

# Christmas

## Fact or Fiction

If liberty means anything at all,  
it means the right to tell people what they do not want to  
hear.

—George Orwell

# Sthitaprajna

## ChristmaS

Fact or Fiction

by

**Sthitaprajna**

Lecturer Dept. of English

Institute of Technical Education & Research, Jagamara

Bhubaneswar

Orissa # India - 751 030

© Sashi Sekhar

First Edition, November 2006

Published by :

**Hindu Writers' Forum**

129 B, MIG Flats, Rajouri Garden

New Delhi, India - 110 027

Cover Design : Bibhu Prasuna

**ISBN : 81-86790-01-2**

Any part of this book translated or reproduced in any form will be duly considered by the author.

Price Rs. 15/- \$ One/-

## Preface

Christians throughout the world celebrate Christmas on 25th December as Jesus's birthday with great funfair, merrymaking, exchanging presents, singing carols, decorating various types of Christmas tree. But is this custom originally of Christianity, and acceptable to all its sects or a borrowed one from Paganism? Christmas means the day on which the mass is celebrated in honour of Christ's birthday. But the Biblical studies reveal that Christmas is totally unbiblical, and therefore, unchristianic as there is no record or evidence in the Bible that Jesus was born on 25th December. And whatever records we get about Jesus's life in the Four Gospels of New Testament are so self-contradictory in relation to the place, time and season of Jesus's birth that point suspicion towards the very existence of Jesus himself.

Biblical scholar John Ellegro says, "*As far details in the New Testament record of Jesus's life is concerned....the Scrolls give added ground for believing that many incidents are merely projections into Jesus's own history of what was expected of the Messiah.*" (The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth). In this context, Dennis Mckinsey writes, "*In essence, it is that there is no writing in all of ancient history outside of the Bible that clearly refers to a man by the name of Jesus of Nazareth. If you want to read writings about Jesus that were written when he roamed the earth, you'll have to confine yourself to the Bible, because there is nothing outside of Scripture that one can use.*" (The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy, p.37). He further says, "*Jesus is a mythical figure in the tradition of Pagan mythology and almost nothing in all of ancient literature would lead one to believe otherwise.*" (ibid, p. 108).

And the mythology of Jesus is similar to other Roman, Babylonian and Egyptian Sun-gods—Apollo, Bacchus, Hercules, Mithra, Adonis, Attis, Osiris, Horus, Baal, Quetzalcoatl—from Virgin Mothers, and on the same date or within a day or two thereof. The birthday of Mithra and Apollo is 25th Dec. while that of Osiris is 27th Dec. and of Horus is 28th Dec. (A.K. Kamaluddin-Religion of Jesus and the Sources of Christianity, p. 57).

There was no Christianity, and no Christmas upto the 3rd century, as it exists today, rather the Christians opposed Pagan custom of merrymaking—the Saturnalia. Roman Church, in 354 A.D. arbitrarily introduced celebration of Jesus's birthday on 25 Dec. only to boost Christianity among the masses. But it was linked with the anniversary of the Son of God and interpreted that Christ is the 'Sun of Righteousness' and the 'Light of the World'. Thus it was justified that Christ was just another variation of Sun-Gods—Apollo, Mithra etc. of pre-Christ era. So Christianity borrowed Christmas from the Pagans practically in all respects. Not only this, they borrowed a lot from Buddhism also, and Mr. T.W.Doane gives 48 similarities between Buddhism and Christianity (Bible Myths pp. 287-289).

Similarly the symbol of the Cross is not original of Christianity but is the sign of life in Pagan symbolism. In the same way, following Paganism, the Sabbath of the Jews was changed from Saturday to Sunday—the day of worship of Sun-God by Roman king Constantine who supported Christianity in the 4th century. Similarly the Passover, the greatest feast of the Jews, borrowed from the Egyptians, handed down to become the supreme festival of Christianity.

