

Spiritual AF Sundays with The Mystic Geek

Season 2, Episode 2

The Appeal to Tradition

Transcript

One of the arguments used to defend the legitimacy of a belief or practice is the appeal to tradition. It comes up when examining faiths outside of the "mainstream culture." Does this appeal to tradition hold up when looking at Christmas?

In this episode, we'll examine how the celebration of Christmas has changed. What does the evolution of Christmas over the past two millennia say when trying to revitalize earth-based religions? Is it better? How much influence?

Stay tuned for this holiday geek-out episode of Spiritual AF Sundays, The Appeal to Tradition.

[Podcast Intro]

And welcome back.

You're listening to Jessica, The Mystic Geek.

In this episode, we're talking about Christmas and traditions. We're also exploring whether a religious belief has to be around for a very long time for others to deem it legitimate, likewise, whether that belief needs to remain pure, unadulterated from the outside world, for others to see it as valid.

How we're going to go about doing this is I'm going to first share with you the origins of Christmas. Then we'll talk about some of the

evolving symbols of Christmas, the things we see nowadays that were outside during the first few centuries post-Jesus. And then, we're going to talk a little bit more, and this will be some of the noodling bit about the whole concept of tradition, beliefs, and authenticity.

History

Let's get into the origins of Christmas.

I am about to share a mix of history and theory because we did not have Twitter back then. We did not have the New York Times back then. A lot of history at that point was still an oral tradition that believers passed around. Some scribes documented things, but it was not as accessible of a tool as media is nowadays. We are going back and trying to fill in the pieces regarding various events and rationale with that.

I hate to say it, but the song lyrics, "Christ was born on Christmas day," was inaccurate. Jesus was not born on December 25th or whatever day in the calendar Joseph and Mary ascribed to them.

The Nature of Holidays

Holidays typically fall into one of two categories: anniversaries or observances. Anniversaries occur each year on the date of that specific event. Meanwhile, we celebrate observances on a day different from the original event's day.

I'll give you an example here. The American Fourth of July is the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, so it is an anniversary. Whereas, if we look at the history of President's Day, this is a holiday set up in observance to honor the birthdays and lives of all U.S. Presidents. Congress approved the Uniform Monday Holiday Bill in 1968, establishing President's Day as the third Monday of February. How does this line up with presidential birthdays? George

Washington's birthday is on February 22nd, and Abraham Lincoln's birthday is on February 12th. Rather than pick one birthday over the other or split the timeframe in the middle, they decided let's go with a Monday because that makes things easy for federal workers who are going to get that day off anyways.

Christmas is literally Christ's Mass. It is an observation, a liturgical celebration. For those unfamiliar with that term, a liturgical celebration is a special occasion for religious believers to participate in prayers and rituals. In addition to the ritual, the worshipers went to the public.

Early Christians disagreed with celebrating Jesus's birth, at least at first. At that time, Christianity was a highly persecuted religion within the Roman Empire, and many became martyrs for their beliefs. So, the early Christian fathers focused on the day of the martyr's death rather than commemorating that martyr's birth. They considered the day of the martyr's death their "birthday into martyrdom." When they looked at other faiths and saw the celebration of divine figures' birthdays, they considered that to be too pagan for them.

The Impact of Emperor Constantine

Let's talk about Constantine, the Roman emperor from around the late 200 and early 300 A.D. era. Some historians consider Constantine one of the biggest influencers in bringing Christianity to the point of acceptance within the Roman Empire. As Emperor Constantine was preparing for a massive battle in 312 A.D., he received a prophetic vision. And in this vision, he saw the sign of the cross shining forth from the sun with words of assurance.

I will share the English translation rather than trying to butcher Latin here. The English translation is, "in this sign, you shall conquer." Other people interpreted this as more of a command, "in this sign, conquer." This vision proclaimed that victory would be Constantine's if he

continued under this divinely ordained symbol. So he went out, fought with the sign on his soldiers' shields, and won.

