

How Unitarians saved Christmas

Clay Nelson © 11 December 2016

This week it was reported that one of Donald Trump's surrogates, his first campaign manager, told Fox News that President-elect Trump had saved Christmas from Obama. Apparently he had won the war on Christmas, declaring it is now safe to say "Merry Christmas" again. In a world of fake news stories where pizza joints can be shot up because of outrageous lies generated by fake news sites, it isn't surprising President Obama was plagued by such stories. One in particular was that being a "Muslim," he never said, "Merry Christmas" or called a Christmas tree a "Christmas tree," in spite of hours of videotape recording him doing just that.

The most egregious fake news site of all, Fox News, has been claiming for years that there is a war on Christmas, to bolster its street creds with its largely religious right audience. The Fox audience's view is that Christmas is under attack by secularism. In their view, Christmas only belongs to conservative Christians; preferably white ones, if the outrage over a black Santa at the Mall of America is any indication.

There does seem to be something about Christmas that foments culture wars, at least since Christmas became a thing. No, it hasn't always been a thing, even for Christians. While the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke have very different accounts of Jesus' birth, there is no mention of December 25th as his birthday. Even if either of them did give a birthdate of December 25th, it would have been recorded as being on the 15th day of the month of Tishri in the year 3758 on the Hebrew calendar.

The early Christians understood the birth narratives to be subversive stories that mocked their oppressor, the Roman emperor. In a sense they were the first shots fired in the Christmas culture wars. They weren't history. They were like the overture to a great symphony foreshadowing the themes that would be explored in the work that would follow, coming to a dramatic conclusion in the resurrection. It was only Easter that early Christians celebrated.

Jump a few centuries forward and the landscape had changed. Christian numbers had grown significantly. Christianity was no longer predominantly Jewish. It was no longer illegal. It was no longer subversive. It had joined hands with its oppressor. For political reasons Rome had co-opted it, making it the state religion even though most Roman citizens were still pagan.

Before then, from probably the beginning of time, people had celebrated the victory of the sun over darkness at the time of the winter solstice. In Roman times it was the feast of Saturnalia where social norms were loosened or turned upside down. It was a time of relief and great joy that winter's harshness would soon abate. In Rome, the cult of *sol invictus* (the unconquered sun) had become favoured by the emperors. Constantine had the sun god on all of his coinage as his equal until 325 and in 321 he declared the day of the sun (Sunday) as the Roman day of rest. The celebration of the birth of *sol invictus* was on December 25th as part of the Saturnalia festivities. Could it be coincidence that Constantine chose that date for Christ's birth at the Council of Nicaea? Possibly. Some scholars argue that it was common to date the birth of gods and heroes on or about the winter solstice and that the date selected had nothing to do with reframing the pagan holiday, but I'm not convinced. The first recorded observance of Christmas was in 336 during Constantine's reign. It was made official in 354 by his successor, Julius I. But that didn't make it an instant hit with the populace.

St Augustine of Hippo, who was born a month before the first official Christmas, would later exhort his congregation in a Christmas sermon, "Let us celebrate this day as a feast not for the sake of this sun, which is beheld by believers as much as by ourselves, but for the sake of him who created the sun." The culture wars were in full swing as the church sought to stamp out pagan celebrations of the day. But the church was losing. By the fifth century Pope Leo was still trying to make the case that the sun represented Jesus in a shiny chariot with four white horses riding across the sky.

Stamping out pagan worship was easier said than done. It became easier to give Christian meanings to pagan worship and to turn a blind eye to some of the practices. One of those was choosing a Lord of Misrule. It was popular under certain English rulers and banned by others. It was also popular on the continent. It involved selecting a peasant or servant to rule over Christmas revelries that included wild partying and drunkenness. But its roots were in antiquity. In ancient Rome, from the 17th to the 23rd of December, a Lord of Misrule was appointed for the feast of Saturnalia, in the guise of the good god Saturn. During this time the ordinary rules of life were subverted as masters served their slaves, and slaves held the offices of state. The Lord of Misrule presided over all of this, and had the power to command anyone to do anything during the holiday period. Initially the church was appalled by the custom. In the 4th century bishops were condemning the licentiousness and debauchery exhibited and general breakdown of social mores.