In the same way, the Christmas tree is not original of Christianity. Egypt, Babylonia and Rome all made use of the tree in their winter solstice festivals. In Egypt, it was the palm, and in Rome the fir, while the sacred tree in Babylonia was the perfect counterpart of our modern Christmas tree". (R.J. Condon, ibid p. 14)

While summarising this topic, Patric Campbell writes in 'The Mythical Jesus (p. 41) "*All are pre-Christian sun gods, and yet all allegedly had gods for fathers and virgins for mothers, had their births announced by stars and celestial music; were born on the solstice around December 25th, had tyrants who tried to kill them in their infancy; met with violent deaths; and arose from dead. Moreover, nearly all were worshipped by 'wiseman' and were alleged to have fasted for forty days.*"

Like other Christian customs and practises Christmas festival has also been borrowed from Paganism. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to name a single feature of the Christmas festivity that is not derived from Paganism. Even Santa Claus is little more than the Scandinavian Wotan, driving through the night sky from the frozen North with gifts for those who honour him at Yuletide.

Actually as Baigent and Leigh say; "*The Church today, after all is less a religious than social, cultural, political and economic institution. Its stability and security rest on factors quite remote from the creed, the doctrine and the dogma it promotes.*" (The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception, p. 234).

The learned scholar Mrs. Sthitaprajna has done a commendable job by exposing the myth of Christmas celebrating on 25th Dec. as birthday of Jesus Christ in this booklet—Christmas : Fact or Fiction. I am sure her thoughtprovoking analysis of Christmas will draw attention both of Christians and non-Christians alike as Christmas is not only unbiblical but also unchristianic in origin as it has been adopted from the Roman, Babylonian and Egyptian cultures. I believe that the rational analysis presented by the learned author will invoke wide interest in this area of activity.

Dated : 22nd Nov. 2006

(Dr. K.V. Paliwal)

# Contents

03 Preface

- 06 When God Said : “Celebrate !”
- 08 The Babe of Bethlehem
- 11 The Sun is the Reason for the Season
- 14 Christmas before Christ
- 16 In Search of a Christmas Date
- 19 Let’s put Christ Back into Christmas
- 21 The Relics of a Pagan Past

04 □

# ***WHEN GOD SAID : “CELEBRATE !”***

Christmas season is on and suddenly the Christmas tree appears hung with presents and decorated with shiny tinsels. Houses are decked with mistletoe. A time to sing carols, admire colourful twinkling lights and burn the Yule log. It's when family and friends get together for a sumptuous Christmas dinner. Christmas is traditionally the time when presents are exchanged. People are busy wrapping gifts, shopping and sending Christmas cards to their friends. The bazaars are in full swing and everything wears a festive look.

Christmas has become big business. To the businessmen Christmas means an opportunity to make money. As someone has rightly said : “they are more concerned to hear about their profit from Christmas than to hear about the Prophet from Bethlehem.” The clinking sound of coins are far more sweet than the Christmas carols. The famous Christmas carol- “Silent night ! Holy Night !” does not seem quite relevant today because the night is no more silent or holy.

## **Cup That Cheers**

There are those who try to find a merry Christmas in what they call “the cup that cheers.” Instead of imbibing the spirit of Christmas, they choose to imbibe Christmas spirits. For such people the holiday is an opportunity to celebrate Christmas in the wrong way. Liquor flows freely.

Christmas is a hectic season too. The more-things-to-do-than-I-have-time-to-do season. With last minute shopping, and other hullabaloo, we forget that this festival commemorates the birth of Christ. Christmas is an irrational season. There's a kind of madness about materialism and in an off-moment we remember why we celebrate Christmas and how. We do everything during Christmas that Christ was opposed to--- commercialism. Madaline L'Engle's poem beautifully reveals the irrationality of the season :

*This is the irrational season  
When love blooms bright and wild.  
Had Mary been filled with reason  
There'd have been no room for the child.*

The overwhelming commercialism of Christmas time is discomfoting. We are perverting this joyous celebration of Christ into a celebration of commerce. As someone has rightly pointed out : “The money changers have slipped back into the temple.” The whole idea behind the celebration is lost. It becomes a time and mood of getting and giving. But there are many families for whom Christmas becomes a burden instead of a pleasure because they are forced to give more than they are able to. For many, this deplorable commercialization of Christmas is downright sinful. The Christmas tree bears us no good fruits. Rather the people bear the one-day-Christianity of Christ because it bears business for us on one hand but also bankruptcy on the other.

## **High Logos Christology**

Christmas is a beautifully simple idea. But it has a wide spectrum of views ranging from plain materialism to a “high Logos Christology.” For some people Christmas is a sentimental tale about a little baby; for some it's an occasion to spend a lot of money buying and giving gifts; for some it is time to look at the strife and tension in the world and wish for peace and harmony on earth. It means different things to different people. It may not be the birthday of Christ but one thing it really stands for is joy. It is the time to be with the family. It is time to hear the bells and carols as Longfellow has written :

*I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat  
of peace on earth, goodwill to men.*

It may not come as a surprise that amidst all these merrymaking, people don't remember that this annual Christmas festival actually celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ.

