

FAITH UNDER FIRE

Christmas in America becomes battleground

As holiday traditions draw national controversy, believers, pagans grapple over Jesus' inclusion

Posted: December 14, 2002 By Joe Kovacs

Every December, a call goes out from the nation's pulpits to "put Christ back into Christmas," but growing numbers of Americans – including fundamentalist Christians – are claiming Jesus Christ had nothing to do with the holiday, and news items from across the country this week indicate that the U.S. has become the new battleground for Christmas.

Cases in point:

- A first-grade teacher in Sacramento Co., Calif., says her principal has prohibited instructors from uttering the word "Christmas" in class or in written materials;
- A school superintendent in Yonkers, N.Y., banned, then unbanned, holiday decorations that contained religious themes more than the generic "season's greetings";
- New York City schools are being sued for alleged discrimination against Christians;
- and atheists reposted their vandalized winter solstice sign in the Wisconsin Capitol, as they declare "Christians stole Christmas" from ancient pagans.

All this comes on the heels of a national survey indicating just over a tenth of Americans today believe Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the focus of Christmas, with almost nine out of ten people saying the holiday has become less religious.

Are atheists correct that the very day set aside by hundreds of millions across the world to honor the birth of their Savior is merely a relic of sun worship? And if it is, why would some schools ban it? And even if today's holiday traditions have their roots in heathen practices, should Christians who wish to be true to their faith take part?

Sign of the times

"The *real* reason for the season is winter solstice," proclaims Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-founder of the Madison, Wis.-based Freedom From Religion Foundation which re-erected its atheistic message Monday in the rotunda of the state seat of government. After six years on display, her placard had been damaged last December by an unknown assailant, and has since been repaired.

The front of the sign states: "At this season of the winter solstice may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds." The back reads: "State/Church: Keep them separate," and carries a little caveat, advising "Thou shalt not steal."

The 23-by-30-inch billboard was OK'd as part of Wisconsin's seasonal display which also features menorahs, angels, and what appears to be a giant Christmas tree more than two stories tall. "We call it a 'holiday' tree," said Brian Hayes, deputy secretary for Wisconsin's department of administration. "We're trying to be sensitive to [the public]." That politically correct terminology comes despite the dismissal of a lawsuit last year where the message content of items adorning the state tree had been challenged, yet it's indicative of the thought-conscious age of the 21st century.

Banned in the USA

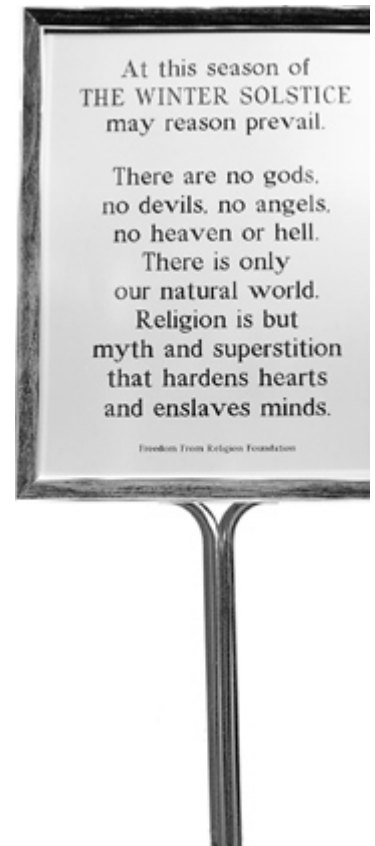
The fact that atheists view Christmas with disdain is not astonishing, since they've attempted to remove the phrase "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God we trust" from U.S. currency, as well as Ten Commandments displays from numerous publicly owned places. What may be surprising, though, is that some devout Christians, many dating all the way back to the days of Jesus, never celebrated the birth of Christ, nor sought to. America's early colonists banned observance of Christmas, and still today, there are many Christians abstaining from what millions more of their brethren joyfully celebrate as God's coming in human form.

