

“CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS – UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST Style!”

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There is not a single doubt in my mind that the Christmas season is an extraordinarily special time of the calendar year for just about everyone of us, though I readily confess that it often takes me awhile before I can get into the Christmas spirit. In the days and weeks leading up to this holiday, my family has been known to jokingly call me “Scrooge” – at least I think they’re joking.

When he was a young man, Bernard Shaw invented a Society for the Abolition of Christmas. On his 90th birthday, Shaw remarked that he was still the self-elected president of the Society and there were no other members. There have been times, over the years, when I have had moments of fatigue and distaste for the crass commercialism surrounding the observance of the Christmas season that I have been willing to be the second member of Shaw’s iconoclastic society.

Yet as Christmas Day approaches, the old enchantment with this holiday always sweeps away my sullen mood. As I begin to pay closer attention to life around me I find myself getting into the spirit of Christmas! I begin to reawaken to what I know to be true about the Christmas season. For, it is then that I see that this strangely happy season meets a deep and perennial need in human nature: that the goodness in each of us demands an occasion when it can freely confess itself. Knowing how unfinished and imperfect we ourselves are, each of us wants and desires to be more charitable towards others.

It is at Christmas time that I notice an important change in human behavior – strangers seem cheerier, friendlier, more considerate. Friends seem more beloved and cherished. Each of us appears to be displaying some of the finer aspects of our humanity – of our better impulses of generosity and good will. Christmas becomes an affirming moment of what our particular religious faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism promotes and stands for.

I enjoy the Christmas season for a variety of reasons – not the least of which is this coming in touch with the nobler side of our humanity.

As I predictably come around to this awareness of Christmas, then not even the blatant commercialism that has grown up about and around this season can spoil the magic, the beauty and the charm for me. As I have gotten older I am beginning to react less and less to the commercialism . . . not let it bother me so, even when I start seeing stores displaying Christmas goods and items in early October.

. . . Yet, what does continue to bother me at this time of the year is the insinuation and even downright accusation that we Unitarian Universalists have no understanding of what Christmas truly means because we – as a religious faith – do not accept Jesus as

our personal Lord and Savior and thus – or, so this particular logic goes – we cannot fully worship and appreciate the birth of the Christ Child – the “Mass of Christ” – which is the basis for the Christmas observance by our more orthodox Christian neighbors.

The more traditional religious communities seem almost stupefied to discover that, indeed, we Unitarian Universalists can celebrate Christmas – albeit with a distinctly different significance and larger understanding.

. . . I would even go so far to state that it is perhaps precisely because we are heirs to such a tolerant, open, questioning, and rich liberal religious perspective we Unitarian Universalists can observe and celebrate the Christmas season with a pride of ownership for the variety of customs and practices that are associated with Christmas.

The truth is that we Unitarian Universalists have given much to enrich the celebration of this season. For example – at one point in our American history – did you realize that it was illegal to observe and celebrate Christmas? It is true. The Puritans banned Christmas and made celebrating it a crime punishable by imprisonment. It took the Universalists in 1651 to challenge that ban and to celebrate the holiday until that law was repealed. You can tell your more orthodox Christian neighbors and friends that if it were not for the early Universalists, they would not be looking forward to Christmas Day this year!

Would it surprise you to know that many of the most familiar Christmas songs and hymns are the products of Unitarian and Universalist writers? The Unitarian minister, Edmund Hamilton Sears, wrote in 1849 “It Came Upon The Midnight Clear”; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – also a Unitarian – wrote “I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day” and James Russell Lowell, another Unitarian, gave the world “What Means This Glory Round Our Feet,” and the English Unitarian, Sir John Bowring, wrote in 1825 one of my favorite seasonal songs – or, at least one I can pretend to stay on tune with – “Watchman, Tell Us Of The Night.”

And the list goes on – Reverend Theodore C. William’s “Glory Be To God On High” and “In The Lonely Midnight,” Reverend Henry W. Hawke’s “Thank We Now The Lord of Heaven,” as well as Reverend Marion F. Ham’s “Heir of All the Waiting Ages” and “Ring, O Ring, Ye Christmas Bells” are the songs sung at Christmas time that are the gifts of our religious forebears.

How many of us knew that Charles Dickens, author of one of the world’s most re-told seasonal stories – “A Christmas Carol” – was Unitarian?

