

Winter Solstice: Sacred Traditions

By

Robert P. Tucker, Ph.D.

[Minister Emeritus of The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, Florida]

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Now Christmas is come
Let us beat up the drum
And call all our neighbors together.

And when they appear,
Let us make them such cheer
As will keep out the wind
And the weather!

[Washington Irving; in Matthews, 132]

Thus wrote **Washington Irving**, the 19th century American man of letters who gave us such unforgettable characters as Rip Van Winkle and the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow. In a volume entitled, *A History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (1809), Irving good-naturedly poked fun at many of the customs of the Dutch settlers on Manhattan Island. In so doing, he recorded for posterity many of their Christmas traditions, which are not so different from what many people do now.

But, as his little poem also implies, there is much more involved in these year-end revels than merely the Christian observance of the birth of Jesus. For now is the time when days are short and nights are long, and when most people in the northern hemisphere fight against the cold and dark in lands that are frosted with snow. The old year is dying and the new year is being born. Guilt about the past mingles with hope for the future. These are days filled with mystery and magic, fun and frolic, love and laughter. Now is the time of the *Winter Solstice!*

This is all so easy to forget for those of us who live in warm and sunny Florida. Indeed, around the world, many who live in industrialized cities have all but lost touch with nature and with what this frigid season used to mean to our ancestors. As one writer has observed:

It is only in the past three hundred years...that [our so-called] “rational” civilisation has...remembered the Solstice by [mere] custom and habit rather than by an instinctual involvement with the turning [of the] seasons. [Shirley Toulson in Matthews, 8]

Christianity’s great gift to the world, of course, was **Jesus** and his ministry of love. *But almost all of the elements associated with the annual celebration of his birth are things which have been adopted and adapted from much older sacred traditions connected to the Winter Solstice.* From the date of Christmas to the character of Santa, from the Tree in the corner to the holly and ivy in the windows, all of these have “pagan” origins which take us back to the very essence of human survival in a world once ruled entirely by nature. As leaves fell and plants “died,” as cold, darkness and death appeared to gain a stranglehold upon the earth, ancient rituals were performed to appease the gods, to preserve the sun’s life-giving light and heat, and to engender hope in the face of despair.

Lo, and behold! The tide always turned. Life continued on and people prospered. From time immemorial, it has been so; and because of that *the Winter Solstice has always been a season for the re-birth of wonder* [Matthews, 8]; and that is what we shall celebrate today as I remind you of the *sacred traditions* which lie far behind our contemporary celebration of Christmas.

Most modern people no longer pay much attention to **the movement of heavenly bodies in the sky at night**. The dazzle of city lights makes it difficult to see them. But throughout history our ancestors watched the night skies constantly. They possessed an intimate and detailed knowledge of the passage of the sun, moon, and stars. Why? Because their very lives depended on it! When the sun was at its highest in midsummer, their crops grew tall and their animals thrived. At the other extreme, in midwinter, they suffered the effects of cold, dampness, darkness and all the associated ailments of body and soul. [Matthews, 14]

It is the movement of earth on its tilted axis going around the sun which produces these seasonal changes. But **twice a year something unusual happens**: for about six days in June and again in December (around the 21st) the sun appears to rise and set at the same points on the horizon. It is as if the sun were “standing still,” and that is precisely what the term “**Solstice**” means: “*the sun stands still.*” [Matthews, 8, 15]

For all pre-industrialized peoples, these two solstices divided the year into a dark half and a light half, with six months of waxing sun and six months of waning. **The days in between were regarded as a mysterious time when the sun’s future seemed uncertain**. It was a chaotic period when the *gates* between this world and the next were opened; when *communication* between the living and the dead, between human and divine beings was common; and when the gods were *born or reborn* and became *incarnate*.

It was definitely **a time to propitiate the gods** with rituals and sacrifices in the hope that after the Solstice things might return to “normal.”