Christmas is a season of shopping, trading and exchanging gifts. People buy gifts for their friends. When asked they defend themselves by saying : “Even the Bible says so. Didn’t the wise men from the East give gifts to the baby Jesus at the time of the birth ?”

## **Wise Men from the East**

The wise men from the East were philosophers and belonged to an influential class and included men of noble birth. The wise men, since they came from India, had brought a lot of gifts for the infant Jesus and offered it on his feet. With utmost faith they presented him gold, frankincense and myrrh. Because Indians had the custom of presenting gifts to kings and great men when they appeared before them.

So the Bible doesn’t teach anything about gift-trading nor is it a Christian custom. The customs of lighting candles and giving presents entered into Christianity with the Christian acceptance of the pagan winter solstice. The *Bibliotheca Sacra* rightly says : “The interchange of presents between friends is alike characteristic of Christmas and the Saturnalia, and must have been adopted by Christians from the pagans, as the admonition of Tertullian plainly shows.”

Tartullian, a church father in the year 230 AD regretted and lamented of the Christians selling at the hands of the pagans. In his book *De Idolatria*, he cries out bitterly on pagan customs taking over Christianity saying : “By us, who are strangers to Sabbaths (Jewish sabbaths), and new moons, and festivals, once acceptable to God, the Saturnalia, the feasts of January, the Brumalia, and Matronalia, are now frequented; gifts are carried to and fro, New Year’s Day presents are made with din, and sports and banquets are celebrated with uproar; oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to their religion who take special care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians.”

05 □

## ***THE BABE OF BETHLEHAM***

Since two thousand years millions and thousands of babies have been born down but we remember only one babe--- the Babe of Bethlehem. The babe was different than others in many ways. He was something special. Bible in its last book talked about him that he was Alpha and Omega--- the First and the Last--- that which was--- that which is--- and that which is to come--- the Almighty ! (Rev 1:8)

Jesus Christ, whose birthday is celebrated throughout the world on December 25, has had a greater impact on human history than any person who ever lived. Though he died at the age of 33, and lived in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire nearly 2,000 years ago, more than one billion people today call themselves followers of Christ. Though he never wrote a book, tens of thousand of books have been written about his life and teachings.

Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, a town in Roman-occupied Palestine, around 4 B.C. After a flight into Egypt to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod, Jesus returned to Palestine with Mary and Joseph and grew up in the village of Nazareth, where he worked in Joseph's carpenter shop.

At the age of 30 Jesus left Nazareth, with 12 men who became known as his apostles, and traveled throughout Palestine preaching love of God. He was a marvelous storyteller, illustrating his teachings with examples and parables about persons, places, and things that were familiar to his listeners. Christ's parables like the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son are often cited even by non-Christians as literary and moral masterpieces.

### **Prophecies from Old Testament**

His birth was considered the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. The Old Testament was a constant anticipation of Christ. So it is quite legitimate to interpret the Old Testament descriptions of temple, prophetism, priesthood and kingship in the context of Jesus Christ. Faithful Christians believed that shortly after Adam and Eve sinned, by tasting the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, God sent a Messiah into the world to save mankind for the original sin. The believers believe in the prophecy of the Old Testament that everything was told about him.

The Old Testament prophets tried to describe what Messiah would be like when he arrived. Moses said, "He will be a prophet mighty in word and deed." Jeremiah said, "He will execute justice and righteousness in the land." Isaiah gave the best description of all : "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:14) and said, "Unto us a son is given... His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace... Immanuel, which being interpreted is God with us" (Deut. 18:18; Jeremiah 23:5; Isaiah 9:6).

When Jesus was born, his country trembled under the shoes of Roman conquerors. People waited for a Saviour, for a Messiah, as the prophets had foretold. They expected a warrior king who would come to rescue their land; like Judas Maccabeus who battled the Greek empire and restored the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews looked for some hero. What they got was hardly what they expected--- a child born in a barn, a carpenter's son, encircled by peril in his infancy, fighting against difficulties through his short life. Conquered by a violent death, rising from the dead triumphant and ascending into heaven and as a suffering Saviour, a man of sorrows he would be despised and rejected. He would be betrayed by a friend and sold for 30 pieces of silver. He would be led as a sheep to the slaughter. He would be wounded for our transgressions, and His soul would be made an offering for sin. (Isaiah 53; Psalm 22).