The use of Christmas Seals on letters and cards sent during this season originated in Copenhagen by a lowly postal clerk named Einar Holboell who – you may have already guessed – was a member of the Danish Unitarian Church.

And, although strictly speaking, it does not belong in the collection of Christmas songs and carols because it does not contain a specific reference to Christmas, nevertheless,

written by John Pierpont, Unitarian clergyman and New England poet, it is one of the most cherished and recognized songs of this season – “Jingle Bells.”

– Truth be known, Unitarian Universalists have given much to this season’s celebration and observance.

. . . How many of you knew these facts associated with Christmas? . . . Well, I am guessing that many of us may not have fully known of our Unitarian Universalist connection with the customs and practices of Christmas, but that each of us do know some things about how we have come to celebrate the Christmas season.

. . . Am I making a correct assumption here? Do we know something about Christmas and its customs and observances? Raise your hands if you think you have a fairly decent working understanding of Christmas?

. . . Rather a mixed response.

Well, maybe we need to check it out. For those of you who do not know much about Christmas, you deserve the chance to uncover more about this holiday – and for those Christmas trivia buffs among us, you should have an opportunity to see just how much you do know about Christmas.

Fortunately, I happen to have a little Christmas quiz here that we can all use as a learning tool to increase our awareness and understanding of this special time of the year.

1. CHRISTMAS IS CELEBRATED ON WHAT DATE?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> January 6th | <input type="checkbox"/> December 21st |
| <input type="checkbox"/> April 19th | <input type="checkbox"/> December 25th |
| <input type="checkbox"/> December 5th | <input type="checkbox"/> All of the above |

2. SINCE WHAT YEAR HAS HUMANITY CELEBRATED CHRISTMAS AS THE BIRTHDAY OF JESUS?

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6 C.E. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1818 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 336 C.E. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1836 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1643 | <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above |

3. “SANTA CLAUS” WAS THE NAME GIVEN TO:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Saint Nicholas | <input type="checkbox"/> Swarte Piet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Father Christmas | <input type="checkbox"/> Sinterklaas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kriss Kringle | <input type="checkbox"/> All of the above |

4. CUSTOMS THAT ARE AMERICAN IN ORIGIN WHICH WE ASSOCIATE WITH THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS ARE:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caroling | <input type="checkbox"/> Gift-Giving |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christmas Cards | <input type="checkbox"/> Fire Crackers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christmas Trees | <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above |

5. WHICH ANIMALS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE OBSERVANCE OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON?

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bears | <input type="checkbox"/> Rabbits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bees | <input type="checkbox"/> Roosters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Deer | <input type="checkbox"/> All of the above |

BONUS QUESTION:

WHAT YEAR DID THE MOVIE “*MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET*” CAPTURE THE HEARTS OF AMERICANS?

Take a few minutes – confer with your neighbor if you wish – and mark the correct answer or answers for each of the questions.

. . . Now has everyone had an opportunity to fill in their answers? Good, let’s see how well we did. Pass your sheet to your neighbor to score – nay, its Christmas time! – I will trust you to score your own quiz and add up your points for your correct responses.

NUMBER 1 “CHRISTMAS IS CELEBRATED ON WHAT DATE?”

How many of you answered December 25th? Give yourselves 9 points because you are only partially correct. The 25th of December is the traditional date for celebrating Christmas Day but Christmas is also celebrated on January 6th by the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, and Egyptian Coptic Church. So, if you answered January 6th . . . give yourselves 3 points. Reward yourselves 12 points if you answered both December 25th and January 6th.

April 19th is not worth any points since only Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian church father, felt that this date was the correct date to celebrate the “Mass of Christ” or Christmas.

Likewise, December 5th is no longer celebrated as Christmas Day by the Dutch or the Germanic peoples. Originally called “Saint Nicholas Day”, this celebration on December 5th went out of vogue in 1700 in America.

And December 21st is the date of the end of the Roman pagan observance of *Saturnalia* – a time when slaves were treated as freedmen – a time of great festivity and feasting. The modern carry-over of the Roman *Saturnalia* is mingled into the American Mardi Gras celebration.

The date of Christmas was set as December 25th to counteract the pagan influence of the Roman *Saturnalia* and the Mithric revelry of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* – the birthday of the Unconquerable Sun observance – and also of the ancient Druidic celebration of the *Brumalia* or Winter Solstice. The early church set the date of Christmas on December

25th to keep the early Christians from partaking of such pagan feasting, revelry, and partying. More out of convenience rather than historical accuracy, December 25th was the date designated as the birthday of the Christ Child.

