“How the Unitarians and Universalists Saved Christmas”
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For those who feel that Unitarian Universalists have no right to celebrate Christmas, I would say ***Bah, Humbug!*** If it were not for our forebears, much of the ambience and spirit of the season would be missing. By the end of this sermon, you will be fully prepared to defend your Unitarian Universalist celebration of Christmas against all comers at the family Christmas dinner! You can even tell them: Had it not been for the Unitarians and Universalists, we might still be celebrating Christmas the way the Puritans did, spending another day at the workplace.

The Puritans had a history of de-emphasizing Christmas. This anti-Christmas attitude was something that the Puritans brought with them from England. Unlike the Jewish holidays, with specific dates on the Hebrew calendar, the Bible does not mention the day that Jesus was born. Since no date was given in the Bible, the Puritans viewed the celebration of Christmas on December 25, the day of the Roman Saturnalia festival, as an attempt to appeal to the pagans. Melding the celebration of the birth of Jesus with the Saturnalia festival was just one of the ways that Christianity ingrained itself into the Roman Empire. It should be added that the Saturnalia festival was marked with revelry, games, and even gift-giving. All of these were heretical to the stern Puritans.

In1621, within a year of their arrival in the new world, William Bradford, Governor of the Plymouth Colony fined a group of people who were publicly celebrating Christmas. In his journal, he wrote that had they stayed quietly in their homes, he would not have done so. Instead, they were out engaging in revelry and merriment. In other words, one could observe Christmas in a solemn manner. Having a “merry Christmas” was forbidden. In fact, from 1659 until 1681, in Massachusetts, there was a fine of five shillings for violating the ban on public celebrations of Christmas.

This opposition to the celebration of Christmas was so strong that, according to one legend, when the Industrial Revolution got rolling, factories would open at 5 a.m. on Christmas day, rather than the customary 7 a.m., to discourage people from getting up early to celebrate Christmas. It was not until 1865 that Christmas even became a public holiday in Massachusetts. We might want to emulate the Pilgrims when it comes to Thanksgiving, but I don’t think that any of us wants to go back to their way of ***not*** celebrating Christmas.

It should be pointed out that the neglect of Christmas factors into American history. In 1776, George Washington and his army crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Eve. The Hessian mercenaries, good German Christians who were forced to spend that Christmas stationed in Trenton, holding their own celebrations, were routed the next day. The Hessians expected the colonists to be in church or at prayer, not in battle on Christmas day.

Attitudes did not begin to change until after the American Revolution. Changes began in 1789, when the Universalists started holding Christmas services. According to Stephen Nissenbaum, author of *The Battle for Christmas,* our Universalist forebears started celebrating Christmas even before they officially organized their church in Boston. The Unitarians were not far behind them.

By 1800, the Unitarians began calling for the churches to open on Christmas day, and for the bars and other forms of commerce to close. This was because Christmas was often celebrated with public drunkenness, and sometimes turned into riots. The drunken revelry was a reminder of the British "Antics," as they were known. The Unitarians hoped that by keeping the churches open, people would go to church rather than the taverns and ale houses. They succeeded in this during the 18-teens. Several other churches actually went along with this; but, within a few years the merchants decided to open their doors on Christmas Day, even if it meant acting surreptitiously. The Unitarians and Universalists continued their crusade for a Christmas holiday, so that working people would have time to spend with their families. Eventually, in the 1840s, states began to declare it a public holiday. Massachusetts, with its Puritan legacy, waited until 1867 before Christmas and the Fourth of July became public holidays.

Taking the day off for Christmas was seen as a luxury, for some. For merchants and factory owners, it was viewed as a day without income, particularly in both England and the United States.

The Unitarian writer, Charles Dickens, is famous for writing the classic story "A Christmas Carol." This was just one of many. There is an entire book devoted to Christmas stories by Dickens. He began writing "A Christmas Carol" shortly after returning home from church. Although Bob Cratchit gets the day off, think of all the other people who are working when Scrooge gets religion on Christmas morning and decides to buy his gifts. Talk about last minute shopping!