However, by the Middle Ages the church had conceded to popular will and joined the fun by electing a boy chorister bishop on the 6th of December, St Nicholas' Day, the patron saint of children. He would rule until Holy Innocent's Day on December 28th. The real Bishop would symbolically step down and the boy would be dressed in full bishop's robes with mitre and crozier. Attended by his friends, robed as priests, he would make the circuit of towns blessing the people.

But while the battle was lost to a purely Christian understanding of Christmas and a more decorous celebration, the war would continue, especially in England. During the reign of Oliver Cromwell the Puritans' Godly party in Parliament succeeded in banning the celebration of Christmas and other saints' days in 1640. That ban would continue until the Restoration in 1660. While the English would continue to celebrate Christmas with the Anglo-Saxon pagan practices of lighting a Yule log and decorating their homes with holly, ivy and mistletoe, it would not be until the 19th century that the traditional English Christmas would be invented.

In the meantime the Puritans would take their antipathy to Christmas to New England. In 1659, the General Court of Massachusetts enacted a law making any observance on December 25th a punishable offense. Preacher Cotton Mather warned that those who celebrated Christmas did so at their own peril. This day, he said, should be one of fasting and repentance. Hanging a simple wreath on the door could be cause for a hefty fine. No doubt, a few brave souls kept their accustomed Christmas celebrations, but it was behind shuttered windows and locked doors. No wonder Santa had to enter the house through the chimney!

The Puritan objection to Christmas was due to there being no mention of it in the Bible and what they considered unchristian behaviour associated with the holiday. As a result, on Christmas Day the shops were opened and the churches were closed. While the law was rescinded in 1681, it would not be until 1856 that Christmas became a public holiday in Massachusetts.

It is in this context that Unitarians came to the rescue of a Christmas that was no longer

either happy or merry.

It would not be surprising to find this ironic. As no Unitarians considered Jesus God or read the birth narratives literally or thought he was born on December 25th, they were the unlikeliest of white knights. What motivated these former Puritans was the new “cult of domesticity” that was a hot new trend of the time. This new concept of family emphasised the importance of tender, intimate feelings between husband and wife, between parent and child, and among siblings. This concept encouraged the careful nurturing of children’s minds and spirits. Discipline was to be instructive, not harsh. The home was seen as a sanctuary from the stress and demands of commerce.

The Unitarian effort to save, or perhaps reclaim Christmas was two-fold: The first effort was to heighten the religious overtones of the day by holding religious services on Christmas day. That didn’t really catch on with Unitarians, but the second did: it was to urge banks, shops, other businesses, and even schools to close for the day — something that had never been done before — so that the family could spend the day together. As part of that effort they were not averse to indulging pagan elements of the holiday, in particular the Christmas tree.

In 1832, the Unitarian minister Charles Follen and his wife, Eliza, delighted party guests with something quite remarkable: a Christmas tree. He had brought the pagan tradition with him from his native Germany, from where he had been exiled. Upon settling in Cambridge to become Harvard’s first professor of German, he had met Emerson and other Transcendentalists who motivated him to become a Unitarian minister, noted abolitionist and advocate for religious freedom.

The German tradition of Christmas trees had been seeded in the United States before that famed evening in the Follens’ parlour, but the sight of a tree *indoors*, festooned with decorations, was still captivatingly new. The Follens’ tree was nudged into history with the help of their friend, British Unitarian reformer Harriet Martineau, who wrote about it in a popular English magazine. Martineau could hardly find enough adjectives to describe the tree’s loveliness: “All eyes wide open, all lips parted, all steps arrested.” A young Queen Victoria was a fan of Martineau. The description of Follen’s tree may have influenced her, for Christmas trees would rise to prominence in her England.