### **Dynamic Ambiguity**

The Jews could not accept Jesus because he was neither the warrior they expected nor a conventional rabbi. He was rather a teacher of religious law, who did not hesitate to reevaluate the laws of

past. He taught of a greater humanity. After all he was a Jew and professed the Jewish Faith. But the Jews did not see him as their anticipated saviour. They are still waiting for the Messiah. And the Christians are looking for return of Jesus.

Christ's birth has always contained a dynamic ambiguity. The Christmas stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke recount a number of stories about birth and childhood of Jesus. But both of them have a different version altogether. Matthew and Luke have nothing in common except the three names --- Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the three places --- Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth and the time --- Herod, Matthew relates the nativity story thus : This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but *before* they came to live together she was found to be with child *through the Holy Spirit* ... 'Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her *by the Holy Spirit*' ... this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet : *The virgin* will conceive and give birth to a son ... and though he had not *had intercourse* with her, she gave birth to a son (Matthew 1:18, 20-5). So does Luke : A *virgin* betrothed to a man named Joseph ... and the *virgin's* name was Mary ... 'You are to conceive and bear a son' ... 'How can this come about, since I am a *virgin* ?' 'The *Holy Spirit* will come upon you ... and so the child will be ... called Son *of God* ... nothing is impossible to God.' (Luke 1:27, 34-8, 3:23)

## Irreconcilable Gospels

However, the pre-Nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke are totally irreconcilable. Matthew has no singing angels heralding the birth, no visiting shepherds. Luke has no courier star, no wise men bringing the babe gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph proceed to the temple in Jerusalem and from there go straight to Nazareth according to Luke. Whereas Matthew takes Mary and Joseph with their baby to Egypt where they stay till the death of Herod and come back to Nazereth again. Luke seems to ignore their visit to Egypt and Matthew did not give importance to their visit to Jerusalem temple.

The story of Herod destroying all children under two years old is mentioned only in Matthew. Had this been true, the universality of it must have made it known to all the other biographers of Jesus. This would have been too striking an event to be omitted by any. Jesus, recounts Matthew, escaped the slaughter because he fled to Egypt with his parents. But what about John who was also under two years of age ? He stayed behind and fared as well as Jesus who fled. Moreover, when the Magi arrived, neither Herod nor "all Jerusalem" knew anything of the birth of Jesus, although according to Luke (2: 15-17) shepherds from Bethlehem, five miles away, had been busy spreading the news.

Herod ordered the killing of all infants in and around Bethlehem when the Magi did not come back to tell him of the child's whereabouts. Had the star conducted the Magi directly to the birth place, this atrocity would have been avoided.

It is an astonishing fact that the earliest Gospel like Mark omits the Christmas story and the last Gospel John starts out with Jesus' baptism. Both the Gospels did not feel the importance of Christmas. Matthew gives us an account from Joseph's point of view. Joseph wonders what to do with a wife who is carrying a child which is not his. Of course the angels had an answer. Luke advocated for Mary. He narrated the pre-Christmas story adding the visitation and how Mary talked over with Elizabeth, who has had similar experiences of her own. Matthew shapes the Christmas with the story of the wise men, and Luke starts the story of the shepherds.

The Christmas story clusters thickly with the visits of angels, prophetic dramas, the marvelous star in the east, the miraculous birth greeted with songs from the heavenly choir. All these seem fantastic and at times sound like a fairy tale full of mysteries and miracles, symbols and images. Everything for a child whose father is eternally unknown and mother a wife of a carpenter !

## Confusion Within

Can we believe the nativity stories regarding the birth of Christ as true? St. Luke speaks of the angels and shepherds, but knows nothing of the star and the wise men. He says that Cyrenus, governor of Syria, published the decree of enrollment. But we know that Quintilius Varus was the governor at the time of Christ's birth. Cyrenus was not appointed to that position until after the death of Herod and the census mentioned by Josephus took place A.D. 6, not at the time of Christ's birth. Matthew confused us when he says that the Holy Family went to Egypt until the death of Herod [2:14]. Whereas Luke says that they waited 40 days for the Purification, and went thence to Nazareth. We are also very sure that Emperor like Augustus cannot pass an order to census the whole world at that time. With so many contradictory stories it becomes all the more difficult to assign December 25 as Jesus' birthday.