The following year, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, granting all citizens within the Roman Empire equal rights, regardless of faith. In essence, he made practicing Christianity legal. Constantine went above and beyond that. He helped assemble the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. by providing both the location for this council of bishops and using public funds to cover the travel expenses for these bishops. Talk about mind blown for early Christians! That council developed the first uniform Christian doctrine known as the Nicene Creed, which emphasized the birth and resurrection of Jesus. In addition, Constantine ordered the construction of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Finally, he wanted the citizens of the Roman Empire to accept Christianity, so he saw ways to blend Christian and Pagan - essentially, Roman - traditions. When we look at history, the first time that Christians used December 25th to celebrate Jesus's birth was A.D. 336, during Constantine's reign. During that time, two other festivals focused on the deities that the Romans honored.

The first one is called Saturnalia, which honors God's Saturn. And this was on December 17th through the 23rd, Saturn being a god of agriculture. There are a couple of traditional points in there that are interesting. The first one is gift-giving, which permeated into modern Christianity. The other aspect of this is in Saturnalia; there is role reversal regarding power dynamics. The master serves the servant. The servants enjoyed the lap of luxury while royalty and nobles were taking care of their tasks - proving that even those at the highest levels weren't above lending a helping hand. When we look at Christian theology and Jesus, there is that belief that Jesus, this divine entity, humbled himself by coming down to earth and incarnating in human form. So we have that role reversal going on there.

The other holiday that came up occurred from December 25th to January 1st. This festival is the celebration of the Persian god of light, Mithras. We have these two deities that have their feast periods right around the time of the winter solstice, where we see the daylight shrink and then start to come back. It made sense then to juxtapose the narrative of Jesus's birth with the belief that Jesus is the light brought into the world.

Constantine's actions don't necessarily mean that his support of Christianity was a hundred percent benevolent. Granted, he may have had a lot of faith. He may have had belief. He underwent baptism before his death. However, he was emperor and had to look at things from a larger perspective regarding the Roman Empire.

When we look at the Nicene Creed, the belief statement from the Council of Nicea, it focused only on Jesus's birth and resurrection. It brought two archetypes: the baby and the martyr on the cross. There are about 30-some years in the middle are not taken into account. Focusing on those two archetypes meant that Jesus's revolutionary beliefs, which the Gospels noted, lost attention. Was that intentional? Was it planned to take the more rebellious, political, and controversial aspects of Jesus's message and put them on the sidelines and instead make his birth the focus, a birth that lined up with the births or the creation stories of other light deities? That is something to consider.

Tradition

We can move on from talking about the early history of Christmas. Let's explore the evolving symbols and traditions. There are a lot of things that you've probably seen out and about. You might've even seen them in church settings. I will go through those different pieces and where they came from historically.

Advent

To start with, let's talk about the whole concept of Advent. Advent is the timeframe before Christmas if you're not Christian and unfamiliar with Christian customs. This tradition started about the fifth century A.D.

This timeframe is considered the start of the liturgical year in Christianity, especially in the Catholic church. The liturgical year is in the timeframe of telling this story of Christianity; it starts and ends at this point.

Now, when does Advent start? That depends. There are different beliefs based on what type of church. You've got the Western churches and then the Eastern Orthodox churches. Western churches typically start the liturgical year; they start Advent on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. The Eastern Orthodox started their Advent period about 40 days before Christmas and focused a little bit more on the Nativity Fast, parallel to what Lent is for Easter, which is that time of reflection and sacrifice.

During Advent, the Church uses different colors. The primary color you'll often see is purple, though some denominations will use blue for Advent. The exception to this is the Sunday before Christmas, Gaudete Sunday. During that Sunday, they might use the color rose for the liturgical vestments because it's a time of celebration since it is the last Sunday service, the last liturgy before Christmas.

You're probably wondering about the origins of color-coding liturgies. They come from a Roman Missal that Pope Pius V wrote following the Council of Trent in 1570, and this Roman Missal made customs more uniform across the Catholic Church. Before that, the colors purple and rose were not part of the liturgical colors worn by the priests.

And then you also see candles, usually on or near the altar. Churches often display three purple candles, representing that spirituality and

somberness. You may have one pink candle representing that Gaudete Sunday, the excitement coming up. Sometimes the church includes a white candle to represent the nativity.

