

The Mystic Geek - Spiritual AF Sundays

# **The Appeal to Tradition (Holiday Special)**

# What We're Going to Talk About

- Origins of Christmas
- Evolving Symbols of Christmas
- Traditions, Beliefs, and "Authenticity"



# The Origins of Christmas

A MIX OF HISTORY AND THEORY



# Jesus was likely NOT born on December 25th

## TWO TYPES OF HOLIDAYS: ANNIVERSARY AND OBSERVANCE

- Anniversaries are celebrated each year on the day of the event
- Observations are celebrated on a day that isn't the day of the event



# Anniversary vs Observance

## EXAMPLES FROM SECULAR HOLIDAYS IN THE UNITED STATES

- The Fourth of July is the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.
- President's Day is an observance to honor the birthdays and lives of all U.S. presidents.
  - Observed on the third Monday of February (Uniform Monday Holiday Bill in 1968)
  - George Washington's Birthday is February 22nd
  - Abraham Lincoln's birthday is February 12th

# Mass on Christ's Day

## LITURGICAL CELEBRATION

Liturgical celebrations are special occasions where religious believers come together around shared beliefs, texts, prayers, and rituals to celebrate the divine.

These events also often include moments of community outreach during which members of the worshiping group take time to provide service or show kindness towards others.



# Early Opposition

## CELEBRATING BIRTH VS MARTYRDOM

- Early Christianity focused on the day of a saint or martyr's death.
- Celebrating a martyr's death as "the birthday of his martyrdom."
- Focus on celebrating someone's day of birth was seen more as a pagan custom.



Sources: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10709a.htm>,  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-27/how-early-church-viewed-martyrs.html>,  
<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10709a.htm>

# The Influence of Constantine the Great

## ROMAN EMPEROR AND CHAMPION OF CHRISTIANITY



- As the Roman Emperor Constantine prepared for a pivotal battle in 312 A.D., he was inspired by a vision: a cross shining forth from the sun with words of assurance.
- "in hoc signo vinces" (in this sign you shall conquer) - proclaiming that victory would be his if he continued under this divinely ordained symbol.
- The Roman Emperor, one year later, having fully realized the importance of religious freedom and coexistence, issued his Edict of Milan, granting all citizens within his Empire equal rights regardless of faith.

# The Influence of Constantine the Great

## ROMAN EMPEROR AND CHAMPION OF CHRISTIANITY



- Assembled the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. - provided the location and used public funds to cover travel expenses for the bishops.
  - The council developed the first uniform Christian doctrine, the Nicene Crede, emphasizing Jesus's birth and resurrection.
- Ordered that the Church of the Nativity be built in Bethlehem
- Sought to support conversion to Christianity by blending Christian and Pagan (Roman) traditions.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Council\\_of\\_Nicaea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Council_of_Nicaea),  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_Nativity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity)



# The Influence of Constantine the Great

## ROMAN EMPEROR AND CHAMPION OF CHRISTIANITY

- The first mention of December 25th as the date of Jesus's birth - A.D. 336 (during Constantine's reign).
- December 17-23: Saturnalia, honoring Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture
- December 25th - January 1st: Celebration of the birth of the Persian god of light, Mithras



# The Influence of Constantine the Great

## IMPACT ON CHRISTIANITY

- Two aspects of Jesus: the baby and the martyr on the cross
- Placed political aspects of Christianity on the sidelines
- Was Nicene / Constantine-influenced Christianity (and thus the development of the Christmas holiday) a means to remove the revolutionary aspects of Jesus's message?

# The Evolving Symbols of Christmas

I DON'T THINK THERE WERE PINE TREES  
DURING THE ACTUAL NATIVITY

# Advent

## MORE THAN CHRISTMAS COUNTDOWN CALENDARS

- Started during/before the 5th Century
- Beginning of the liturgical year.
- Starting date... it depends
  - Western churches: Fourth Sunday before Christmas
  - Eastern churches: 40 days before Christmas (Nativity Fast)
  - Parallels to Lent for Easter



Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Advent>  
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-history-of-advent/>  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent>

# Advent

## MORE THAN CHRISTMAS COUNTDOWN CALENDARS



- Colors... It depends
  - The primary color is purple
  - Some denominations use blue
  - Rose for the Sunday before Christmas - Gaudete Sunday
- Origin of liturgical colors: Roman Missal following the Council of Trent (1570)
  - Rose and violet/purple were not used before this Council.

