

## **"Why Christmas?' asked the Unitarian"**

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What's the connection between anti-slavery, Christmas trees and Unitarian Universalists? It's remarkable actually, almost to the point of being unbelievable. I bring this up in response to a common question I get this time of year. "Why do Unitarian Universalists celebrate Christmas if you don't believe in the virgin birth or that Jesus is God?" In order to answer this question thoroughly we have to look back at the history. When we do, the question almost becomes: "Why do Christians celebrate Christmas, since it's so Unitarian Universalist?" I realize this sounds provocative. But what I'm about to share with you is that at its very core, the Unitarians and Universalists have profoundly shaped the meaning and practice of Christmas as we know it.

Those of you who've been through our Roots classes or who've been at All Souls awhile know that Unitarian Universalism in America is an offspring of the Puritan and Pilgrim traditions. Just look at this sanctuary – have you ever seen a more Puritan church? This chancel area was designed and built with the exact dimensions of the very first building the Pilgrims worshipped in when they landed on the shores of North America. Now of course, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries we became known as the liberal wing of the Church and neither America nor Christmas have ever been the same.

Let's look at how the Puritans felt about Christmas.

First of all they knew that December 25th was probably not when Jesus was born. They figured that if God intended for us to celebrate Jesus' birth, then God would have let us know his birth date. It was clear to the Puritans that Christmas was not Christian; it was a pagan holdover.

The famous puritan preacher Increase Mather in 1687 preached from the very pulpit I served in Boston before coming here to Tulsa

...that the early Christians who first observed the Nativity on December 25th did not do so 'thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into Christian [ones].'<sup>1</sup>

And he was right.

It's easy for us to assume that since the Puritans were so uptight and conservative they just didn't want people to have fun and so they outlawed the celebration of Christmas. As a matter of fact, celebrating Christmas was made illegal in the Massachusetts Bay Colony for twenty-two years from 1659-1681, and a fine was imposed on anyone caught celebrating it. You have to understand that this period was not like the Cultural Revolution in China, in which guards would come searching homes to see who was breaking the law. Because in Puritan times Christmas was not celebrated in homes around evergreen trees.

The Christmas celebrations that came to America from the old world were more like Carnival or Mardi Gras celebrations, in which people went into the streets and there was lots of drinking and noise-making, sex, and even people in costumes. The lower classes went to the homes of the wealthy and expected to be provided with good food and drink. At this one time of year, the servants and workers would get served by their employers. It's thought that the role reversal acted as a chance for workers to let off steam so that for the rest of the year they would repay the benevolence of their employers with hard work and goodwill. In that sense Christmas served to maintain the status quo.

But you must remember that this developed at a time of an agrarian society. Winter was the slow time after the harvest was brought in, and it was also the time that the new alcohol was ready to drink, and it was the time of the slaughtering of animals. So, with fresh meat, good stocks of alcohol and lots of leisure time, Christmas was a period of feasting and revelry. But as the economy moved towards industry, and society became increasingly urbanized, the poor and homeless populations grew in size, in need and in animosity. The weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day were increasingly filled with activities and expectations that made the wealthy classes uncomfortable.

Due to this problem, Christmas was eventually transformed into a domestic holiday that was celebrated at home among families during the early nineteenth century. It was at this time that the concept of Santa Claus became popular, as well as the concept of giving gifts to one's children. This transformation supported the rise of consumerism, and kept young people off the streets, where they might engage in troublemaking and promiscuity. The concept of role reversal was maintained in that on this day the powerful within the family (namely parents) would serve the servants (namely the children). The notion of charity developed both to try and help the poor as well as to appease them in order to make the streets safe and free of beggars.

