

A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST VIEW OF CHRISTMAS

There is of course, no single Unitarian Universalist view of Christmas or any other holiday or religious tradition! There may be as many different views as there are UUs! This is at best my thoughts about some common UU views of Christmas, but it may be no more than my own current thoughts about Unitarian Universalism and Christmas! With that disclaimer clearly stated, I will get started!

Even non-UU scholars pretty much agree that Jesus was not born on December 25th, then known as the solstice, but that the celebration of his birth was moved to December 25th in the 3rd or 4th century most likely to replace the pagan celebration of solstice. When there were some changes made to the calendar which resulted in the solstice falling a few days earlier, Christmas was left on the 25th where it had become established. Based on a number of scholarly debates, I believe it was more likely that he was born in early fall, though some suggest the spring. Since the modern world celebrates Jesus' birth on December 25th, though it has no hard evidence of his actual birth date, I will leave that question for another time and look to the matters around the celebration.

We know about Jesus' birth through accounts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The other gospels do not address the matter. Matthew and Luke agree on little other than that Jesus was born. Luke has the familiar story with a Census, no place at the inn, swaddling cloths, manger, an angel and shepherds. Matthew has Herod and the wise men, a star, gifts, and the flight to Egypt. Christmas pageants often conflate the details. Even the most rational UUs would mostly concede that a certain Jesus was probably born within a few years of the beginning of the Common Era. Skepticism over the supernatural elements and the meaning of his birth and life might however prevail. In the last century, some Unitarian Universalist churches have celebrated Christmas, while others have not.

Today, probably a majority of UU congregations have some kind of Christmas celebration, often held on Christmas Eve. Many UUs like to sing the carols and light the candles, while others stay away from such experiences. Each congregation and every minister makes their own choice about whether or how to celebrate Christmas. Every UU then decides whether to come to whatever is planned or not! Though I have not called myself a Christian in a long time, I like the carols and the candles and many of the teachings which may have come from Jesus or which may at least have inspired early followers of the Jesus tradition.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should acknowledge that I also like the Santa Claus story, with its origins in the secret generosity of a 4th Century Christian Bishop named Nicholas of Myra in what is now Turkey. Myra, on the Mediterranean, is a long way from the North Pole, and Santa Claus is a long way from the original St. Nick, but the gifts and the spirit remain!

Recent generations have demythologized Christmas, and yet even the grumpiest Unitarian Universalists respond to the foods, drinks, decorations, gifts, and good spirits of the season. Many Unitarian Universalists quietly boycott services about Hanukkah, Christmas, and other holidays, but many more enjoy learning about and remembering traditions around these holidays! A large portion of UUs came out of Christian traditions and continue to value the life and teachings of Jesus, and our roots as a movement are deeply embedded in Christianity.

The stories of Jesus' birth are not in agreement, but that doesn't mean they lack any speck of truth. They were written long after Jesus died, embellished like the birth stories of any figure who later became prominent in that distant pre-modern era. They stand as testimony by those who later came to worship Jesus of the importance that they discovered in Jesus' life and teachings. Were they written as we demand of modern historical accounts, no. Nor were they written with the expectation that people would believe them in the way that we believe in the findings of science. They were written as a tribute, a statement of faith by people who had come to believe in the message of a universal love and equality shared by a man who was executed for stirring things up. These were

stories written by men who had come to love Jesus and the religion that Paul, Peter, John and their followers shaped into Christianity.

Modern scholars, including Unitarian Universalists, have discovered more questions than answers about the historicity of Jesus and the origins of the Christian faith, but there is a core of religious truth in the story of Jesus that remains inspiring to hundreds of millions of followers to this day. Many UUs would describe themselves as Christians, but more would not. Most would agree that they value the teachings of Jesus. Even in this increasingly secular nation, people find Jesus inspiring. I can do without the miracles, heaven and hell, but the teachings about love and acceptance continue to inspire my life and ministry. Christmas reminds me of the best of Christianity and the Jesus tradition, as I suspect it does for many UUs!