The Catholic Encyclopedia states, "'the word for Christmas in late Old English is Cristes Maesse, the Mass of Christ, first found in 1038, and Cristes-messe, in 1131."

It explains "Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church," pointing out "first evidence of the feast is from Egypt" around A.D. 200 with attempts by theologians to assign not only the year of Christ's birth, but also the precise date.

Historians agree that through the subsequent centuries, traditions from ancient pagan (non-Christian) religions became intertwined with those of Christianity, and depending upon one's point of view, either paganism became Christianized, or Christianity became paganized.

In 1644, the English Parliament outlawed the holiday, compelling shops to be open that day, and condemning plum puddings and mince pies as "heathen."



Atheists' winter solstice sign at Wisconsin Capitol

In his Pulitzer Prize finalist, "The Battle for Christmas," historian Stephen Nissenbaum at the University of Massachusetts documents the American development of the holiday now ensconced in popular culture.

"In New England, for the first two centuries of white settlement," writes Nissenbaum, "most people did not celebrate Christmas. In fact, the holiday was systematically suppressed by Puritans during the colonial period and largely ignored by their descendants. It was actually *illegal* to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681 (the fine was five shillings). Only in the middle of the nineteenth century did Christmas gain legal recognition as an official public holiday in New England."

Nissenbaum agrees with other historians that the first recorded observance since the New Testament recounted Christ's birth took place hundreds of years after Jesus' resurrection.

"It was only in the fourth century that the Church officially decided to observe Christmas on Dec. 25. And this date was not chosen for religious reasons but simply because it happened to mark the approximate arrival of the winter solstice, an event that was celebrated long before the advent of Christianity. The Puritans were correct when they pointed out – and they pointed it out often – that Christmas was nothing but a pagan festival covered with a Christian veneer."

Christmas in America saw huge growth during the 19th century, starting with Washington Irving's 1820 book "The Keeping of Christmas at Bracebridge Hall." A week before Christmas in 1834, Charles Dickens published "A Christmas Carol," and in 1860, American illustrator Thomas Nast created Father Christmas, also known as Santa Claus, based on European stories of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children.

Spirit of the rising sun

Today, followers of ancient paganism strive to remind the public about the heathen origins of traditions that many may never have questioned. They've published books, given speeches, and created websites proffering a heathen history of modern customs.

[CircleSanctuary.org](#) is among the Internet addresses run by nature-worshipping pagans. Author Selena Fox discusses the state of being pagan and celebrating the lengthening of days during the Northern Hemisphere's darkest time of year.

"Yule, the winter solstice, is a festival of peace and a celebration of waxing solar light. I honor the new sun child by burning a[n] oaken yule log in a sacred fire. I honor the great goddess in her many great mother aspects, and the father god as Santa in his old sky god, father time, and holly king forms. I decorate my home with lights and with holly, ivy, mistletoe, evergreens and other herbs sacred to this season. I ring in the new solar year with bells."

Fox even provides a [list of suggestions](#) on how 21st century citizens can take part in the ancient rituals, to "re-paganize" Christmastime:

- Have gift exchanges and feasts over the course of several days and nights as was done of old
- Adorn the home with sacred herbs and colors; decorate in druidic holiday colors of red, green and white
- Hang a sprig of mistletoe above a major threshold and leave it there until next yule as a charm for good luck throughout the year
- Have family/household members join together to make or purchase an evergreen wreath
- If you choose to have a living or a harvested evergreen tree as part of your holiday decorations, call it a solstice tree and decorate it with pagan symbols
- Reclaim Santa Claus as a pagan godform by decorating him with images that reflect his various heritages ranging from the Greek god Cronos (father time) to Odin, the Scandinavian all-father riding the sky on an eight-legged horse
- Place pagan mother-goddess images around your home, possibly including one with a sun child, such as Isis with Horus
- Honor the new solar year with light – light candles, burn a yule log and save a portion for the following year, put colored lights outside your home, and with the popularity of five-pointed stars, consider displaying a blue or white pentagram.