Twelve Days of Christmas

Let's examine the twelve days of Christmas. What are they talking about with that? The Twelve Days of Christmas is a timeframe from the day after Christmas to the Epiphany of January sixth. You're probably wondering what the heck is, "Epiphany"? The Epiphany is a holiday that started in the fourth century, 361 A.D. to be precise, about 25 years-ish after the church officially recognized December 25th as Christmas.

What the Epiphany commemorates started actually as two different things. One is the visitation of the three magi, so the three wise men, the three kings, whichever translation you want to use, who saw the star in the sky, followed the star, found Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and provided gifts that were symbolic of different things. That's the first part of the Epiphany. The second part was the observance of Jesus's baptism. In about 1955, the Church set up a separate feast day to commemorate the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

If you recall, some traditions use Advent as a time of fasting and reflection; this is the celebration they have afterward, the way they break that fast.

Christmas Trees, Wreaths, and All Things Evergreen

Now we are going to talk about Christmas trees. Why evergreens? Why pine trees or other evergreens? Evergreens do not lose their foliage during winter; they stay green throughout. In the winter, an evergreen tree is a reminder that the waning light will return, that life conquers death and that there will be a continuation. Germany started bringing trees into the home for Christmas, and some historians credit

Martin Luther with the tradition of lights on the Christmas tree. The story is that after coming home from a sermon, he looked up at the sky. He saw the twinkling lights, which gave him the idea of attaching candles to the tree. They have since been moved on to electrical lights because you probably guessed that having candles on your tree, especially once it gets dry, is a massive fire hazard. So yay, electricity, being able to take care of that concern for us.

While most Christians in Europe accepted this tradition, the extremist Puritans in America decided that Christmas trees and fun were too Pagan. They went as far as to outlaw observances of Christmas outside of attending church services. No decorations, no caroling, nada. Americans only adopted the tradition of Christmas trees about the 1830s, and you can thank the German settlers in Pennsylvania for that change.

Gingerbread

We talked about the Christmas tree. Let's examine a tradition that is a bit more edible: gingerbread. We're talking about gingerbread men, gingerbread people, et cetera. Gingerbread originated around the 11th century. The soldiers, the warriors in the crusades, brought back this aromatic spice, this aromatic plant, from their travels. Over time it was used in various things, including baked goods. During the medieval era, there were gingerbread baker guilds. That's right; they had people unionize around making gingerbread. The gingerbread guild bakers would bake that gingerbread, except for Christmas and Easter; at that point, it was allowable for the general public to bake those things themselves. The first gingerbread figures were gifts given by Queen Elizabeth I of England to her distinguished guests. She had gingerbread figures made in the likeness of people she held in high esteem. The popularity of the gingerbread house started with Hansel and Gretel, so it began with a gruesome fairytale in the early 1800s. In that story, it was a house of bread and adapted one of gingerbread.

And that is how baking and decorating gingerbread men and houses became Christmas traditions.

Hanging Mistletoe (and kissing from underneath)

Let's move from baked goods to not-so-edible plants. I'm going to start with mistletoe, a pretty naughty plant, for several reasons. First off, let's talk about the etymology of the word mistletoe. It comes from the Anglo-Saxon words "mistel," which is poop, and "tan," which is a stick. Yes, mistletoe equals poop stick. There you go.

There is a story about mistletoe in Norse mythology. The god Baldur was paranoid that the various animals and plants of the world were out to kill him. As a result, his wife and mother approached every plant and animal to vow that they would not kill Baldur. Unfortunately, they missed one, and Baldur died from an arrow made of mistletoe. After the gods resurrected Baldur, his mother, Frigg, declared that the mistletoe was a symbol of love and that those who pass underneath it should kiss. That's one of the reasons why kissing under the mistletoe became a tradition.

Pagan culture saw the mistletoe's white berries as a symbol of male fertility. I'll let you sit and think on that one for a bit. Yes, if you thought we were talking about semen, that is what they're alluding to when it comes to the imagery of mistletoe berries.

Let's go back to the custom of kissing under the mistletoe.

