

DECEMBER 13, 2015

Sunday Sermon: “The Unitarians Who Saved Christmas”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

Christmas is our high holiday, but it wasn't always. It started as Christ Mass and was relatively minor. But the catch phrase of Putting Christ back into Christmas is relatively new. Biblical scholars tell us that most of the Christmas story was manufactured during the early Christian period to make the birth of Jesus correspond with a classic birth narrative of gods during the first century. What we suspect is that Jesus was born to a young unmarried Jewish girl, one account by a Roman Centurion, and then she married. Yet about 75% of Americans believe the story as written. This is probably because it is a good story and its celebration has evolved over the past two millennia. But Christmas has always been more cultural than religious. It is much of the cultural additions that give us the holiday we celebrate as Christmas.

Many Unitarian Universalists may not appreciate that much of the culture of Christmas is due to the work of Unitarians. When I conjure up thoughts of the spirit of Christmas many different visions come into my mind. Many of these visions are due to our ancestors, both Unitarian and Universalist, as you heard with “Jingle Bells.” I remember the Christmas of my youth. Certainly I think of the crèche, that representation of Mary, Joseph, and others around the crib of Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem. In the small town where I grew up, one was built in front of the Catholic Church and another very different one was in front of the Baptist Church where I went as a boy. They were the same figures but I remember a difference in the formality of the figures. I remember the Christmas pageant in which the story was always the same but the characters changed as we grew. There was always the nervous Sunday school teacher who would line us up to march in our costumes and was constantly reminding us to be good, meaning less like the playful boys that we were. Lots of things have changed since then but the nervous energy of sixty some years ago will be present in numerous children's choir and pageants around the area. Certainly the importance of the Christmas story has not been dulled for me by these past sixty years.

It has not always been that way. The longtime members of the church I served in Kingston were always telling me about the life of their ancestors. Christmas for

these pilgrims was much different. In 1621 Governor Bradford, one year after landing, found that some of the colony's new residents were planning to take Christmas day off and ordered them back to work. And in 1659 the General Court of Massachusetts declared that to celebrate Christmas was a criminal offense and until 1681 the criminal was subject to a fine of five shillings. In Puritan thinking the celebration of Christ's birth was not a biblical event in December but was an arbitrary decision of the early Church Fathers, what they termed the Papist Church. They also objected to the medieval partying practices that had grown up around the holiday, like a New Year's celebration, if you will. December had become a month for natural over-indulging, all of the harvesting was complete, the livestock that was not being kept over the winter had been slaughtered and much needed to be eaten due to lack of preservation options and the wines and beers brewed in the summer and fall were just starting to come into season. The Reverend Increase Mather of Boston put it this way in 1687, "The generality of Christmas-keepers observe that festival after such a manner as is highly dishonourable to the name of Christ. How few are there comparatively that spend those holidays after an holy manner. But they are consumed in Compotations, Interludes, in playing Cards, in Revelling, in excessive wine, in mad mirth...¹"

H.L. Mencken once said, "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." You know I don't believe there was much fun in New England at all until the Irish arrived.

Now that brings me to another memory of Christmas: caroling. When we lived in upstate New York the UU Fellowship used to go out caroling on the streets of the town going from house to house. While my voice never added anything but volume to the proceedings, it is one of those memories that forms the spirit of Christmas. It too was not always viewed as a positive spirit of Christmas. One of the seasonal traditions that comes from England is the tradition of the misrule. In this tradition the servant and the mistress and master trade places and the Manor House master will throw a party for all his workers. For those followers of Downton Abbey, there is one episode that shows this practice up to the early 20th century. The master will wait on the servant. During Puritan times one of their

¹ Steven Nissenbaum, The Battle for Christmas, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) 7.

objections to Christmas was the twelve days of reveling that developed from the misrule tradition.

We see the practice still within our cultures with Boxing Day in England and Canada. This involves the practice of leaving Boxes or gratuities for all those people who have served you during the past year, in England this was our milk man and post person.

Anyway the early carolers of the 18th Century created animosity for Christmas with their practice of Wassailing. This practice was done by gangs of young males who would take to the street singing and snow-balling in the Christmas season and keep the Good Folks awake with their drunken singing until they were given some grog and then they would move on to the next community.

This was sort of like Drink or Trick, and in some recorded incidents violence actually occurred. They mostly sang drinking type of Seasonal Songs. In fact some of the tunes of some of the early Carols were really seasonal words on drinking songs.

The Christmas carols that we sing this morning were written by Unitarians. Two were written by two men who represented many other liberals of their day who attempted to legitimize the spirit of Christmas into something more wholesome. The first Hymn was written Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the poet, in the middle of the Great Civil War as an antiwar piece, and was written during the last year of the war. Before this time there had been little attempt to align Christmas with a peace theme. Certainly the biblical narrative with Joseph and Mary's uprooting from Nazareth and Harrods's butchery, had no great peace theme before this time. Listen to the words from the second verse 'the belfries of all Christendom had rolled along the unbroken song of peace on earth' and the fourth verse, 'Then peal the bells more loud and deep: "God's is not dead, nor doth God sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth, to all good will." This was after the civil war gained its anti-slave agenda. These were certainly apt sentiments during that great confrontation. But now for me the spirit of peace is an integral part of the Christmas feeling, it is closely tied with that Christmas spirit.

