

**“A Closer Look at Christmas”**  
**Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley**  
**December 19, 2004**  
**The Rev. Judy Welles©**

It's a rare day that I find myself in agreement with newspaper columnist Cal Thomas, but last Friday was one of them. Thomas wrote in his column about how the culture has “shoplifted” a religious holiday which offers a specific message, and out of political correctness has reduced it to a conglomeration of generic mid-winter holidays with no message beyond the imperative to buy stuff. He asks, “What would happen if increasing numbers of Christmas believers declined to participate in the orgy of consumption and instead asked the baby who became a man — and much more — what he would like for his birthday?”

We all could probably come up with a pretty good list of what Jesus might ask for as birthday gifts: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the widows and orphans, love our enemies, and promote peace in the world, for starters. I'm tempted to ask Cal Thomas and his friends what *they* are doing to bring Jesus what he wants for his birthday — not a lot that I see — but I won't go there. Instead, I want to get behind his query to the deeper question: what is the true — really true, authentic, honest-to-goodness *real* message of Christmas? And whose message is it?

You see, as I look at the great sweep of human history, I see deeper yearnings and broader-based messages than those of this particular mid-winter Christian holiday which we call Christmas, valid as those are. At bottom, I see a longing for light in the darkness, a yearning for warmth in the winter chill, the need for hope that this cold, dark time will pass, and a desire for love no matter what — a guarantee of love and liberation when everything seems dark and hopeless, and despair is closing in.

These are human longings. They aren't Christian, they aren't western, they aren't Euro-centric, they aren't Anglo-Saxon. They transcend time and geography. What desert traveler hasn't hoped for an oasis? What Arctic dweller hasn't yearned for the longer days of light? What frantic Mom on a budget hasn't longed for peace and quiet?

Yes, Christmas is a Christian holiday, but it speaks to a need in all people that goes beyond religious specificity, beyond dogma and canon. When the Christian church was in formation, during those early centuries as the canon was determined and holidays gradually evolved, it was understood that the best way to make a holiday “stick” was to superimpose it on an already-existing holiday that had a well-established place in the calendar of the human heart. A study of the history of world religions will reveal that many “new” religions gathered power and authority by colonizing existing holidays of the earlier religions they wished to supplant. The early Christians were following a time-honored practice by sneaking in holiday observances

that were specific to the Christian message without taking away the holiday already being celebrated by the folk whom they hoped to convert to Christianity.

Thus we have the two most significant Christian holidays coming at the same time of year as pre-existing holidays in the pre-Christian world: Easter at Passover and at the time of the Spring Equinox, its name taken from the name of the Teutonic goddess of spring, Eostre or Osta. And Christmas coming at the same time as the Winter Solstice and the Roman celebration of Saturnalia.

Now the earliest Christians weren't particularly interested in how Jesus was born. For them, the importance of Jesus was in his teachings and, of course, his miraculous resurrection from the dead. It wasn't until about the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Christians began paying attention to Mary in a new way, that stories began to arise about Jesus' birth. All along, Mary had been included among the saints and apostles, but after several centuries she began to be regarded as the Queen of Heaven. Thus it seemed important to observe the birthday of her son, Jesus. (Think about how many Christmas carols from many lands are focused on Mary or at least include mention of her, and you will get a sense of her growing importance.)

Several religions already had important holidays clustered around the third week of December. The ancient Babylonians believed the son of the queen of heaven was born on December 25. The Egyptians celebrated the birth of the son of the fertility goddess Isis on the same date, while ancient Arabs contended that the moon was born on December 24. (Note the prevalence of birthdays of sons of goddesses.)

One noteworthy holiday connected with the winter solstice was Saturnalia, celebrated in honor of the Roman god Saturn. I found this paragraph in an essay on the Internet; listen for familiar-sounding imagery and message:

Saturn... was the oldest and most benign deity in ancient Italy and was fabled to have reigned during the Golden Age. This was conceived by the Romans as an era in which plenty abounded and nothing had appeared to corrupt and mar the peace and happiness of mankind. But since that time the world had gone from bad to worse. The lust of gold and the lust of blood had brought disastrous evils. The dream of an Age of Gold was widespread in the pre-Christian world. The Greeks taught men to think of it as followed by the Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages. These ages marked the steady decline and degeneration of mankind. But they looked for the eventual return of a Golden Era. This spirit of Gentile expectancy was that of a millennial, and King Saturn would reign.<sup>1</sup>

So with Saturnalia, you have one example of the hope for a divine rescue figure who will restore humankind to its glorious and peaceful past, and lift up the lot of humans to prosperity and happiness once again. Saturnalia was generally celebrated for several days starting on December 17, until the Roman Emperor Aurelian blended a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://people.howstuffworks.com/framed.htm?parent=christmas.htm&url=http://www.prime.org/xmas3.htm>

number of Pagan solstice celebrations of the nativity of such god-men/saviors as Appollo, Attis, Baal, Dionysus, Helios, Hercules, Horus, Mithra, Osiris, Perseus, and Theseus into a single festival called the *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, or the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun," on December 25. The Christian reference to Jesus as the "light of the world" thus fit nicely with existing pagan beliefs about the birth of the sun. The ancient "return of the sun" (s-u-n) philosophy had been replaced by the "coming of the son" (s-o-n) message of Christianity. (And we see this again at the spring equinox and Easter – joy at the uprising of this sun and son.)