And, with that understanding, we are brought to question **NUMBER 2: “HUMANITY HAS CELEBRATED CHRISTMAS AS THE BIRTHDAY OF JESUS SINCE WHAT YEAR?”**

We can begin by ruling out the obviously wrong answers. If you said 1818 you'd be correct in naming the year when, in Obendorf, Austria, a young parish priest named Joseph Mohr wrote the song “Silent Night, Holy Night,” but you'd be incorrect if you said it was the year that humanity began to celebrate Christmas. No points for answering 1818.

Also, no points if you said 6 A.D., for this is the year that most scholars maintain that Jesus was born, but certainly the people of Jesus' time did not celebrate his birth in the manner in which human history has associated with Christmas.

If you said 1643 – deduct 4 points! Shame on you! This is the year when the Roundhead Parliament of England outlawed – rather than began celebrating – Christmas. In fact, if you lived in either England or America between 1643 and 1681 you would have been severely punished for observing Christmas. As a point of information – the Puritans did not celebrate Christmas, Easter, or Whitsunday during the mid 17th century as these holidays were considered pagan to them.

If you answered 336 A.D. – how many did? Give yourselves 10 points as this is the correct answer. The first historical mention of celebrating Christmas as a day of significance appears in the records of the early Christian Church in 336 A.D.

. . . Oh, and if you also checked 1836 – again, how many of you did? – give yourselves 2 points because, in a technical sense, you would be correct. For, in 1836 the state of Alabama became the first state in America to legally recognize the celebration of Christmas. By 1890 all states and territories had also accorded Christmas Day official and secular sanction.

Anyway, **QUESTION NUMBER 3: “SANTA CLAUS WAS THE NAME GIVEN TO:”**

How many of you answered all of the above – Saint Nicholas, Father Christmas, Kriss Kringle, Swarte Piet, Sinterklaas? . . . Well, if you did, you'd be incorrect.

The correct answer is Saint Nicholas and Sinterklaas – Sinterklaas being a Dutch contraction of Sint Nikolaas. If you answered only Saint Nicolas, only give yourselves 6 points, because you are only partially correct. If you answered both Saint Nicholas and Sinterklaas, accord yourselves the full 12 points.

If you said Father Christmas, deduct 2 points as *Pere Noel* or Father Christmas, as he was known to the French and the English during the Reformation, was a separate Christmas character from Santa Claus. Even though we moderns equate Father Christmas as Santa Claus, they truly are two distinct characterizations of Christmas legend and lore.

And if you said Kriss Kringle, also deduct 2 points because the German and German-speaking Swiss used this term to refer to the Christ Child – corrupting the German “*Christkindl*” into Kriss Kringle. The term refers not to Santa Claus but to the Christ Child who was responsible for bringing gifts to children. Again, we moderns have assimilated Kriss Kringle as we have Father Christmas to refer to Santa Claus, but in doing so, we are historically inaccurate.

Saint Nicholas – or Sinterklaas – is the historic Santa Claus, named after a bishop of Myra in Asia Minor who lived in the mid 4th century. He was the patron saint of merchants, bakers, mariners, and children – the last designation providing the connection and relationship with our Christmas observance. A number of legends survive that illustrate his generosity. Giving to the needy, feeding the poor and caring for children during the winter months, Saint Nicholas used to travel on a black donkey and visit the children of the villages and hamlets, questioning them to see if they had studied the catechism and if they behaved well. Before leaving, he treated them to fruit and candy and small gifts.

And if you answered Swarte Piet, take away 2 points for Swarte Piet or “Black Pete” was the name of the mule that Saint Nicholas rode upon as he visited the poor, the needy and the children. Black Pete always got an apple for his efforts.

. . . How are we doing so far? Or, should I not ask?

NUMBER 4: “CUSTOMS THAT ARE AMERICAN IN ORIGIN WHICH WE ASSOCIATE WITH THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS ARE:”

. . . This is a fairly easy one since you could rule out a number of these.

Caroling is a custom that originated in England during the middle ages and gained popularity in the 18th century. So, that is not American in origin.

Gift-giving goes back to the Roman *Saturnalia* and the observance of the Roman new year when gems, lambs, pastry, gold, and silver were exchanged.

Exchanging Christmas Cards began in England in the 1840’s and was introduced to America in 1843 by John Calcott Horsley.