Crusades and Religious Wars have probably killed far more people over the eons than wars for oil, land, or water, and yet the various religious beliefs of earth have also motivated human beings to do much good for fellow beings. As social beings who want to share our beliefs with others, it makes a certain amount of sense that force would at times be employed by certain unstable overachievers among us to proselytize unbelievers. Christianity's record is probably worse than most other religions in forced conversions, especially in regard to Muslims, Jews, Witches and other Pagans. The divisions within Christianity have also at times inspired threats of hellfire, violence, and war toward those who do not believe in the same fashion even among supposed groups of followers of Christ. Islam and other traditions have also suffered from the internal growth of various militant fundamentalist sects.

Within modern Christianity, there have been groups that considered Billy Graham too liberal, and don't expect the Wisconsin and Missouri Synod Lutherans to ever agree with the Christians of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Baptists seem to split at the drop of a hat, but every Christian Denomination has had its splits. Interesting that Jesus is remembered for bringing people together!

I have to say that I was disappointed to hear this week that another courageous United Methodist Minister in Pennsylvania was defrocked for officiating at the marriage of his gay son and not repenting of that great evil and swearing allegiance to the Book of Discipline. I owe much to my former religious home and I am sad to see it has not become more accepting over the decades! Many of us former Methodists thought we would live to see the United Methodist Church at least become welcoming to LGBT persons. I guess that isn't happening this Christmas!

Rev. Bill Sinkford, blogging from the UU Church of Portland noted that At least one of the popular carols of the season was written by a Unitarian minister. It is "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," by Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears. Sears was born in 1810 and studied law for a time before being called to the ministry. He first served as a missionary, supported by the American Unitarian Association, in the then distant and dangerous frontier area...around Toledo, Ohio. Most of his ministry, however, was spent at First Parish in Weyland, Massachusetts. It was there, in 1849 that he wrote the five stanza poem put to music the following year. (Verses he wrote about peace and the poor are often omitted!)

Many Unitarian Universalists join in celebrating the hope that is so much a part of the season. The hope of Peace, Joy, and Love in the songs and spirit of the season is contagious! Even if we no longer believe the myths and legends of Jesus' birth or of St. Nicholas, we can still enjoy the warmth of the good spirits in a cold season of the year. We can also enjoy the opportunity of gathering with friends and relatives and sharing some good cheer. One would have to be a real curmudgeon to not find something to enjoy about the season. Not that there is anything wrong with curmudgeons or scrooges!

Now that there are so many ways of buying gifts over the internet, it is easy to skip the crowded malls and only go out on our own schedules! Introverts can choose to limit the things they do during the holidays, leaving the loudest parties, events and crowds to the extroverts! Christmas carols and ads started before Halloween this year, for those who really want to make the season last! Some years it is easier to travel to visit family and friends than in other years but many of us plan to go somewhere or have others come to visit for the

holidays. We celebrate in different ways, but most of us enjoy the time away from the ordinary stuff of our lives that we get at the holidays.

Even if Jesus wasn't born in December, and even if there weren't any angels or shepherds, I still like Christmas and I am not alone among Unitarian Universalists. There are any number of reasons to celebrate, and only a few to be a curmudgeon around the holidays! Not everyone had happy holidays in their family of origin, but everyone can choose to let the season inspire them to have a happy holiday this year!

We can celebrate the birth of a special child, or we can celebrate that people are trying harder to get along with each other at this season. We can celebrate miracles or we can celebrate the amazingly ordinary change of the seasons. We can celebrate the bright lights and interesting ornaments, or the giving of gifts, or we can celebrate moments of peace and harmony in a crazy world. We can celebrate time with our family and friends, we can sing Christmas Carols and attend holiday parties, we can let the season move us to acts of care and generosity. We can embrace the Christmas spirit and help to brighten the lives of others. We can enjoy our favorite things and our favorite people! We can be a gift to each other and to the world. We can be inspired to be inspiring! We can dance and sing and play musical instruments, we can be creative. We can be our best selves and we can share generously. We can live as if we know that life is a great gift, and we can share that gift with all that we meet. We can live fully and freely and make space for others to live freely and joyously in this mysteriously amazing universe. We can celebrate Christmas and New Year's or we can celebrate Solstice and Yule. Or we can just celebrate life! Choose life and love in this holiday season!

And remember, Solstice is really the reason for the season!
Ho, Ho, Ho, Merry Christmas! Amen!