I will add: there is another Unitarian that we and the Cratchit children can thank (or blame) for the idea of giving gifts. As a young man, poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a Unitarian minister. In 1798, he wrote an article on the custom of giving gifts, which he learned about when he and William Wordsworth spent time studying in Germany. He published his account of this tradition in the Unitarian journal, *The Christian Register.*

Another joyful custom came to us from Germany via our Unitarian forebears. That is the Christmas tree. Charles Follen started out as the brilliant son in a wealthy German family. He was named a professor at Jena when he was 24. However, due to his political activities, he lost his position and was forced into exile. He went to Switzerland, but within four years he was in trouble once again, for his politics. This time, he left for the United States. He learned English while he was on the boat. Following his arrival, he learned about Unitarianism and became a minister, in Lexington, Massachusetts. In 1830, he was named Professor of German at Harvard. It was a full-time position that was funded for five years. Yet again, his political activities got him into trouble. He

became a fervent abolitionist, which alienated some of the people who were funding his position. So, at the end of the five years, he did not get tenure, but instead, lost his Harvard position. Later, he would drown. I should add, William Ellery Channing, often referred to as "the father of American Unitarianism," lost the pulpit that he had served for nearly 40 years when he went against the wishes of his church board and performed Follen's memorial service. Even in death, Follen was a controversial figure.

It should also be pointed out that the story of the Christmas tree was popularized by two women writers, both of whom were Unitarians, as well as friends of the Follen family. Around 1835, both women saw the Christmas tree in the Follen home and used it in their stories.

Harriet Martineau, an English Unitarian journalist, was given an advance to come over and write stories about America. Because Follen was such a controversial person, she made his son, Little Charley, the star of the story. While Little Charley is out playing, his parents are feverishly decorating the tree in their drawing room. When Little Charley and his friends enter the house, they are given some treats and told to play games. As the finishing touch, the candles in the tree are lit. The doors are swung open, and Little Charley and his friends are mesmerized at the sight of the flaming tree, covered with treats. He and his friends are invited to enjoy the treats, and to make sure that they do not burn themselves. Think about trying to light candles on a freshly-cut tree. Martineau's story was widely popular on both sides of the Atlantic, and it helped to spread the popularity of the Christmas tree.

Another Unitarian writer, Catherine Sedgwick, also knew the Follens. Sedgwick's story was a fictional account that also served as a satire of the New Yorkers. Sedgwick used her status-conscious brother and sister-in-law as models for a family named Percival. In Sedgwick's story, Mrs. Percival and the other women brag about how many people came to call on them during the day, and how much money was spent on them. The atmosphere feels artificial and pretentious. In contrast to this, there is the tree, a piece of reality. Sedgwick tells how the family erected the tree in honor of Madeleine, the family's German nursemaid. The presents are all hung on the tree: "As fruits of the tree," we are told. In addition, the presents have been made or customized by the Percivals' eldest daughter, Lizzy. On New Year's Day, the children are brought in for their presents. The father and mother, who have been so pretentious, are moved by the gifts that their daughter has created for the family, particularly when compared to the ones that they have spent so much money purchasing. It takes a child to teach them the importance of a personal rather than a mass-produced gift.[1]

With all of the scurrying around that we do in search of the perfect gift, it is refreshing, sometimes, to think about all of the pictures that have come down to us of Santa's Workshop. It is always portrayed as a place of hand tools and crafty elves, not a fancy

[1]Catharine Sedgwick, "A New Year's Day." Cited by Stephen Nissenbaum in *The Battle for Christmas*, pp.190-4.

workshop filled with assembly lines or power tools, or a sweatshop in Asia or the Lower East Side.

One curious observation from this story that you probably noticed is that, at that time, the gift-giving in New York took place on New Year's Day. In some places, the gift giving would take place on December 26, which is known as "Boxing Day" in British countries. On Boxing Day, the various workers who lived on a wealthy person's land would go to their landowner's home, where they received what were called "Christmas boxes." They would then carry the boxes back to their more humble dwellings.

