ceremony; how universal are humanity's spiritual yearnings no matter how varied their form." Gilbert goes on to say that: "Christmas is a magical time of the year not only because of the fabled birth in the stable, but because it is the amalgam of so many myths and practices that come out of the pagan world. At heart, we are all pagans - dependent on the coming and going of the seasons. But we need more. We need to assign meaning to this blessed reality in which we live, and so we depend upon prophets of the human spirit, including Jesus of Nazareth, to help us understand the miracle of life, our mutual responsibilities, and our finite role in an infinite cosmic drama."⁷

As Unitarian Universalists, the winter holidays are an opportunity to understand more deeply the many different roots of our faith and to remember that we are intimately connected with nature. This is also a time to renew our commitment to live more fully our faith and our values. As Maureen Killoran said in the second reading, "'tis the season for generosity of spirit, for giving of the heart without counting cost, for forgiving those who are not here or not here as we would need, for gentleness with self and others, for hope that love in presence or in memory will pay a healing call and for conviction that the way you greet each dayspring is what matters after all". It is also the time for the candles and the twinkling lights of this time of year to remind us of the potential of love's light to triumph over the darkness of despair, of suffering and of human need and to create a world that is more beautiful, more just, more brilliant than it ever has been. You and I, each and every one of us, no matter our circumstances or challenges in life, can give that light to the world and are called to do so every day, not just during this holiday season.

As we welcome the winter holidays once again and we deck our halls with greenery and ornaments, may we renew the spirit of Christmas in our hearts and commit ourselves once again to working all year long toward a world that is more beautiful, more just and brighter than ever.

References

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- ⁴ Kennedy, Andrew, "Unitarian Universalists Celebrate Christmas? Why?", Sermon, December 2010, http://www.uumilwaukee.org/sites/default/Files/sunday_services/Past_sermons/2010%20Christmas.pdf.
- ⁵ Crockett, David, "The Winter Solstice, a Cross-Cultural Event", Sermon, December 2007, http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:T_Qr7JHjAvQJ:uusouthcountyri.org/sermons/Winter-Solstice.pdf+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us
- ⁶ Montley, Patricia, *Ibid.*, pg. 17.
- ⁷ Gilbert, Richard S., *Ibid.*

All other historic information comes from Patricia Montley's text cited in #3.

Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will,' said Scrooge indignantly, 'every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!' He stopped at the outer door to bestow the greetings of the season on the clerk, who cold as he was, was warmer than Scrooge; for he returned them cordially. 'A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!' said Scrooge, buttoning his great-coat to the chin. 'No one _1_ for sure who decorated the first Christmas tree. The _2_ of bringing an evergreen tree indoors and _3_ it at Christmas started in Germany. One _4_ says that Martin Luther started the practice. Luther was an important Christian _5_. The biggest Christmas tree in Britain is put up in Trafalgar Square in _9_. The people of Norway still give this tree every year to the _10_ to thank them for helping Norway against Hitler in the second World War. 1) a) knows b) begins c) decides d) is 2) a) tree b) legend c) story d) custom 3) a) showing b) giving c) putting d) decorating 4) a) story b) legend c) fairy d) novel 5) a) man b) saint c) leader d) woman 6) a) inside b) outside c) upside d) offside 7) a) comfortable b) beautiful c) public d) popular. Reading during the festive period is a wonderful way to get into the Christmas spirit and enjoy the delights of the holiday season. The delights of the Christmas season are beautifully illuminated and the book is a pleasure to read. Today, the tale's enchanting spirit and imagination continues to ring true and appeal to the sense of wonder we all share, reminding us of the importance of keeping in touch with the child within. Courtesy of HarperCollins. Doctor Zhivago by Boris Pasternak | Russia. The epic novel, published in 1957 in Italy, portrays the effects of the 1917 Russian Revolution and its aftermath on a bourgeois family. For many, the novel is a love story against the backdrop of Russia's historical upheaval at th