At this point, at the turn of the nineteenth century, Christmas trees were still not part of the American Christmas celebration. Enter Charles Follen, a German immigrant and Unitarian minister. The rest of this story is so intertwined with Unitarian history and theology that I might not have believed it myself if I hadn't found it in a book written by a well-known non-Unitarian historian named Stephan Nissenbaum. Nissenbaum's book, *The Battle for Christmas*, was a Pulitzer Prize Finalist in 1996. It sheds light on many of the myths about Christmas, and shows how the history of the holiday has affected our culture. In it he explains that the Unitarians

used culture rather than politics as an instrument to influence the social order. They employed their cultural authority – a combination of literary skill and access to the most popular channels of print – in a strenuous effort to deal with what they feared were the corruptive cultural effects of consumer capitalism, especially on the young. The Christmas tree played a serious, if relatively minor role in the larger project. <sup>2</sup>

Nissenbaum refutes common legends about the origins of the Christmas tree being brought in by Hessian soldiers, as well as the one about it originating with Queen Victoria's German born husband Prince Albert. Instead, he traces the popular spread of the American Christmas tree to a number of authors, all of whom were Unitarians. One story was a work of non-fiction about the Unitarian Minister and Harvard professor Charles Follen, who set up a Christmas tree in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1835. The story was made popular by a British writer, Harriet Martineau who was also a Unitarian, and who came to America and wrote a well-read book about her travels, which included Follen's tree. What she did not write about was their mutual endeavors at ending slavery.

This is where the connection between Anti-slavery, Christmas trees and Unitarians comes in. Nissenbaum writes that

There were important similarities between the antislavery sensibility and the new attitude towards children. Abolitionists and educational reformers shared a joint empathy for people who were powerless to resist the wrath of those who wielded power over them. – slaves and children respectively. Both types of reformers [he tells us] had a particular abhorrence of the use of the lash as a form of punishment. <sup>3</sup>

Prominent Unitarians were leaders in both the anti-slavery movement, the movement for education reform and, as it turns out, the spread of the Christmas tree. These were not unrelated endeavors, as a matter of fact, they all have the same theological roots. In Nissenbaum's own words:

Child-rearing practices were linked to theological beliefs. Whether parents chose to beat their children, for example, or lavish attention on them at Christmas was linked to whether they believed in original sin. A

central tenet of early 19th century Unitarians – and one that distinguished them from both the old-style Puritans and the majority of evangelical[s]... was the belief that human beings were not born for damnation. Puritans and most evangelical Protestants, in contrast, believed that people were inevitably stained at birth by an original sin that corrupted them at their very core by causing them to be willful and selfish. Such a defect was so deep-seated that it could be removed, if at all, not by any act of will, no matter how strenuous (because the will itself was part of the problem), but only through a free gift of divine, arbitrary and irresistible grace. ...Puritan-minded parents... therefore felt that it was their obligation to break a child's will as early as possible. Unitarians on the contrary, believed that the will should be trained rather than broken; it might be imperfect, but it was not fundamentally corrupt. Unitarians strenuously believed that human beings were responsible – utterly responsible—for their own actions.<sup>4</sup>

Can you see the connection to anti-slavery and progressive education? One group believed that people were depraved and that their will needed to be broken. The other group believed that people were good and their will needed to be trained. Once you accept that people are inherently good, it's hard to justify slavery. The difference between breaking and training the will created very different philosophies of education as well. Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker said, “Men often speak of breaking the will of a child; it seems to me they had better break the neck. The will needs regulation, not destroying. I should as soon think of breaking the legs of a horse in training him, as [of breaking] a child's will.”<sup>5</sup>

So, what does the Christmas tree have to do with all of this? Well, it turns out that the young British poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge famous for poems like “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” at age twenty-six decided not to pursue his plan to become a Unitarian Minister and instead spent Christmas of 1798 in Germany. While there he witnessed a Christmas ritual involving a decorated evergreen tree. What distinguished this ritual from the ones in America was that the children not only received presents from their parents, but they gave presents to their parents. The exchange of presents, Coleridge believed, turned what had become in the United States a ritual of children's selfishness and materialism, into a lesson about giving and receiving and engendered authentic and loving familial relationships.

