

Hanukkah, Christmas & Solstice: the Western Holiday Traditions

Solstice, as an annual astronomical event had been recognized long before the western monotheistic religions appeared on the scene. Since it is observable around the globe, it probably is not entirely fair to claim it as only a western religious occurrence, but since both Judaism and Christianity actually originated in the middle east, I hope you will grant me some flexibility in naming all these traditions that have come to be celebrated most widely in the West as the Western Holiday Traditions. Judaism to some extent and Christianity far more widely has tended to eliminate whatever references and practice of earth-centered religions that it could which existed prior to its spread into an area. Often this was accomplished by moving some festival or holiday into the same time period, such as the birth of Jesus onto the winter solstice and the resurrection of Jesus onto the spring holiday to Ostara, Germanic goddess of spring whose holiday was celebrated with bunnies and eggs. The Christmas tree, by the way was also part of a Germanic pagan celebration.

Oh yes, I probably should add a disclaimer about Islam, the youngest and 2nd largest of the triad of related monotheistic religions of the book, which is also rapidly growing throughout Europe and the Americas. I am not including it among these traditions solely because it remains predominantly a Middle Eastern tradition focused on Mecca as its most holy shrine. All three of these monotheistic religions look to Jerusalem with longstanding claims, in an ongoing conflict recently exacerbated by Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the Capitol of Israel.

Today, I want to focus on Solstice, Hanukkah, and the Christmas Season for the spiritual and religious impact that they have in our nation and throughout the Western world. Since most of the west is dominated by different parts of Christianity; Roman, Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant, Mainstream, Evangelical, and Fundamentalist; it makes sense to start there for it would be impossible to ignore the Christian influence.

Christianity came to Europe early in its development, spreading north and west from the Mediterranean Countries already reached by Paul and other early followers of Jesus. By the time that Roman Christianity had become dominant under Constantine, branches of Christianity had vanquished most of the native religions and dominated much of Europe. Orthodox Christianity stretched north to include Russia and other nations. For a time, Islam reached as far West as Spain, but was eventually mostly pushed back to what is now Turkey. When the Americas were settled by Europeans, with native populations decimated, Christianity again expanded, adding two more continents. The Protestant Reformation brought about massive religious changes in Germany, Switzerland, and other parts of Europe. Various protestant branches including the Anglicans who split from the Roman church under Henry the 8th, but beginning with the Puritans, escaped European religious conflict and settled most of North America.

The celebration of Jesus' Birth had been set at the solstice by the early 4th Century, and was celebrated through elaborations of the Gospel stories in Matthew and Luke. There are various theories about the date of his actual birth and about the choice of December 25th. Some suggest a borrowing from the festival of Saturnalia or that of Sol Invictus, while others suggest that Jesus may have been conceived and crucified on the same date, requiring a December date for his birth. Various scholars have suggested an actual birthdate as more likely in May, June, or August.

By the late 4th Century a period of preparation had been added to the Christmas celebration that eventually stretched to include the four Sundays prior to Christmas and was called Advent. As Christianity spread to the New World, new customs for celebrating Christmas took on the local flavor of each area, with different foods and practices making each area's celebration unique and older religious customs being absorbed into the new celebration.

By the time the new world was settled, most of the controversy over Jesus' birth had been long settled and Christmas was celebrated by most Christians on December 25th, though a few groups celebrated January 6th. The 25th had been the solstice until a later revision of the calendar moved the Solstice to the 21st. So throughout most of the Western World, Christians celebrated Jesus' birth on Dec. 25th remembering a stable, with sheep, shepherds, angels, 3 wise men and a star.

Hanukkah celebrates a more earthly light. An oil lamp lasting 8 days when it only has oil for a day, until more consecrated oil can be brought to the desecrated temple being restored after the victory of the Maccabean revolt less than 2 centuries before the birth of Jesus. Hanukkah has never been a major holiday in Judaism, but it has become better known in this country in recent years possibly because it offers a sort of gift-giving parallel to Christmas. A candle is lit each night of the 8 days of Hanukkah on the Menorah, and each night a gift is given. The memory that the consecrated oil found in the temple lasted 8 days is seen as a miracle and the core of this holiday tradition.

The Jewish people have often been oppressed throughout history, and rarely have been able to determine their own fate as an independent nation. Only during the time of David and Solomon did they really flourish. The Maccabean revolt freed them from oppressive rule for a relatively short time historically, before the Roman Empire made a vassal state of Israel once again before the time of Jesus. Israel was not free again until 1948, then and since only with backing from the United States. Approximately equal numbers of Jews live in Israel and the United States, somewhere around 6.5 million each at this time. Probably more than a third of all Jews were killed during the Nazi holocaust. Jews constitute only about 2% of the U.S. population, but have been an important minority through most of U.S. history.