The final hymn is my all-time favorite, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" by Edmund Hamilton Sears. This 1848 hymn was written in the shadow of the great civil war when the issue of slavery was on the minds of most of our clergy. It is

now viewed as “a major landmark in Christmas music and in Christian philosophy.” This carol may have been the first clear expression of what became the social gospel movement, because it was the first Christmas carol with a social-ethical message. It was such a radical departure from the standard Christmas message that it worried many Christian conservatives.

The third verse sings ‘But with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long; Beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong; (meaning slavery) And man at war with man hears not the love song which they bring; O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing.’”

Sears brought to the spirit of Christmas a dimension of liberation with his message against the sin of slavery and conflict. This Christmas song, though one of the best known ever, never refers to the Nativity or Jesus. As you sing this hymn next read the words and see how different it is. “A hundred years after the carol was written a British carol scholar remarked that, “in its original form, the hymn is little more than an ethical song, extolling the worth and splendour of peace among men.”² Though heralded as a Humanist hymn, Sears’ believed Jesus was divine. One of Sears’ parishioners, Lydia Maria Child, authored the well-known poem that was set to music to become “Over the River and Through the Wood.”

But the spirit of Christmas also includes Santa Claus. The development of which comes to us from New York traditions of the Dutch and Knickerbocker ideas through the writing of Clement Clark Moore, a sometimes Unitarian.

Moore wrote the poem “A visit from St. Nicholas” or more commonly “the night before Christmas.” Prior to Moore’s poem St. Nick was always portrayed as a medieval bishop. Moore develops Santa Claus as an elf-like being who brings joy especially to children. You see on the cover of today’s order of worship a drawing from one of the printings of the poem. It was drawn by a Unitarian political cartoonist Thomas Nast. In Moore’s time children were looked at as small adults, but in Moore’s message we see a more important image of childhood, an image of imagination and wonder. This too is part of the magic that becomes our Christmas. But it was especially socially relevant in the reform movements to end child labor. If children are seen as only small adults, they are easier to exploit. Here is another

² Erik Routley

liberating influence of the spirit of Christmas. Here both poet and illustrator helped change that image.

Nast's image of a rotund Santa Claus had become standard during the Civil war and the illustrator put him in the papers with union troops. One confederate soldier once remarked, "that the union not only had the best arms but Santa Claus as well.

Coupled with the image of Santa Claus is the idea of children receiving gifts. We all remember our early Christmas morning discovery of the Christmas tree with its magic silvery balls, lights and particularly the tinsel icicles that you found still cleaning up months later. Under the tree we also found the magic of presents that just seemed to appear. I think I will always remember my children's sense of wonder and delight on Christmas morning. This too is the spirit of Christmas.

Now there are lots of stories how the Christmas tree came to these shores and became popularized, but the one I like involves two other Unitarians. One was a radical Unitarian minister and Harvard Professor of German, Charles Follen. Follen was a German immigrant who was exiled from his native Germany and then Switzerland for his Republican ideas and came to these shores in 1824 with papers of introduction from another famous radical, the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette suggested Follen try Boston and there he fell in love and married a young woman named Eliza Cabot. Eliza's prominence opened doors to Charles and found him a position at the college and introduced him to Unitarianism. He devoured both.

Anyway in 1835 the other Unitarian in my story came to visit with the Follens. This was the famous author Harriet Martineau who came from the most prominent British Unitarian family of the 19th Century. Follen decorated a pine tree German style with candles for his young son and Harriet wrote a story about seeing it for the first time. The Christmas tree became part of the spirit of Christmas when Martineau wrote about the Boston Christmas in her book about travels in the new world. This was not so coincidental as it may look. Follen was a rabid anti-slavery and children's advocate and a close friend with William Lloyd Garrison. Both men believed that to change the image of children into a softer public image would help the cause of child labor laws and institution of slavery in this country. Martineau's story helped bring children into Christmas instead of the idea of rich youth revelers. The spirit of Christmas was again building.

Now about the same time a young Unitarian writer in Britain published a short story about Christmas. He had been raised as a poor son of a London clerk who was consumed by alcohol. He had known poverty and hunger for most of his life and into this Christmas story "he poured not only all of his craft but some intimate experiences from his personal life." Charles Dickens was that writer, and portions of his story was read in the timeless "A Christmas Carol." Throughout this season this story has been told in different ways as a timeless theme.

Dickens' short story brought him instant success. He came to the Boston in 1867 and gave his public readings. "Many people wept as he read it to them." Dickens was a bitter critic of wealth and power. He wrote, "Neither in the Anglican church nor in the so-called nonconforming churches could he find anything like a social conscience." He went to the Unitarian Essex Chapel in London, and he found what he heard there refreshing. In time he joined the Chapel. According to his leading biographers, he became a Unitarian for the rest of his life." In the Christmas Carol, Dickens gave the spirit of Christmas other images. First there is the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge. Even the name Scrooge has come to typify an anti-Christmas spirit, and word scrooge entered our vocabulary. In the image of the Cratchit Family, Dickens helps change the spirit of Christmas from one of Revelers to Family.

I hope no one heard me debunking or belittling Christmas for the non-religious nature in this sermon, or heard a claim on Christmas as being only a Unitarian thing, or heard this sermon as a history lesson on the evolution of Christmas traditions, but as a continuing evolving spirit that is alive in the world today, that has caused wars to go into cease fires and prompted us to reach into our pockets with compassion as many of us do with our holiday appeal or when we pass the pots and bells of the Salvation Army en route to stores. For in truth, the Spirit of Christmas is alive and grows today into so much more than just the story of the birth of a baby two millennia ago.

In an ever evolving and never-ending world. Amen.