Although there have always been more Unitarians in the English-speaking lands than Germany, another Unitarian-German connection that I learned of concerns the carol, "O Holy Night." One of my colleagues shared that in 1847, the French poet, Placide de Roquemaure, was commissioned to write a poem, "Cantique de Noel." Feeling that it needed music, de Roquemaure asked a musician-friend, Adolphe Charles Adams, for help. It became a popular French carol until it was learned that Adams was a Jew, and de Roquemaure had denounced the church and became a socialist. French Catholic leaders then denounced the carol as unfit for religious services because of its "total absence of the spirit of religion."

John Sullivan Dwight was a Unitarian minister during the early nineteenth century. He was a brilliant student at Harvard, and was called to the pulpit in Northampton, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, he suffered from such severe stage fright that he became physically ill when he preached. Dwight gave up his preaching career and founded Dwight's Journal of Music. He was so moved by *Cantique de Noel* that he translated it into English. The carol quickly became popular, particularly among Dwight's fellow abolitionists in the north, because of these lines:

> *Truly He taught us to love one another;*
> *His law is love and His gospel is peace.*
> *Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;*
> *And in His name all oppression shall cease.*

"Do You Hear What I Hear" is rarely heard in churches. Who would dare to match Bing Crosby's classic rendition of it? Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker were a married songwriting duo who lived in Connecticut. They were active Unitarian Universalists. They were so active that two different UU churches claim them as members. Typically, he would write the music, and she would write the words. However, in this case, Regney was moved to write the lyrics during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Baker then composed the music.

As you can see, there is a history of Unitarian Christmas carols having social relevance and connection to the issues of the day. "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," another Christmas chestnut, was written by Edmund Sears—no relation— though he was a Unitarian minister. He wrote it before the Civil War. He knew how brutal the war over slavery would be, and wrote it as a song of peace.

“Jingle Bells” was also written during that era by a Unitarian, James Pierpont. Both his father and brother, John Senior and John Junior, were Unitarian ministers. “ James served as the music director in his brother’s church, in Savannah, Georgia. Nearly all of the Pierponts were ardent abolitionists. When the Civil War broke out, John, Jr. returned to Massachusetts and served as a chaplain in the Union army. James, the songwriter, stayed in Georgia and enlisted in the Confederate army. It was the case of someone whose music was joyful while his politics were questionable.
Since one does not hear very many sleigh bells in southern Georgia, I would like to think that his heart was in the right place when he wrote “Jingle Bells.”

So, whether you are listening to the various “sounds of the season” on your radio or television; cutting or decorating your Christmas tree; watching holiday movies; or walking through a store shopping, you cannot escape or deny our impact on the celebration of Christmas. So, keep these thoughts and lessons in mind:

First, I think that we can point to the emphasis on authenticity that our religious forbears have brought to the celebration. Whether we are speaking about the tree, the handmade gifts, or the human need for celebration, we share similar values with them, even if we are no longer a denomination that is overtly Christian. One does not have to be Christian to appreciate a good story, or an honest show of gratitude or affection.

Second, we can take pride in the ways children were brought into the holiday celebration. Rather than making this a severe time of focusing on human depravity, the stories and songs written by Unitarians and Universalists have celebrated childhood and merriment. They have looked at childhood as a time of innocence, but not as a time for spoiling children to the extent that they would grow up rotten and demanding.

Third, the term “family values” is often bandied about by religious conservatives. However, it is important to point out that it was our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors who led the move to make Christmas a true family holiday, when families could go to church together, rather than going to work or school on this special day.

Finally, it is important to remember that traditions change and develop over time. There was once a time when to call oneself Unitarian or Universalist meant that you were Christian. For more than 50 years, we have been part of an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural religious movement. That is why many of our congregations celebrate Hanukkah, Solstice, and Kwanzaa, in addition to Christmas.

So, if someone asks you why Unitarians bother to celebrate Christmas, ask them if they know where the Christmas tree came from? Ask them if they think that the man who wrote *A Christmas Carol* didn’t deserve to celebrate Christmas himself? And, if that still doesn’t work, ask them if they can make it through a Christmas season without hearing, if not singing or humming “O Holy Night” or “Do You Hear What I Hear” at least once.