Fire and **light** were the most important **symbols** in every celebration for they represented the most important god, the Sun! **Greenery** was added to decorations as a sign of the *natural life* people hoped would return in the spring and **evergreens** were used as a token of the *immortal life* they so desired. [Matthews, 12, 15, 40]

All over the world, our ancestors erected **altars and temples dedicated to the sun**. Many of them had elaborate systems of slots carefully aligned to track the sun’s course, and to let its light shine on special symbols or into special rooms or caves just at the time of the Solstice. Remnants of these structures still exist throughout Britain and Europe, in both North and South America, and in the Middle East. [Matthews, 16-23]

In **Egypt**, the sun god “**Ra**” was worshipped (sometimes under the name “**Aton**”) and hymns were sung to him with words like these:

Thou dost appear beautiful on
The horizon of heaven,
O living Aton, thou who wast
The first to live.

When thou hast risen on
The Eastern horizon,
Thou hast filled every land
With thy beauty...

When thou dost set on
The Western horizon,
The Earth is in darkness,
Resembling death...

At daybreak, when thou dost
Arise on the horizon...
Thou dost dispel the darkness
And shed thy rays. [Matthews, 20]

Though ancient **Judaism** did *not* worship the sun, it too acknowledged the importance of the Winter Solstice. An ancient commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, for example, tells how Adam, after his expulsion from Paradise, noticed a shortening of days and prayed and fasted for eight days in the hope of calling back the lost light. Since this took place at the Winter Solstice, the days soon grew longer again, and thereafter Adam repeated the ritual every year. [Matthews, 23]

Above all, of course, Solstice is a *season to celebrate* with dances and costumes, with feasting and gift-giving. [Matthews, 12, 15, 40] Along these lines, it was the Roman celebration of **Saturnalia** which has had the greatest influence on our own modern midwinter festivities. From December 17th to the 24th the Romans honored the god **Saturn** who, they believed, ruled over agriculture. Normal behavior was abandoned. Masters served their slaves. Law courts and schools were closed. The whole community gave itself up to feasting, gambling, and drinking. It was a time of fun and laughter and of the exchange of gifts. Indeed, it is this Roman practice (and not the gifts of the Magi) which is really the source of our own custom of giving presents at Christmas! [Matthews, 23]

The festival of Saturnalia was observed annually until the 4th century when it was combined with the New Year festival of **Kalends** in January. [Matthews, 24] Then houses were decorated with lights and greenery and gift-giving remained prominent. One ancient source described it in words which could be used to describe what still happens today:

The impulse to spend seizes everyone...
People are not only generous [to] themselves,
But also towards their fellow men.
A stream of presents pours itself out. [Matthews, 25]

During Kalends, people would dance and sing in the streets, give money to the poor, and dress up in masks and disguises like animals or like members of the opposite sex. (Our modern Christmas caroling, Salvation Army kettles and Mummers' parades have all originated from just such pagan beginnings!)

As you might expect, all of these ancient festivities were later **condemned by the Christian Church**; but even "worse" celebrations often took place within the churches themselves, as when rambunctious clergy would celebrate the "**Feast of Fools**," or, "worst" of all, "**The Feast of the Ass**," both of which ceremonies included silly pranks, disorderly laughter, outrageous parodies of the mass, and even the crowning of "**Boy Bishops**." [Matthews, 27-31; see Santa/Nicolas remarks below!]

Such things aside, usually the most glorious part of every ancient Winter Solstice involved the celebration of the birth of the "**Mid-Winter King**," truly a "**Child of Wonder**." Always a male child, always partly or wholly of divine origin, and always born under extraordinary circumstances, *many different* child-kings appeared over time and all were taken as symbols of hope, light and life in a world darkened by despair and death. [Matthews, ch. 2 *passim*; 51]

By far the oldest Wonder Child was the Egyptian god **Osiris** who was loved and worshipped throughout the Mediterranean world. With his consort, Isis, he brought peace, order and beauty to the people. But then he was murdered by his jealous brother. After much struggle, Isis was able to restore Osiris to life. His *second nativity* was said to have occurred on the **25th of December** and so that date was widely celebrated, with his death and resurrection symbolizing the sun's setting and rising on which the fertility of the Nile Delta depended. [Matthews, 54]