The greatest story never told?

The pagan connections to Christmas are not news to the likes of [Garner Ted Armstrong](#), a Christian evangelist and political commentator based in Tyler, Texas. Armstrong has been proclaiming such information for the past 46 years on a peak of 135 television and 360 radio stations, stating "it is impossible to 'put Christ back in Christmas,' since He was never in Christmas in the first place!"

"None of the apostles of Christ ever heard of the term; not one of them ever celebrated Christ's birthday," writes Armstrong in his booklet "[Christmas ... The Untold Story](#)." "The words Christmas, holly wreath, mistletoe, Rudolph, Santa Claus and Christmas tree do not appear anywhere in the Bible."

Armstrong is among Christians who believe God's plan of salvation for mankind is more accurately depicted through holidays which are frequently mentioned in Scripture, such as Passover and the Day of Atonement. If anything, he thinks Dec. 25 would most likely be Jesus' conception day, thus placing his birth in the autumn, possibly during the Feast of Tabernacles, symbolizing God's "tabernacling" – that is to say, dwelling – with mankind.

Like-minded preachers say the Bible warns extensively about adopting pagan customs, pointing to the 10th chapter of Jeremiah to specifically cite the practice of tree decoration, which some historians date back to ancient Egypt and Babylon:

"Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the

workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not." (Jer 10:2-4)

Armstrong says the pagan celebrations, including winter's Saturnalia, or feast of Saturn in ancient Rome, crept into ostensible Christianity over many years, and some writers began urging a celebration at the same time as the secular events "for the simple reason that so many pagans were already accustomed to 'joyous,' sometimes 'riotous' orgies of feasting at the time of the winter solstice."

"It would be a sin for me [to celebrate Christmas], but it doesn't mean it's the unpardonable sin," Armstrong told WorldNetDaily, stressing he doesn't feel at all threatened by the holiday.

"I have no more difficulty walking through Beijing at the Chinese New Year and seeing the dragons and fireworks. It doesn't affect me. ... [the Apostle] Paul says the idol is nothing."

While Armstrong teaches against the observance of Christmas, he adds that most people who celebrate it are doing so with good intentions, simply unaware of the facts regarding its origins, and they should neither be judged nor condemned by fellow believers in Jesus. He encourages people to type words like "origins of Christmas" into Internet search engines to find out for themselves the background on the customs.

Angels in the outfield

For millions of Christians, the story of Christmas in the Bible is among the most beloved, and is one of their foundations of faith – that God came to dwell as a man and offer eternal life to mankind. It is both simple enough to be understood by young children, and has majestic meaning to provide adults with inspiration and awe.

The events surrounding the birth of Christ are recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which give an almost play-by-play description:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:8-14)

The shepherds subsequently found the child in the manger, but unlike depictions on many modern holiday cards and Nativity scenes, there were no wise men present at the birth. The Gospel of Matthew says the Magi arrived at a house, not the manger. And as for the tradition of three wise men, the Bible never mentions their number – only the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Those gifts were presented to Jesus, not exchanged with other people.

The accounts don't mention a tree – evergreen or otherwise – nor do they specify the time of year. Some analysts theorize that since the shepherds were still out in the fields by night watching their flocks, the event could not have been in winter, due to plunging temperatures. Still others think Dec. 25 has a valid claim on the actual event.

Spirit of the rising Son

"I believe the celebration of Christmas is a wonderful opportunity to honor Christ and share the gospel," says Rev. Jerry Falwell, chancellor of Liberty University in Virginia and one of America's best known ministers. Falwell is a staunch defender of the holiday he's celebrated for every one of the 69 years he's been alive.

"And I plan to celebrate it on the 'other side,'" he tells WorldNetDaily.

Falwell acknowledges that many of the customs associated with the observance are not found in the Bible, but he doesn't have a problem with that.