Christ couldn't have been born in winter. At least the Bible says so. Because when the Christ-child was born, "the shepherds were abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). In the month of December this is never possible in Judaea for December was a cold and a wet month as described in the Song of Solomon (2:11) and Ezra (10:9, 13). The winter was extremely cold and the heavy rains stopped shepherds from abiding in open fields at night. Naturally they brought back their flocks from the mountains and fields before the first rain which usually began in Marchesvan corresponding to our month of October.

When the angels came to proclaim the birth of Jesus the shepherds were outside watching their sheep at night. This shows that October had not yet commenced and Christ must have been born before October, may be sometimes in September--- six months after Passover in spring. But the date of Christ's birth is totally concealed. It is entirely unknown because no where in Bible is the exact date mentioned. This may be deliberate for God did not wish us to celebrate His birthday.

Some theologians believe that these nativity stories evolved after the historical events of Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. Jesus' death and resurrection took place first before these stories were written. The stories are an echo of that event, not a foretaste of it. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection Matthew discovered Jesus to be the new Moses, the new David--- the Messiah. So an unknown birth was glorified by attaching the nativity stories of popular gods of paganism. It was the facts of Jesus' life and death which justified superimposition or imagination of the famous paganistic concept of the miraculous birth.

# ***THE SUN IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON***

Christianity with its many virtues has made a wrong choice while accepting a pagan custom as its own which is not only anti-Bible but anti-Christ as well. The very title of Earl Wendell Count's book *Four Thousand Years of Christmas* proves that Christmas isn't Christian. It was celebrated two thousand years before the birth of Christ in the honour of the Sun-God. So some Christians believe that Christmas is idolatry because God very patently says, "Take heed... that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods?' - that I also may do likewise. You shall not do so to the Eternal your God; for every abominable thing which the Eternal hates they have done for their gods." (Deuteronomy 12:30-31).

Stop and think for a moment. Have we ever reflected on why we believe what we do. Why do we follow the customs and where did these customs come from? Have we ever wondered how and when Christmas originated?

Why do the Christians observe Christmas? Is it Christian or is it a Pagan celebration of Nature? Does Christmas really celebrate the birth of Jesus? And was he really born on December 25? These are some of the basic questions which will lead us to the true meaning of Christmas.

Christmas means the Mass of Christ shortened as Christ-Mass or Christmas. Now Mass is a continuation of paganism with all its rituals, elaborate ceremonies and pagan prayers. Mass is a heathenistic ritual and by attaching the name of Christ, we make Christmas a polluted ceremony.

## **Between Death Day and Birth Day**

The early Christian church didn't celebrate Christmas for the first few centuries because it wasn't a Christian tradition to celebrate the birth days of remarkable persons. Rather the general custom was to celebrate their death-day. Only sinners like Pharaoh and Herod rejoiced over the day they were born. It was the general custom in the Roman Empire to celebrate the birthdays of rulers (Mt 14:6) and men of prominence. Their birthdays were publicly honored even after their deaths. And such celebrations did not necessarily, coincide with the actual date of birth. For instance, the birthday of Pluto was celebrated on the day of the feast of God Apollo.

No biblical authority have ever mentioned of Christ, his apostles or even his church having observed his birthday. Had Jesus intended us to celebrate his birthday, the exact date of his birth would have been revealed in the Bible. But he did not. Jesus never once made a small allusion to the season. Paul the apostle however has commanded his fellowmen to observe the death-day of Christ. (1 Cor. 11:24-26).

But as an argument goes, if Joseph could adopt Jesus then there's nothing wrong to adopt a pagan custom to glorify the birth of our Lord though it be forbidden in the Bible. So Christians rejoice the birth of Christ.

Nevertheless, Christians know that they have no monopoly over Christmas festivities because there are many claimants to this--- Sol, Mithra, Apollo, Saturn, Marduk, Horus etc. They all celebrate their birthdays on December 25 as the Winter Solstice.