Solstice, as a natural occurrence remains important as a marker of the changing seasons. Also as a natural phenomenon it has inspired religious recognition in most earth-centered religions, from the ancient Druids and Celts to modern Neo-Pagans and Wiccans. The creation of Stonehenge and other places of worship throughout the world was influenced by the Winter and Summer Solstices and the Vernal and Autumnal equinoxes. Yule and solstice are celebrated by most earth-centered traditions today. Solstice celebrations center on ideas of new birth and re-birth and the return of the light. After the Winter Solstice the days get longer and the nights shorter until the Summer Solstice when the process is reversed.

In many ways the Western religious celebrations came into alignment to create the modern Christmas celebration. Without the astronomical event of the Winter Solstice, there really wouldn't have been much of a reason for Christians to move

or set the celebration of Jesus' birth on the solstice. And without the Messianic Expectation of the Jewish tradition, the birth tradition of Jesus would really not be that important. But several of the more prominent early Christians came out of the Jewish community, as did Jesus himself. The Messianic Expectation of a King in the line of David to save and free the people of Israel was strong in the centuries before Jesus was born and in his time. Judas Maccabeus was also thought by some to be the Messiah at the time of the Maccabean revolt. Casting Jesus as the Jewish Messiah was one of the ways to give him more prominence and help to insure that the early Christian movement would not quickly die out.

There are many ways that Christianity could have disappeared in the early days. It could have been reabsorbed into Judaism as a passing sect. It could have simply died out for lack of a core group passing on its teachings. The attempts to suppress it could have been successful in killing off early adherents as well as the important beliefs. It is almost a miracle that it survived at all, but it also could have chosen vastly different beliefs and doctrines. For good or ill, it was the Roman church based on a Trinitarian belief in the equality of Father, Son, and Spirit that triumphed with the help of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. as the central tradition within the Christian family. Many of the other choices are known only through some brief and longer references in the writings of early Christians.

Many of us within heretical Christian related traditions might have gone in entirely different directions if there were not some teachings of Jesus and celebrations such as Christmas that continue to appeal to us. In recent years, the loudest parts of Christianity have taken somewhat of the all or nothing approach of the evangelical fundamentalists, so that many of us who value what we think are the teachings of Jesus, want nothing of Christianity nor to be labeled Christians. For myself, I still love the idea that divine love could come into the world in the form of the baby Jesus to inspire people to love each other. I do not believe in the virgin birth nor the bodily resurrection, so I will never be accepted as Christian by many of the proof-testing Christians of today, so I choose to not call myself Christian. Additionally, I have grown more agnostic in my beliefs in any loving deity that could allow so many bad things to happen, such as hurricanes, floods, or the election of Trump.

Nonetheless, there is still a magic to the Christmas season which is almost undeniable, even by the most curmudgeonly individuals. Could it happen at another time of year, without the Winter Solstice and the short days? Could it happen without the corpus of beliefs and music surrounding the idea of the Son of God come to earth as the baby Jesus? The jammed malls, the commercialization, the Christmas Muzak all can be too much, especially for introverts, but even with all of that, there are the smells of holiday cookies and pies, the goodwill of most, the candlelit services, decorated trees, and the wonderful melodic Carols of the season.

It is interesting that here in the 21st Century, we are looking back to celebrations around an astronomical occurrence that would have been noticed by the earliest humans, in the context of a Messianic Expectation that looks back to the Kingship of David some 30 centuries ago while we celebrate the birth of a child 20 centuries ago who arguably fulfilled those Messianic Expectations and was the Son of a God we don't all believe even exists. And out of all those eons of context, our President feels it necessary to protect Christmas from the hands of those who might wish Happy Holidays to others! We live in a strange and dangerous time, in which we need the goodwill of all peoples, the dreams and hope of all religions, the willingness to compromise of all those entrusted with the common good, the very best of humanity!

I wish to those who celebrate the solstice, the return of the light and a prosperous and safe year to come! I wish a happy and merry Hanukkah to those who celebrate the endurance of the oil that provides light, and a year of freedom and blessing. And to those who celebrate Christmas, I wish a Merry Christmas and a vision of love that might empower Scrooge to help Tiny Tim and every other person in need; that might allow disagreements on conversion and doctrines to be put aside for the sake of finding human commonality and community. And to all those disenfranchised by organized religions, I wish you the opportunity to gather together here and elsewhere to celebrate the ending of this year and the hope for the year to come.

Blessings to All! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!