"The Christmas tree and Santa Claus don't bother me," he said. "If we can use anything to get people under the sound of the gospel, without violating Scripture, it's a good thing."

While there are some unknowns such as the exact date of birth, Falwell stresses "we do know He *was* born – virgin-born as the Son of God."

Yet over 2,000 years after that history-changing event, most Americans think Christ is fading from the Christmas picture, at least according to a recent poll.

When the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University asked if "most people focus on the birth of Jesus at Christmas time, or has the holiday become less religious than it used to be?" only 11 percent said they believed Christmas was still about Jesus, with 87 percent responding "less religious."

Close to half of adults – 45 percent – say they personally know someone who doesn't believe in God, but still will celebrate the holiday this year; 62 percent say they'll attend a religious service on Christmas Eve or Day; and 81 percent plan to put a decorated tree in their home this year.

"Do I put up a tree? I have in the past; this year I won't," says Jose Negron, a 34-year-old Christian minister at the Stonehouse Church to the Nations in Toano, Va. Even without the tree, he still plans to celebrate Christmas.

"I grew up in America. It's an historical constant," Negron said.

Indeed, trees and their decoration have played a role in American history, even in the nation's darkest hours. In 1942, just a year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill came to Washington to join President Franklin Roosevelt in lighting the National Christmas Tree, a tradition started by Calvin Coolidge in 1923.

"Against enemies who preach the principles of hate and practice them, we set our faith in human love and in God's care for us all men everywhere," said Roosevelt.

Thousands of citizens turned out for the event, which was broadcast nationwide on radio in the grips of World War II.

"Let the children have their night of fun and laughter," proclaimed Churchill. "Let the gifts of Father Christmas delight their play. Let us grown-ups share to the full in their unstinted pleasures before we turn again to the stern task and formidable years that lie before us, resolved that, by our sacrifice and daring, these same children shall not be robbed of their inheritance or denied the right to live in a free and decent world."

The tree-lighting ceremonies continue to this day, with President George W. Bush having two dedications under his belt.

The history of mankind's fascination with trees long antedates World War II, the founding of America, and even the Middle Ages. Historians have found evidence of tree decoration and tree worship in places such as ancient Rome and Egypt. The Old Testament also records God's displeasure with his own people for following pagan practices involving trees:

- *"And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and forgot the Lord their God, and served Baalim and the groves."* (Judges 3:7)

- *"For the Lord shall smite Israel ... because they have made their groves, provoking the Lord to anger."* (1 Kings 14:15)

- *"For they also built them high places, and images, and groves, on every high hill, and under every green tree."* (1 Kings 14:23)

In the 1800s, Alexander Hislop, a noted historian of antiquity, examined the origins of customs such as the Christmas tree and date of celebration. Writing in "The Two Babylons," Hislop maintains the practice derives from the worship of pagan deities.

The Christmas tree, now so common among us, was equally common in pagan Rome and pagan Egypt. In Egypt that tree was the palm tree; in Rome it was the fir; the palm tree denoting the pagan Messiah. ... The mother of Adonis, the sun god and great mediatorial divinity, was mystically said to have been changed into a tree, and when in that state to have brought forth her divine son. If the mother was a tree, the son must have been [recognized] as the "Man the branch." And this entirely accounts for the putting of the yule log into the fire on Christmas Eve, and the appearance of the Christmas tree the next morning. ...

Therefore, the 25th of December, the day that was observed at Rome as the day when the victorious god reappeared on earth, was held at the *Natalis invicti solis*, "The birthday of the unconquered sun." Now the yule log is the dead stock of Nimrod, deified as the sun god, but cut down by his enemies; the Christmas tree is Nimrod redivivus – the slain god come to life again.



President Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the National Christmas Tree in 1940



The 2001 National Christmas Tree took on patriotic colors in the wake of the Sept. 11 terror attacks

"I can count about a hundred trees, wreaths, poinsettia displays, lights, everywhere I look [in my office] complex," says Bob Sipsky, of Stuart, Fla. "Christmas gorge-as-much-food-as-you-can eat-a-ramas every day for two weeks. Enough already."