Unitarians also contributed to Christmas music that mostly promoted peace, with the exception of *Jingle Bells* by James Pierpont. For most of the history of Christendom, the idea of peace on earth has been taken as referring to a private, personal peace. Few imagined that peace on earth actually meant we should stop killing each other. *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow lamenting the civil war and *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* by Unitarian minister Edward Sears saw it differently.

Sears called us to task for not heeding the angels’ call to peace: “Beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong, and man at war with man hears not the love song which they bring,” Sears decried.

His lyrics raised objections from a number of Christian conservatives of the time. Many people said, contemptuously, that Sears’ hymn was just the sort of thing you would expect of a Unitarian.

All this contributed to saving Christmas but the most important contribution was by a Unitarian who connected Christmas to the Social Gospel. In doing so he popularised the idea of Christmas being an occasion to give to those less fortunate and to gather family

and friends around laden dinner tables and Christmas trees filled with lights, decorations, and toys, not to mention inspiring Dr Seuss' *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* and Frank Capra's film classic *It's a Wonderful Life*.

In 1842, Charles Dickens travelled to America and chronicled his disillusionment with the country's institutions, especially slavery. Yet Dickens praised his visit to Boston, where he met Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing. "His interest in Unitarianism was virtually the only enthusiasm he managed to bring back with him undamaged at the end of the trip," according to Victorian scholar Robert Newsom.

On returning home, Dickens took a pew at the Unitarian Little Portland Street chapel in London. "Disgusted with our Established Church, and its daily outrages on common sense and humanity," Dickens wrote in a letter, "I have carried into effect an old idea of mine, and joined the Unitarians, who *would* do something for human improvement, if they could; and who practice Charity and Toleration."

Dickens himself worked tirelessly for a wide range of charitable causes, raising funds for soup kitchens, emigration schemes, housing associations, prison reform, hospitals, adult education, and disabled artists. He also believed that through his fiction he could promote moral solutions to social ills and could change society for the better.

All Dickens's novels reflect the central ideas of nineteenth-century Unitarianism: the belief that Jesus was a human being who exemplified a truly religious life; the rejection of materialism and the doctrine of necessity, the medieval idea that that which is illegal is made legal by necessity; the rejection of a God of stern judgment; a disdain of theological controversy; the rejection of dogma; an inclusive rather than an exclusive religion; and an emphasis on doing good works.

In 1843, shortly after his return from America he wrote *A Christmas Carol*. In not once mentioning Jesus, Dickens shows it is possible to experience a conversion—not necessarily based on a specific religious experience—but a personal regeneration that leads one to help others. With Scrooge's transformative change of heart, Dickens illustrates that his readers, too, can be converted from a harsh, complacent, selfish worldview to one of love, hope, and charity and, like Scrooge, can again become part of the human community. For Dickens, that was the true meaning of Christmas.

Today, historians credit *A Christmas Carol* and *'Twas the Night before Christmas* as having done the most to make Christmas what it is today, a holiday for everyone. While the author of the of *'Twas the Night before Christmas* was an Anglican, its illustrator was a famous Unitarian cartoonist and political satirist, Thomas Nast. It was he, not Coca Cola, who first drew Santa Claus as we now all know he looks, and made his home the North Pole where he could belong to all the world's children no matter their faith (or no faith).

And that is how Unitarians won the Christmas wars. We made it merry again through inclusion not exclusion. We did it by making it a time of joy and wonder for all. We made it a holiday in which people of any belief system could participate. It reminds us to nurture our families. It recognises that as humans we need moments to forget about our station in life and the worries and responsibilities that come with it and let loose a little. It honours our admiration for the just and compassionate world Jesus hoped we would create, without worrying about who he was, but more about who we are and how we treat one another, especially the unfortunate. We lifted it up as a day of transformation that we might become more human all year round.

So in the words of Tiny Tim: “Merry Christmas to all. God bless us everyone.”