

The Ancient and Pagan Origin of Christmas

Most of the traditions we practice on December 25th have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus, which probably actually occurred in late summer or early fall. In fact, most of the customs and traditions of Christmas actually pre-date the birth of Jesus. Here are a few examples:

The date of December 25th probably originated with the ancient birthday of the son-god, Mithra, a pagan deity whose religious influence became widespread in the Roman Empire during the first few centuries A.D. Mithra was related to the Semitic sun-god, Shamash, and his worship spread throughout Asia to Europe where he was called Deus Sol Invictus Mithras. Rome was well-known for absorbing the pagan religions and rituals of its widespread empire. As such, Rome converted this pagan legacy to a celebration of the god, Saturn, and the rebirth of the sun god during the winter solstice period. The winter holiday became known as Saturnalia, and began the week prior to December 25th. The festival was characterized by gift-giving, feasting, singing and downright debauchery, as the priests of Saturn carried wreaths of evergreen boughs in procession throughout the Roman temples.

But after the conversion of emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. to Christianity, this new religion was spread throughout the empire and Mithraism, as St. Jerome reports, was forcefully subdued, especially in Rome and in Alexandria. In 376 A.D. Pope Leo destroyed the temple of Mithra. Despite that, the Mithraic festival of the birth of the Sun continued, as it was fun to be merry in the middle of the winter. It was not till the year 530 AD that the church commissioned the Monk Dionysius Exiguus to proclaim this popular time of the year as the birth of Christ. Constantine converted to Christianity, but he kept celebrating this pagan festival, and transformed it into the Christian holiday of Christmas.

Many of the symbols associated with the modern holiday of Christmas such as the burning of the Yule log, the eating of ham, the hanging of boughs, holly, mistletoe, etc. are apparently derived from traditional northern European Yule celebrations. When the first missionaries began converting the Germanic peoples to Christianity, they found it easier to simply provide a Christian reinterpretation for popular feasts such as Yule and allow the celebrations themselves to go on largely unchanged, rather than trying to suppress them.

The use of evergreen trees during Christmas comes from Germany, where it was used in the Yule Time worship and celebration, as well as in observance of the resurrected sun god, and of the Winter Solstice. The evergreen represented life, and also was regarded as a phallic symbol in fertility worship.

It was believed that the red berries of the holly was a symbol of the menstrual blood of the queen of heaven, Diana. The white berries of mistletoe were considered to be the droplets of the semen of the sun god. Branches of holly and mistletoe were hung in doorways of temples and homes, and it was believed that kissing beneath them will make the spirits of the god and goddess to enter one's body and make them fertile.

The Scandinavian tradition of slaughtering a pig at Christmas, and not in the autumn, is evidence of this conversion. The tradition derives from the sacrifice to the god Freyr

at the Yule celebrations. Halloween and Easter are theorized to have been likewise assimilated from northern European pagan festivals.

English historian Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ("Ecclesiastic History of the English People") contains a letter from Pope Gregory I to Saint Mellitus, who was then on his way to England to conduct missionary work among the heathen Anglo-Saxons. The Pope suggests that converting heathens is easier if they are allowed to retain the outward forms of their traditional pagan practices and traditions, while recasting those traditions spiritually towards the one true God, instead of to their pagan gods (whom the Pope refers to as "devils"), "to the end that, whilst some gratifications are outwardly permitted them, they may the more easily consent to the inward consolations of the grace of God". The Pope sanctions such conversion tactics as Biblically acceptable, pointing out that God did much the same thing with the ancient Israelites and their pagan sacrifices.

Although the Christian celebration of the birth of Christ was superimposed upon ancient Pagan traditions, it does not, or should not, diminish the arrival of the "Prince of Peace", and his original message of tolerance, compassion, giving and peace. Who ever you worship, it is a time of joy, of giving, compassion, of praying for peace and of gift giving and celebration!



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