

Christmas: A religious and cultural phenomenon



Christmas is celebrated on December 25 and is both a sacred religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. For two millennia, people around the world have been observing it with traditions and practices that are both religious and secular in nature.

Christians celebrate Christmas Day as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a spiritual leader whose teachings form the basis of their religion. Popular customs include exchanging gifts, decorating Christmas trees, attending church, sharing meals with family and friends and, of course, waiting for Santa Claus to arrive.

How Did Christmas Start?

The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Centuries before the arrival of the man called Jesus, early Europeans celebrated light and birth in the darkest days of winter. Many peoples rejoiced during the winter solstice, when the worst of the winter was behind them and they could look forward to longer days and extended hours of sunlight.

In the early years of Christianity, Easter was the main holiday; the birth of Jesus was not celebrated. In the fourth century, church officials decided to institute the birth of Jesus as a holiday. Unfortunately, the Bible does not mention the date for his birth (a fact Puritans later pointed out in order to deny the legitimacy of the celebration). Although some evidence suggests that his birth may have occurred in the spring (why would shepherds be herding in the middle of winter?), Pope Julius I chose December 25. It is commonly believed that the church chose this date in an effort to adopt and absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival. First called the Feast of the Nativity, the custom spread to Egypt by 432 AD and to England by the end of the sixth century.

By holding Christmas at the same time as traditional winter solstice festivals,

church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced, but gave up the ability to dictate how it was celebrated. By the Middle Ages, Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. On Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere. The poor would go to the houses of the rich and demand their best food and drink. If owners failed to comply, their visitors would most likely terrorise them with mischief. Christmas became the time of year when the upper classes could repay their real or imagined "debt" to society by entertaining less fortunate citizens.

When Christmas Was Cancelled

In the early 17th century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. By popular demand, Charles II was restored to the throne and, with him, came the return of the popular holiday.

The pilgrims, English separatists that came to America in 1620, were even more orthodox in their Puritan beliefs than Cromwell. As a result, Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was actually outlawed in Boston. Anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. By contrast, in the Jamestown settlement, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all and passed without incident.

It was not until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. Americans re-invented Christmas, and changed it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centred day of peace and nostalgia. But what about the 1800s piqued American interest in the holiday?

The early 19th century was a period of class conflict and turmoil. During this

time, unemployment was high and gang rioting by the disenchanted classes often occurred during the Christmas season. In 1828, the New York City Council instituted the city's first police force in response to a Christmas riot. This catalysed certain members of the upper classes to begin to change the way Christmas was celebrated in America.

In 1819, best-selling author Washington Irving wrote *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, gent.*, a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. In contrast to the problems faced in American society, the two groups mingled effortlessly. In Irving's mind, Christmas should be a peaceful, warm-hearted holiday bringing groups together across lines of wealth or social status. Irving's fictitious celebrants enjoyed "ancient customs," including the crowning of a Lord of Misrule. Irving's book, however, was not based on any holiday celebration he had attended—in fact, many historians say that Irving's account actually "invented" tradition by implying that it described the true customs of the season.

Also around this time, English author Charles Dickens created the classic holiday tale, *A Christmas Carol*. The story's message - the importance of charity and goodwill towards all humankind - struck a powerful chord in the United States and England and showed members of Victorian society the benefits of celebrating the holiday.

The family was also becoming less disciplined and more sensitive to the emotional needs of children during the early 1800s. Christmas provided families with a day when they could lavish attention - and gifts - on their children without appearing to "spoil" them.

As Americans began to embrace Christmas as a perfect family holiday, old customs were unearthed. People looked toward recent immigrants and Catholic and Episcopalian churches to see how the day should be celebrated. In the next

100 years, Americans built a Christmas tradition all their own that included pieces of many other customs, including decorating trees, sending holiday cards and gift-giving.

Although most families quickly bought into the idea that they were celebrating Christmas how it had been done for centuries, Americans had really re-invented a holiday to fill the cultural needs of a growing nation.

Who Invented Santa Claus?

The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back to a monk named St. Nicholas who was born in Turkey around 280 A.D.. St. Nicholas gave away all of his inherited wealth and travelled the countryside helping the poor and sick, becoming known as the protector of children and sailors.

St. Nicholas first entered American popular culture in the late 18th century in New York, when Dutch families gathered to honour the anniversary of the death of *Sint Nikolaas* (Dutch for Saint Nicholas), or *Sinter Klaas* for short. *Santa Claus* draws his name from this abbreviation.

In 1822, Episcopal minister Clement Clarke Moore wrote a Christmas poem called "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas," more popularly known today by its first line: "Twas The Night Before Christmas." The poem depicted Santa Claus as a jolly man who flies from home to home on a sled driven by reindeer to deliver toys to children around the world.

The iconic version of Santa Claus as a jolly man in red with a white beard and a sack of toys was immortalised in 1881, when political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore's poem to create the image of Old Saint Nick we know today. Rudolph, "the most famous reindeer of all," was the product of Robert L. May's imagination in 1939. The copywriter wrote a poem about the reindeer to help lure customers into the Montgomery Ward department store. (*History Channel*)