18th-century servants further pushed it, and part of the lore behind that was that if a man saw a woman under the mistletoe, it was his right to kiss them. In addition, there was the superstition that if the woman refused, that bad luck would fall upon her. Coercion. Not the greatest. This thing looks innocent enough, but there are some cringy bits to the history.

We should pivot here.

Boughs of Holly

Let's talk about a less cringe plant tied to Christmas, the holly plant. Holly is part of Pagan and Celtic mythology. There is the Oak King, who represents the summer, the warmer part of the year, and then there's the Holly King, who represents the dark and winter part of the year. Those two go at it. The whole explanation for the changing seasons is the Oak King and the Holly King are battling. Part of the year, the Oak King wins part of the year of the Holly King wins.

This plant is also associated with the Roman god Saturn, the God of agriculture; as we discussed before, Christmas and its timeframe in the calendar line up with Saturnalia, which is the feast day, or feast timeframe tied to that Roman god, Saturn.

Christians added their interpretations when it came to the various elements of the holly plant. Those sharp leaves on their tie to the crown of thorns that Jesus wore. The red berries tie to his sacrifice and the blood. And the evergreen nature of holly ties to the concept of eternal life.

Let's go on to other more modern and secular topics.

Gift-Giving

First up is gift-giving. As I shared before about Saturnalia, there was gift-giving back then. This tradition within Christianity probably was influenced by that Roman holiday. In addition, the early Christians also associated this tradition with the three magi giving gifts to Jesus. The timeframe for when gift-giving happens has changed over history. Initially, the gift-giving occurred either on the feast day for Saint Nicholas on December sixth or in early January. It was about the 19th century when celebrants moved that gift-giving day from either St. Nicholas's Day or early January to Eve.

Santa Claus

Since we're talking about gift-giving, we could talk about Santa Claus, who has undergone many changes since his origins. The origin of Santa Claus starts with Saint Nicholas, the patron Saint of children, whose feast day, the day of his martyrdom, is December six. The third century A.D. was when Saint Nicholas was around. Over time, various cultures and traditions adopted his story. The Dutch name for St. Nicholas is "Sint Nikolaas," or the nickname is "Sinterklass." Hold onto that for a moment as Europeans immigrated to the United States. Sinterklaas gained popularity during the 18th and 19th centuries. And then, in about the early 19th century. That is when life-sized or live versions of Sinterklass, or Santa Claus, started showing up in various shops.

The Christmas Pickle

Since we're talking about marketing schemes, let's go into the concept of the Christmas pickle. While some people tried to link the Christmas pickle to an obscure German festival, historians have debunked that idea. This novelty resulted from a marketing scheme for importing glass Christmas tree decorations from Germany.

[Sarcastic and amused tone]

And it has nothing to do with the lore around St. Nicholas resurrecting, a group of boys who were murdered, butchered, and stored in brine. There's no way we will have something that is a fun part of the Christmas tradition based on dark material. Not unlike the gingerbread houses that I mentioned.

[End of sarcastic and amused tone]

Now that I got that little bit of silliness out of my system. Let's talk about the last bit here, the Yule log.

(I'm sure you're probably going, "What about Elf on the Shelf? Caroling? Wassailing? Whatnot?" I can only go for so long here, folks. If you want to research those other bits, go ahead and do that. I'm just ending at the Yule log.)

The Yule Log

Within Christian tradition for Christmas, the Yule log was a log that the family chose, and it was burned in the hearth, piece by piece, from Christmas to Epiphany. So during the twelve days of Christmas.

Historians discovered the assimilation of the Yule Log into the Christmas tradition occurred before the 17th century. Before that, it was just the Christmas log.

What is Yule? Yule is a winter holiday that the Germanic people observe, and Yuletide is a two-month celebration from mid-November to mid-January. When you think about it, this is that full timeframe of when we see the light getting less and less during the day, we hit Solstice, and then we start seeing it come back up again. So it's that maintaining that hope that the light will return. The internet is out there for you to learn more about Yule and its various practices.

After listening to me explain the origins of the observance of Christmas and the evolution of its spiritual and secular customs, you're probably going, "Jess, where are you going with this?"

