



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

A Christmas Miracle: Why Unitarians still celebrate Christmas

Clay Nelson © 20 December 2020

On this last Sunday that I will be sharing my musings in 2020, I thought I would make it as Covid-free as possible. I decided to muse on why Unitarians still celebrate Christmas against all reason.

Jesus' official birthday was set by the Emperor Constantine in 336. The 25 December date was chosen to help stamp out pagan celebrations of the victory of the sun shortly after the winter solstice. It was also a backhanded slap at our Unitarian forebears who had lost the debate about the Trinity eleven years earlier, but who were still plentiful in numbers. The trinitarians wanted to celebrate the birth of the Son of God, which was contrary to what would later be the Unitarian view that Jesus reflected the divine spark in each of us, but was not God. There was only one God in their view. It was a view that was not tolerated in by orthodox Christendom and resulted in some horrific attempts to purge such believers by the Catholic church and later by reformed churches during the Reformation. John Calvin worked with the Inquisition to lure our first martyr, Michael Servetus, to Geneva. Calvin was prosecutor, judge and jury. Servetus was burned at the stake and his ashes scattered. In England Unitarianism was the last nonconforming denomination to be made "legal" in 1813. Even in New Zealand we weren't well-received. On the third of December 1901, the night before our new building was dedicated, someone graffitied the front of the building in big letters, "This is the house of Satan". You would think that Unitarians would have given up on Christmas long ago, yet our best attended service all year is still by far Christmas Eve.

On this, the Sunday before Christmas, we have a party decorating the church for a holiday we are not totally on board with theologically. Many of us reject Jesus as part of the godhead, all of us are sceptical of literal virgin births, bands of angels, and a star that was a precursor of Google maps. All too many of us are not familiar with the birth stories and don't know that there are two of them with different theological axes to grind. We generally don't know that they are subversive stories challenging and mocking the power of the emperor. Apparently, Constantine didn't know that either.

Over the millennia Christmas has had its ups and downs. Most Christians to this day see Easter as the important holiday, but those new Christians who had been pagan until Constantine thought Christmas more a time for merry-making than pious rituals. In an attempt to subdue some of the excesses, the church threw in four weeks of advent prior to Christmas, a

kind of “Lent-lite” season, for more serious contemplation on what to expect. It never caught on with Unitarians.

In England the excesses got really out of hand when they finally quit the Julian calendar 170 years after the rest of Europe to accept the Gregorian calendar, in 1752. I have an untested hypothesis that because the two calendars separated Christmas in the west and Epiphany in the east by twelve days, instead of the one day on which they were both celebrated before, it gave them 12 more days of merrymaking.

Our forebears in America were having none of this. They were the Puritans who left England, in part, due to these excesses and for religious freedom. It turns out they wanted only their flavour of religion to be free and promptly banned the celebration of Christmas in Massachusetts just as it had been under the days of Cromwell back in not so merry ol’ England. In the colony the celebration of Christmas merited criminal prosecution and a fine of five shillings (about \$8000 US today). That law remained on the books until 1856, but was not enforced. It turns out people like merrymaking a lot more than they like religion.

Well clearly, Christmas needed saving if we were ever to greet each other with happy Christmas again. It turns out that Unitarians were up to the task, even though we are more of a “Happy Holidays” kind of people, both theologically and politically. We take unremorseful pleasure in tweaking noses at Fox News and their claim that there is a war on Christmas.

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 which is why we don’t have a Christmas Day service, 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. The reason was so families could have a day to share the blessings of the season together.

Then came something unexpected, and in Boston of all places. In 1832, the Unitarian minister and professor of German at Harvard 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. They now bring joy and beauty around the world.

Unitarians also contributed to Christmas music that mostly promoted peace, with the exception of *Jingle Bells* by Unitarian 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 and *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* by Unitarian minister Edward Sears lamenting the civil

war saw it differently.

Sears lyrics offended a number of Christian conservatives at the time. They contemptuously viewed Sears' hymn as 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.

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.

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 practise Charity and Toleration."

In 1843, shortly after his return from America, he wrote *A Christmas Carol*. Without 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.

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 the 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).

So, I guess that's why we are so crowded on Christmas Eve. We promote Christmas as a time of beauty, peace, generosity, kindness, family in its broadest sense and, of course, merrymaking. This is why we still celebrate Christmas. It's not really a miracle — we aren't big on miracles. We celebrate because humanity needs it. All of us: Catholics, Protestants, atheists, humanists, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, earth-centred indigenous peoples, pagans and seekers.

Another reason we need it has been made apparent this year. Christmas offers unexpected hope for renewal and transformation in an uncertain

future. That is what will keep Unitarians celebrating Christmas for another couple of millennia.