He wrote about this, and in 1824 it was published in the “Christian Register” which was the American Unitarian Church's official journal. (It was the precursor to what we know now as the UU World Magazine.) In less than a decade, two famous American Unitarian authors wrote popular fictional stories that incorporated the Christmas tree. The most famous of these was Catherine Sedgwick, and the other was her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Dwight Sedgwick. In each of these stories, the Christmas tree represented something authentic and good. The stories tell of strong families in which children are central and in which the holiday allows them to cultivate their character. In Elizabeth Sedgwick's book, one year instead of presents, Santa puts a poem in each child's stocking. As Nissenbaum explains, the poem points

affectionately but firmly to his or her characteristic failing – a readiness to lie, a quick temper, a lack of perseverance, and selfishness. St. Nicholas adds the promise that he will return the following Christmas to check up on the children's progress. The son inclined to dishonesty grumbles, ‘I know I'll get something from old Nicholas another year, by hook or by crook.’ After a year in which the children struggle, assisted by their father's constant reinforcement, to conquer their weakness, and the next Christmas, St. Nicholas does, indeed, bring each child a handsome gift. <sup>6</sup>

The story exemplified the Unitarian theology that good character is part of every person's true nature, and that children need to be trained and raised properly in order to realize it. The Christmas tree ritual was presented as a way to steer Christmas away from selfishness and materialism and make it a part of the positive training of children. Therefore the Unitarian agenda was to use the concept of the Christmas tree as a way of spreading this notion and custom to families across the country. The Catherine Sedgwick books, along with Harriet Martineau's, are especially credited with popularizing the custom throughout upper and middle-class America and ultimately the nation. Within a few years of the publication of their books,

Christmas trees and the exchange of presents became a regular part of the American Christmas holiday for people of almost all denominations and ethnicities.

Many prominent Unitarians continued to work for abolition and education reform. At one of the first Anti-slavery Fairs, there was a decorated evergreen shrub; on it there was a sign that read, "Persons are requested not to handle the articles, which like slavery, are too delicate to touch." Nissenbaum explains that "this was a sarcastic reference to the reluctance of most respectable Americans to discuss the slavery issue."<sup>7</sup>

The story doesn't end there. As a matter of fact, Nissenbaum's entire next chapter is dedicated to how Christmas became known as time of social outreach and charity. The major influences include another Unitarian, Charles Dickens, whose story "A Christmas Carol" satirizes entrenched wealth and power and criticized the popular notion that poverty was God's judgment. Dickens's story of generosity and charity during the Christmas season has remained a classic, and to this day his version of Christmas has dominated the popular meaning of this season. This book, steeped in Unitarian theology, has shaped what Christmas is.

Another prominent Unitarian influence was Margaret Fuller, who spent part of her Christmas day in 1845 visiting deaf and dumb children who lived in an asylum in New York. The publisher of the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley, also a Unitarian, wrote about Fuller's visits in his paper, and within a few years, charitable agencies institutionalized these events, which increased their popularity and fundraising.<sup>8</sup>

The Unitarian influence penetrated not only secular life, but changed the meaning and focus of Christmas in churches through the writing of hymns. Some of the classics, like our first hymn this morning, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," were written by Unitarian poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and the enduring favorite, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," by Unitarian Edmund Hamilton Sears. These hymns were radical in their time. Until then Christmas hymns focused specifically on the Nativity and the birth of the savior. Unitarian hymns like Sears' and Longfellow's focused on the social gospel of striving for "peace on earth, goodwill to men." Eventually, these hymns, along with their social message and theology, would be sung and accepted in churches across the land, and still are today!

My friends, this is our holiday. For those who will be sitting around a tree over the next few days and exchanging gifts with family, take a moment to realize the potential of the path you're on and what it means to be part of this church.

Indeed, this is a season of hope: hope, not so much in expectation of a savior coming down from on high, but hope in the progress of humanity towards greater compassion and understanding. A belief that with the birth of every child, (including these beautiful babies we dedicate this morning,) each one gives us hope that humanity has the possibility of coming closer to a world of peace and goodwill to all. That's why each time that unto us a child is born, is a holy time and a time for hope and celebration. Merry Christmas! Amen.

1 Nissenbaum, Stephen. *The Battle For Christmas: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday*. Vintage Books, New York 1996. (pp. 4). 2 Nissenbaum, (pp. 178).

3 Nissenbaum, (pp. 187).

4 Nissenbaum, (pp. 202).

5 Nissenbaum, (pp. 203).

6 Nissenbaum, (pp. 203).

7 Nissenbaum, (pp. 187).

8 Nissenbaum, (pp. 247).