The Appeal

Well, listener, I'm glad you asked. I wanted to bring a bunch of foundational material for discussing what we call the appeal to tradition.

What does this term mean? The appeal to tradition is a logical fallacy that occurs when someone argues that a particular idea, belief, or practice is valid simply because it has been around for a long time or

as part of a longstanding tradition. This argument is often used in religious discussions, as believers pass down their religious beliefs and practices through the generations. Theologians see those aspects as integral parts of the religion's tradition. In conversations about faith, theologians can use the appeal to tradition to defend or justify a particular belief or practice.

For example, someone might argue that a particular belief is true because a religious group has focused on it for centuries. Or, they may believe that because a religious tradition included a specific practice for a long time, it justified its continued use.

However, scholars generally consider the appeal to tradition as a flawed argument, as the fact that something has been around for a long time does not necessarily mean that it is valid. It is essential to critically evaluate the evidence and reasoning behind a belief or practice rather than simply accepting it because it is part of a tradition.

When I look at the whole concept of appeal to tradition in Christianity and other faiths, I can break it down into two pieces.

Historical Accuracy

The first part looks at the idea of historical accuracy or inaccuracy.

So effing what?

Why is historical accuracy seen as a source of credibility? Who establishes the standards of what is deemed credible? Do those standards benefit any particular groups of people, and if so, who?

Suppose some cultures have developed a writing system. In that case, they're likely in a better position to defend the challenge of historical accuracy than a culture that relies a lot more on oral traditions than written ones. Placing too much value on historical

accuracy within a religion's tradition draws the focus away from more important topics, such as its moral and spiritual teachings.

Syncretism

Another objection that comes up is that of syncretism. Syncretism occurs when there is a religion or group, and that group pulls in and adopts bits and pieces from the local practices, religions, and traditions. Some people think that is bad because they feel that as a practice or a belief adapted to either the modern time or the modern culture, it is becoming less "pure" from a historical perspective.

Let's adjust an earlier line of questioning, who sets the definition of historical purity? Which groups of people benefit from those standards?

The critical thing to realize is that assimilation can occur naturally. An area that adopts that religion that's coming in might adapt the traditions and customs to better fit with their existing practices. That was often the case when it came to Christianity. Part of that was you had many missionaries taking over various areas and proselytizing and converting.

And then, on the flip side, the local people would find ways to maintain their folk practices by blending that into Christian beliefs. When he looks at syncretism from that perspective, what ends up happening is that different locations and cultures end up having other guiding ideas. These differences can lead to conflict or factions, which some people see as a downside to syncretism because they focus heavily on purity and unity. The last bit that comes up with syncretism is pulling from other traditions and practices.

The conflict between different religious beliefs is a common source of tension. It can be especially concerning when one powerful ideology

encroaches upon another, cherry-picking elements without respect for their original context or significance to the native faith.

In the modern day, we have the term cultural appropriation.

We are curious to know if that happened within Christianity.

Did the leaders look upon the groups they colonized and pondered what practices they could integrate into their own? Did the colonized put up a facade of practicing the incoming religion while maintaining their folk practices?

Share Your Views With Us

I'll throw it back at you, dear listeners. Do you believe that religion needs to be tied to historical events or at least be able to defend its claim of connection to historical practices or groups to be seen as valid? Likewise. What's your take on religions pulling from other belief systems? Is it perfectly okay, absolutely taboo, or does that depend on various factors? And if so, what? We'd like to hear from you.

There are two ways that you can reach out. Email me at jess@themysticgeek.com, or you can leave me a voice message at speakpipe.com/themysticgeek. With that, we're going to wrap up today's episode on the appeal to tradition. Join us next week for our new year's episode will explore the practice of new year's resolutions. Two weeks from now, on January 8th, we will discuss the concepts of rest and action and the need to find a balance between them. I'm still noodling over ideas for future episodes. The one on January 15th will be around the myths of self-care, but wait to quote me. If you have topics you want me to explore and discuss, please reach out with that. I hope you have a spiritual AF week. Take care.

[Podcast Outro]