Sipsky is a Bible believer not affiliated with any organized church. He celebrated Christmas for 35 years before abandoning it, now thinking it an insult to God.

"There are clearly explained festivals that God tells us to observe, which teach how to have peace on earth, and what the true Savior requires of us," Sipsky says, "yet mankind ignores these, and prefers to make up his own festivals and traditions. Christmas is based in deception: its origins; lying to small children about Santa Claus; talking about having peace on earth while ignoring God's instructions on how to achieve it; saying it is biblical, while 99 percent of it is all about commerce and other selfish objectives. Myths and traditions do not please the God of the Bible, a right way of living does. Deception is at the top of the list of what He hates."

That anti-Christmas view is echoed by Tom Moniz of Hobe Sound, Fla. "Being a God-fearing man, I cannot honor a lie, nor do I think adopting a pagan holiday and calling it his birthday does any honor to him."

"Most of these people are killjoys," says Rev. Falwell regarding those who attack the celebration of Christmas. "Most of these tightwads just don't want to [spend] cash. ... I don't take my children or grandchildren near them."

To many Christians, Christmastime is among the most sacred times of the year, and they look to keep it that way.

"It's the *reason* for being a Christian, because we believe Jesus is God," says Louis Giovino, director of communications for the New York-based Catholic League, the nation's largest Catholic civil-rights organization.

With recent controversies surrounding Christmas in the public arena, the league has issued a list of guidelines to help people understand what kind of religious expression is permissible at this time of year.

Giovino admits the observance has picked up some pagan customs over the years, but says they've been "baptized" by the Church. He notes by the time of Dickens in England, the holiday took on a more raucous tone, with drinking parties and violence, and says the Protestant legislation to outlaw Christmas was in direct response to the riotous revelry.

"The Puritans weren't into celebrating anything," he said.

Giovino stresses the important part of Christmas is the larger picture of the Christian message, the belief that "the Word became flesh."

"It's not like saying 'Happy birthday, Jesus!'" he exclaimed. "I think personally Christmas is ridiculous without Christ. Otherwise, we might as well celebrate the winter solstice as pagans."

The baby with the bathwater?

With the extremes on Christmas observance ranging from total holiday indulgence to complete abstention, there are plenty of people who seek middle ground. Pastor Richard Bucher of the Trinity Lutheran Church in Clinton, Mass., is one of them, asserting celebrating Christmas is *not* pagan.

"It's laudable that certain Christians care so much about pleasing God to ask the question if it's right," Bucher told WorldNetDaily, "but a lot of arguments they're making are just not sound. They end up placing guilt on Christians celebrating Christmas and do a real disservice."

On his church website, Bucher addresses examples such as the tree decorated with silver and gold in Jeremiah's 10th chapter, and explains upon close examination, it does not refer to anything like a Christmas tree.

"The very next verse, 10:5, goes on to say, '*Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.*' This passage and the passages that follow make it crystal clear that the 'decorated tree' that Jeremiah was talking about in 10:3-4, was a tree that was cut down and made into an idol, a very common custom in the ancient world."

"Just because heathens took something God has created for good," he asks, "does that mean such things are off limits [to Christians] permanently?"

He says many have invented sin where God has not said that something is sinful, and adds the issue boils down to what exactly is meant by "Christmas."

"Is it thanking God for the birth of the Savior, or *everything* that people do associated with it? People just lump everything together."

Despite all the conflict, some believers have little problem with the controversies over Christmas; in fact, they rejoice in them.

"Those who would attempt to take Christ out of Christmas are fighting a losing battle," says Joan Driscoll of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. "The harder they try, the stronger the holy message and meaning of Jesus' birth becomes. The heavenly voices of the angels singing 'Alleluia' will easily drown out the guttural tones of the dissenters."

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