# Twelve Days of Christmas

## THE TRADITION BEHIND THE ANNOYING SONG

- The span of time between the day after Christmas (December 26th) and the Epiphany (January 6th)
- The earliest reference to the Epiphany was in the 4th Century (361 A.D.)
- The Epiphany commemorates...
  - The visitation of the three Magi
  - Jesus's baptism\*

\* In 1955, a separate feast day was set up for the baptism

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve\\_Days\\_of\\_Christmas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Days_of_Christmas)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany\\_\(holiday\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday))



# Christmas Trees

## SIGNIFICANCE OF EVERGREENS

- Evergreens do not lose foliage during the winter months.
- Evergreens in winter are a reminder that the waning light will return (life conquering death)
- Germany started the tradition of bringing trees into the home
- Martin Luther is credited with the tradition of lights on the Christmas tree.





# Christmas Trees

## THE PURITANS HATED FUN

- Puritans saw Christmas trees (and fun traditions in general) as "too pagan"
- In 1659 the General Court of Massachusetts outlawed observances of Christmas outside of attending church services.
- Americans did not adopt the tradition of Christmas trees until the 1830s (German settlers in Pennsylvania)

# Gingerbread

## HOUSES, MEN, ETC

- Gingerbread likely originated at the end of the 11th century
- There were gingerbread baker guilds!
- Elizabeth I of England gifted guests with decorated gingerbread figurines
- The popularity of the gingerbread house started with a gruesome fairytale (Hansel and Gretel, published in 1812)



# Mistletoe

## I SAW MOMMY KISSING SANTA

- Anglo-Saxon words 'Mistel' (poop) and 'tan' (stick)
- Norse mythology: Arrow made of mistletoe killed Baldur - kissing under mistletoe is seen as a way to appease the plant



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mistletoe>

<https://www.whychristmas.com/customs/mistletoe>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/mistletoe-the-evolution-of-a-christmas-tradition-10814188/>

# Mistletoe

## I SAW MOMMY KISSING SANTA

- Pagan cultures saw its white berries as a symbol of male fertility.
- Servants in 18th-century England pushed the custom of kissing under the mistletoe



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mistletoe>

<https://www.whychristmas.com/customs/mistletoe>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/mistletoe-the-evolution-of-a-christmas-tradition-10814188/>



# Boughs of Holly

## LESS CRINGY PLANT LORE

- Part of Celtic mythology: Oak vs Holly
- Associated with Saturn, Roman god of agriculture
- Christianity
  - Sharp leaves = crown of thorns
  - Red berries = blood
  - Evergreen = eternal life

Source: <https://www.flowerkingdom.com/blog/the-symbolic-significance-of-holly>  
<https://www.missionviejoflorist.com/blog/the-holly-plants-role-in-the-symbolism-of-christmas/>

# Gift-Giving

## ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS...

- Potentially influenced by the traditions of the Saturnalia
- Early Christians associated this tradition with the three Magi
- Timeframe for gift giving
  - Originally Saint Nicholas Day (December 6th) or early January
  - It changed to Christmas Eve during the 19th century.



# Santa Claus

## FROM SAINT TO SANTA

- Origins: 3rd Century A.D. with Saint Nicholas (Patron saint of children) - December 6th Feast Day
- The Dutch name for Saint Nicholas = Sint Nikolaas; nickname = Sinterklass
- Gained popularity in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries
- Shops featured life-sized (or "live") Santa Claus in early 19th century



# The Christmas Pickle

## WEIRD MARKETING SCHEMES

- Possible marketing for imported glass Christmas tree decorations from Germany
- Likely has NOTHING to do with the lore about Saint Nicholas resurrecting a group of boys who were murdered, butchered, and stored in brine





"Saint Nicholas Resuscitating Three Youths" by Bicci di Lorenzo

=



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# Yule Log

## OBVIOUS TIES TO PAGANISM

- A chosen log that was burned each night from Christmas to Epiphany
- Ties to Yule are mentioned in 17th-century literature
- Yule (Jul) is a winter holiday observed by the Germanic peoples. Yuletide is a two-month period (mid-November to mid-January)



# Traditions, Belief, and "Authenticity"

BREAKING DOWN ARGUMENTS

# Historical Inaccuracy

## SO EFFING WHAT?

- Why is "historical accuracy" seen as a source of credibility?
- Who sets the standard for determining and proving historical accuracy, and who benefits from those standards?
- Is the strength of religion tied to history or its moral and spiritual teachings?



# Syncretism

## DISTORTION OR ADAPTATION?

- Associating historical purity of belief with authenticity
- Different locations and cultures have different guiding beliefs. This can lead to conflict or factions.
- Depending on how it happens, pulling from other traditions and practices can be seen as a threat to those groups.



**Questions?  
Comments?  
Ponderings?**

LET US KNOW!

Email Address

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Leave a voice message

<https://www.speakpipe.com/TheMysticGeek>

# Upcoming Episodes

JANUARY 1ST

What's the Deal with New Year's Resolutions?

JANUARY 8TH

Finding Balance Between Rest and Action