The Roman people celebrated Saturnalia by bringing trees into their houses and hanging bright bits of metal on them. Their halls were decorated with boughs of laurel and of green trees, with lighted candles and with lamps. Bonfires were lit in high places to strengthen the reviving sun in his course. Candles and green wreaths were given as gifts, the streets were crowded with noisy processions of men and women carrying lighted tapers, and public places were decked with flowers and shrubs. Sound familiar?

In the Roman world, then (which, of course, was the world that Jesus was born into), we have an important holiday which celebrates the birth of the sun and the hope for a return to peace and plenty, marked by decorating with greens, feasting, and the exchange of gifts.

In another interesting parallel, we also see that the story of Jesus' nativity echoes several other stories of miraculous births of contemporary heroes. Suetonius, the biographer of the Roman emperors, wrote about the birth of Augustus Caesar, who ruled the Roman empire from 27 BCE to 14 CE – that is, during the time that Jesus was born. He said that Augustus was conceived when his mother was impregnated by Apollo in the guise of a serpent, and when the child was born, a senator in Rome declared that "the world had got a master."

The stories about the husband are interestingly parallel, too. You may recall that in the Gospel of Matthew, when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy he was about to abandon her. Then he had a dream, in which an angel told him that Mary's child was conceived of the Holy Spirit and would be a savior. So Joseph married Mary after all, and stood faithfully by her side. Similarly, Octavius, who was married to the mother of Augustus, had a dream during her pregnancy "in which he saw his son under more than human appearance, with thunder and scepter, and the other insignia of Jupiter... having on his head a radiant crown, mounted upon a chariot decked with laurel."<sup>2</sup>

Even when you move completely away from Western religious tradition, miraculous births still occur. Here is what is told about the birth of Buddha:

One night, Queen Mayadevi dreamed that a white elephant descended from heaven and entered her womb. The white elephant entering her

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<sup>2</sup> Suetonius, quoted in a *Newsweek* article titled "The Birth of Jesus," by Jon Meacham, December 13, 2004, p. 58.

womb indicated that on that very night she had conceived a child who was a pure and powerful being.

Later, when she gave birth to the child, instead of experiencing pain, the queen experienced a special, pure vision in which she stood holding the branch of a tree with her right hand while the gods Brahma and Indra took the child painlessly from her side.<sup>3</sup>

I'm not meaning to imply that the early Christians also borrowed from Buddhist lore to strengthen their story; surely these parallels were not discovered until many centuries later. But it does suggest a common human desire across many cultures to attribute religious or heroic figures with uncommon conceptions and births as a way to set them apart from ordinary people right from the start. If we are to be saved, these stories imply, it will be by someone with divine as well as human origins.

While the "original" Christian nativity story focuses on the birth of the child, the miraculous appearance of angels to the shepherds, and the star that led the Wise Men to the stable, other traditions and practices have been added to our holiday observances in the intervening centuries. Many of these are clearly connected with pagan and solstice celebrations involving greenery and light. The Christmas tree, mistletoe, holly — all are reminders of the reliable return of life and fertility at a barren season when we might otherwise forget. The lights outlining our houses, the strings of lights on our trees, the smoldering Yule log, burning candles and tapers everywhere — these serve to remind us that the dark days will eventually be over and the long, warm days will return.

The persistence and reliability of returning light takes another form in the celebration of Hanukkah, the Jewish holiday which celebrates the miracle of oil in the temple on Jerusalem's Mount Moriah. Although there was only enough consecrated oil to keep the lamp burning for one day, it somehow lasted for eight days until the temple was restored by the Maccabees from its near-destruction by Syrian invaders. Hanukkah was not a significant Jewish holiday until recently, when its proximity to Christmas on the western calendar argued for its elevation to more prominence. Like the Christians and many other religions, the Jews have realized the value of preserving their own holiday by attaching it to the holiday observances of the prevailing local religion — in this case, Christmas.

It helps me to truly celebrate at Christmas time if I remember the common human thread that runs deeper than any particular story. That thread that loops through the desire for a return to better times, for a leader who will bring peace, for the return of light and warmth during a season of darkness and cold. While Cal Thomas is partly right that the Christian message of Christmas *has* been shoplifted, there is more going on here than Christmas. And that, of course, is what he is complaining about.

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's book, *Introduction to Buddhism* and found on the Internet at [http://www.kadampa.org/english/reference/buddha\\_birth.php](http://www.kadampa.org/english/reference/buddha_birth.php)

But for me, it makes the holiday *more* authentic when I realize that it addresses the deepest of human longings, longings that cut across cultures, across geography, and across centuries of human experience. It helps me to feel connected to the sweep of history when I pause to understand that I stand in human solidarity and human compassion with those whose deepest desire is for the saving message of light in times of darkness, hope in times of despair, and a love that will never abandon us.

Amen.

**Closing Words**

More Than a Baby Jesus  
Elizabeth Selle Jones

It starts early, too early,  
With an innocent, colored light  
Or jingling bell.  
Almost unnoticed, certainly resisted, the momentum builds.  
It oozes, multiplies, infiltrates  
Permeates, engulfs, and overwhelms.  
Now there is no corner, no page, no sound,  
No thought, no mind, no heart  
That is not pregnant with it.

Despite growing anxiety  
Do not resist it.  
Abandon cynicism.  
Suspend suspicion.  
Overindulge in friendship.  
Give endlessly of compassion and justice.  
Unwrap possibility and promise.

Let the Soul Season flood throughout.  
Let holiness saturate,  
Joy invigorate,  
Hope purify,  
Let love finally be born.

Oh yes, let love be born.