December 25th was also the date which Roman Emperor Aurelian set, in 274 CE, as the birthday of the "**Unconquered Sun**," (a god), as well as of "**Mithras, the God of the Morning**." [Matthews, 52-4]

There had been a cult of the sun god, "**Sol**," in Rome from its earliest days. Then around 10 BCE the Emperor Augustus replaced Sol with the Greek God, "**Apollo**." Born of the god Zeus and the woman Leto, Apollo was half human, half divine and was often depicted as a good "Shepherd." (The parallels in the Church's later description of Jesus were by no means accidental.) [Matthews, 52]

By the 2nd century, CE, Apollo had lost out in popularity to the Persian god, *Mithras*, who had taken the Roman world by storm. Also a sun god, *Mithras' birth* was said to have been attended by *shepherds*. Just before his time on earth was completed, he took a *last supper* with his followers who later memorialized it with a *ceremony of bread and wine*. (They also made his *feast day* to be, naturally, *Sun-day*; and they all underwent a *baptism*.) Instead of dying, Mithras was believed to have *ascended* into heaven to be with his *divine father*. At the *End of the world*, it was expected that he would *return* to enact a *final judgment* and to *raise the dead*. [Matthews, 52-3] Rudyard Kipling expressed the Romans' deep love for this deity when he wrote in a poem:

Mithras, God of the Morning,
Our trumpets waken the wall!
Rome is above the nations,
But Thou art over all! [53]

“It has been said by some commentators that but for the accident of history that popularized Jesus, the Western world could well have adopted Mithraism as its religion.” [Matthews, 52f., emphasis added]

That “accident” was the Emperor Constantine’s sudden and unexpected conversion from Mithraism to Christianity in 312. [Matthews, 54] Soon thereafter Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire [324 CE, Magnusson, 339], and—*since no one knew the actual date*—**December 25th** was settled upon by both the church and the state as the official “birthday” of Jesus—even though Luke’s gospel (2:8) indicated a springtime arrival (since the flocks were in the fields). [Matthews, 54; Panati, 215] Before Constantine, few Christians had celebrated Jesus’ birth, having been taught that it was his *death* that was all important. [Cf. Paul’s letters; Panati, 216] After 350, Christmas was added to the many celebrations of the Winter Solstice, and Jesus took his place among many other such “Children of Wonder.” [Matthews, 12; Krythe, 2]

I had hoped, this morning, to be able to tell you so much more in this sermon: about how the **evergreen tree**, the **holly** and **ivy**, and the **mistletoe** came to be parts of Christmas, and especially about how all of them came from much older, Winter Solstice celebrations involving even earlier traditions about how the **“Green King of Winter”** had to fight for the hand of the **“Spring Maiden”** and how all of this finds expression in the stories of **“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,”** and **“Robin Hood and Maid Marion.”** [Matthews, ch. 3] (I’ll bet you didn’t know that King Arthur and Friar Tuck had anything at all to do with Christmas! But they do.)

I had also hoped to be able to tell you about how our modern tradition of **“Santa Claus”** grew out of the experiences of a very real person, a *teenager* named **Nicolas** [Matthews, 68] who was consecrated a boy *bishop*, became famous for giving *presents* to people, and was made a *saint* by the church. But even more, I had hoped to explain to you how it was that the Santa tradition originally derived from **pre-historic shamans**, *dressed all in furs*, who *climbed down the central poles* of their tents bearing *gifts* of prophecy about the new year and presents for the children. [Matthews, ch. 4]

Lastly, I had hoped to take you through each of the **Twelve Days of Christmas**. [Matthews, ch. 6]

But, alas, my time has run away as fast as Santa’s reindeer!

With that in mind, then, I leave you with these sad but hope-filled words from a wonderful French carol:

Noel is leaving us,
It’s sad to say.
But he will come again
Oh, yes! Some day.

His wife and children
Weep as they go;
On their grey horse
Riding through the snow.

Even the [3] Kings [Magi] ride away
In the snow and in the rain.
Oh! But after twelve months,
We shall see them again! [Matthews, 211, adapted]

Here's wishing for all of you, a **Wonderful Winter Solstice!**

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Dr. Tucker can be reached by email at:

drroberttucker@aol.com