Christmas Trees have their origin with a variety of cultures and peoples. Some say that the ancient Druids began the tradition of decorating a fir tree – some say Martin Luther in Germany put lit candles in the branches of a fir tree in order to demonstrate to his wife and children the impression that the winter night sky made on him – and some say

that the Princess Helen of Mecklenburg introduced the lighted and decorated Christmas Tree into Europe. So, you can take your choice as to its origins, but suffice it to say, it is not purely American in practice and tradition.

– Oh, okay – after all, it is the Christmas Season – so let me be generous – if any of you knew that in 1832 the abolitionist and Unitarian minister, Charles Follen, brought the first Christmas Tree to America from his native Germany, that should be worth 2 points.

So that leaves us with the answer that is worth 12 points – fire crackers. South of the Mason Dixon Line the firing of rockets, lighting those twisty serpent sparklers, cherry bombs and fire crackers ushered in the Christmas Day observance. This custom, originated somewhere in the early 1840's, continues to this day in parts of the South.

NUMBER 5: “WHICH ANIMALS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE OBSERVANCE OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON?”

I'll accept every answer except bears. Deer and rabbits are honored at Christmas time by the Pennsylvania Dutch in their famous Christmas cookies. Bees are believed by the Pennsylvania Dutch and the Moravians to crawl out of their hives on the eve of Christmas, regardless of the cold temperatures, in order to usher in the birth of the Christ Child. Cattle also are said to take special notice of Christmas Eve, where on this night of nights, they cease lowing and are thought to be able to speak in human voices. And Shakespeare, in his play Hamlet, has Marcellus say:

*Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our savior's birth is celebrated,
The cock of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dar stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.*

Roosters are reported to crow on Christmas Eve to ward off evil spirits. In the Ozark Mountains, folks maintain that roosters crow all together at 3 a.m. on Christmas morning. But bears – in all the customs and traditions that I have ever studied – have no significance in particular with Christmas, so deduct 2 points if you said “bears” and give yourselves 3 points each for answering rabbits, bees, deer, and roosters.

Well, how did we do? There is a possible score of 60 points to this quiz – well, 62 counting those extra two points for knowing that in 1832 Unitarian Charles Follen brought the custom of Christmas trees to America.

– For those of you who did not fair so well and need some extra points to boost your score. The bonus question at the bottom is worth a possible 10 points if you knew that “Miracle on 34th Street” was made in 1946. For its British and European distribution the movie starring Edmund Gwenn as the benevolent old fellow who may or may not be Santa Claus, was re-titled “The Big Heart.”

Hey, what the heck! It's Christmas time! 30 more points to any of you who knew that "Miracle on 34th Street" was written and directed by George Seaton. You heard me correctly! 30 points! – That's because, and perhaps you already guessed it, George Seaton was a Universalist.

. . . Now, there are several encapsulating comments that I would like to share. First, hopefully each of us has learned a little bit more about Christmas that will help us – as Unitarian Universalists – to better appreciate the customs and practices associated with this special holiday. And, for the trivia buffs among us, some Christmas factoids to store away in your minds for when you need to add something to a conversation concerning fire crackers, the Roundhead Parliament or bees.

Yet, more importantly, I think such an exercise also highlights that regardless of whether we know quite a bit or very little about the celebration of Christmas over the centuries, there is something within each of us that welcomes such a time as Christmas for celebration and observance. The true significance of this season is to be found in the hearts of those who carry the sentiment and the wish for peace and goodwill into all the seasons of the year.

The words of the noted Universalist preacher and scholar, Clinton Lee Scott, appropriately come to mind:

“Christmas is more than a date in the calendar.

Christmas is a mood, a sentiment, a symbol.

It is the quickening of the presence of other persons into whose lives we have invested a part of our own lives.

It is a memory of other days when into one's path a special one appeared to turn an ordinary moment or a commonplace event into a hallowed experience.

Christmas is home and hearth, the full, free laughter of children, the remembrance of friends, and a moment of peace amid the noisy conflicts within and without.

It is a gathering up of the transcendent dreams of the centuries, signaled in the birth of a child who commanded the homage of wise men and women.

Christmas is a time when goodwill is re-born and again made real in the hopes and hearts of all.”

. . . My friends, may we always honor and keep the joy, the laughter, and the good feelings of this season in our hearts and in our lives. Blessings of this Christmas season on each and everyone!

Howell K. Lind
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