

The Origins of Christmas

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

Have you ever wondered where Christmas came from? Some of you will groan at the question; you're probably thinking, "Well duh ... it comes from the birth of the baby Jesus!"

Well, yes and no. It's true that many Christians celebrate the birth of the Christ-child on this day, but it wasn't always so. In fact, the earliest church never celebrated Christmas, and less than 250 years ago, certain Christians banned Christmas because it was too festive!

In the earliest days of the church, it was dangerous to be known as a follower of Jesus. It was a matter of life and death. Two main groups opposed the earliest Christians—Jewish leaders, and the Roman imperial system.

The earliest Christians were Jews who had left the synagogue to follow this upstart rabbi, Jesus. Jewish leaders treated them as a disruptive force who caused division in the synagogue. Jesus was teaching radically innovative ideas which drew people away from the Torah, the heart of Judaism.

On the other hand, the Roman system hated Christians because they refused to pay homage to the emperor. These early Jesus-followers insisted on worshipping God alone. They would not be cowed by imperial force, and so they disrupted the plans by which the oppressor subdued the people in the countries they had conquered. These early Christians defied the empire, and Rome could not let that happen, executing many Christians, often by crucifixion.

In such an environment, the underground church met in secret in small gatherings, celebrating resurrection and new life every Sunday.

All of that changed in 313 CE. Emperor Constantine declared that Christianity would be one of the official religions of the Roman Empire. Suddenly, it was legal to be a follower of Jesus. Within the next two centuries, the church went from being an underground group to being part of the power structure of empire. The Church (with a capital C) became an institution of power and influence. I don't think the Church has ever recovered from that mistake.

The Church flexed its new muscles. One of the earliest acts was to take over the Roman festival of Saturnalia, a weeklong festival from December 17–25. During Saturnalia, Roman courts were closed, and Roman law dictated that no one could be punished for damaging property or injuring people. Each Roman community selected an "enemy of the Roman people" to represent the "Lord of Misrule." This victim was forced to indulge in food and other physical pleasures throughout the week. At the festival's conclusion on December 25, the authorities would brutally murder this innocent man or woman as a symbol of destroying the forces of darkness.

When the Church gained power, Christian leaders converted large numbers of pagans to Christianity by promising them that they could continue to celebrate Saturnalia. But there was an obvious problem, so Christian leaders decided to remedy it by naming Saturnalia's concluding day as Jesus' birthday. The very first mention of a Nativity feast was in 354 CE, a mere 40 years after Christianity became an official religion.

In his book, "The Battle for Christmas," Stephen Nissenbaum writes, "In return for ensuring massive observance of the anniversary of the Saviour's birth by assigning it to this resonant date, the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it

had always been.” The earliest Christmas holidays were celebrated by drinking, sexual indulgence, singing naked in the streets (a precursor of modern caroling), and other such indulgences.

This origin story partly explains the tension many feel at Christmas between an orgy of consumerism and a more religious observance. The consumerist emphasis really took hold in the 5th and 6th centuries and culminated in a revelry of eating and drinking in the Middle Ages.

Inevitably, there was a backlash. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas in England in the 17th century. In Boston, the Reverend Increase Mather observed in 1687 that “the early Christians who first observed the Nativity on December 25 did not do so thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens’ Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into Christian ones.” The New England Puritans followed the example of their English forebears by banning Christmas in Massachusetts and other parts of New England. Christians trying to impose their beliefs on society in general is not a new idea.

This very brief historical overview shows that the origin of Christmas is not as obvious as first thought. To those conservative commentators who continue to whine about the “war on Christmas,” this kind of historical insight can help us appreciate that this celebration began as an ancient pagan festival which was coopted by the Church. In fact, Puritans were among the earliest people to wage a war on Christmas!

Many of the traditions we associate with Christmas, from decorating the house to buying presents to putting up a tree to wishing for a white Christmas, come from these early Saturnalian origins.

My own celebration mixes all these elements. I put lights on the house. I erect a tree (fake and pre-lit) in the house. I purchase and make gifts for family and friends. And I also mark the festival of the birth of Christ. I wish people “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays.”

From November 1 to December 30, the world’s major religions celebrate many holidays. There are also many non-religious celebrations of light during these shortest days of the year. I don’t believe my tradition is the only one that counts.

It is such a gift to celebrate any festival of light, and I will do so with joy and verve.