## **Winter Solstice**

Since ages Winter Solstice has been celebrated as the birthday of the Sun-God; "Sol" meaning *Sun* and "Stice" meaning *still*. The sun begins to rise on this day again after declining in the winter. The Winter Solstice--- the shortest day--- celebrated the resurrection of the sun and people looked forward to

the coming of spring and summer, the time of renewed harvest and regeneration. So long before Christianity there were spring festivals celebrating the rebirth of nature. Ancient people were very dependent on the seasons. So all cultures in different parts of the world held their major religious festivals on four seasons--- the summer and winter solstice and the two equinoxes, or “equal nights” when days and nights are equal in length. Christmas started at the formation of our solar system.

Sun is the source of life and so it is represented as God. The seasonal changes were according to the movement and position of the sun. The pagans used to believe that the sun died in the winter. So the return of the sun was celebrated as “Sol Invictus,” the day of the unconquered sun. It was generally the occasion of feasting and revelry with all its simplicity, virtue and joviality.

The ancient people were sun worshippers. The older religions had a common basis of sun worship and borrowed legends from a common pool of mythology. Hence, we find Christs and Christmases, virgin mothers and divine sons, stable births and persecuting monarchs, annunciations and foster fathers throughout the world religions where the nativity of Jesus dissolves into this mythical nativity legends of Sol, Mithra, Krishna, Horus, Apollo etc. Even the title Christ may be traced to the Chaldean Chris or heres, the name of the sun.

Its Hebrew equivalent “heres” occurs several times in the Old Testament, where it is always translated as sun. The other religions outside Christianity held Jesus Christ was a personification of the sun. This becomes clear when a Manichaeon as St. Augustine was converted to Christianity, he had to condemn his previous faith thus :

I curse those persons who say that Zoroaster and the Buddha and Christ and the Sun are all one and the same.

## **Sun Worship**

In the ancient pagan Rome, rebirth of the Sun-God was celebrated as the Saturnalia from December 17-24. The Brumalia which celebrated the “New Sun” on December 25 concluded the week long festival. People amused themselves by feasting and indulging in all kinds of merrymaking. Business was suspended and slaves set free for the week. The most remarkable feature, however, was the license granted to the slaves. The masters waited upon their slaves, a custom still preserved in the British army where officers and sergeants serve Christmas dinner to other ranks. The week-long celebration resulted in lifting of almost all restraints : closing of schools, easing of punishments, gaming, feasting, and exchanging gifts.

Similarly, in Persia their Sun-God, Mithra, was believed to be born at midnight of December 24. The temples were lit-up and boys burnt incense just as the churches do these days on Christmas eve.

The Egyptian sun-god Horus was born in the mid-winter and during the celebration the Egyptians, just like the present-day Catholics, depicted the scene of the divine babe--- the new sun-god in a manger and the mother Isis beside it.

In Mesopotamis, Marduk, the sun god is believed to constantly fight against forces of cold and darkness and renews each new year with his victory. During this festivity of the Sun’s victory called the Zagmuk festival, the people recited their creation myth, exchanged gifts and held feasts. In Persia and Babylon this festival was called the “sacaea.”

In Egypt, winter solstice was celebrated as the death and the resurrection of Osiris by leaving gifts in the tombs of the dead and bringing date-palms home which symbolizes life.

In central America, the Aztecs celebrated solstice by tearing apart and eating a huge cake made in the shape of a life-sized man representing the sun-god Huitzilopochli. This ritual was some what similar to the Christmas Eucharist ceremony where Christians eat bread as the symbolic flesh of Christ and drink wine to symbolize his blood.

In northern Europe, the Druids and Vikings built huge bonfires on hilltops to give additional strength to the sun-god in his mighty battle against forces of cold and darkness.

During the time of Julius Caesar, in Rome, Mithraism was very popular. Mithra, the Sun-god, killed the cosmic white bull which became the moon and the bull's blood gave birth to all life on earth. Mithra's cloak became the night sky and stars.

## **Devil's Funeral**

The sun-worshippers believed that during the winter solstice or the birth of sun all the malignant spirits, ghosts and witches become powerless. The Christians follow the suit. It was popular belief that the mystical presence of child Jesus made the evil forces powerless. The legend had it that during Christmas the gate of paradise was open. Anyone who dies during this time goes to heaven and any child born was thought to be especially blessed and fortunate. This universal belief of the ghosts, witches and evil forces being defeated by sun/Christ during Christmas time has been immortalized by Shakespeare in his famous lines from Hamlet :

*Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:  
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;  
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, no witch has power to charm,  
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.*

(Act 1, Scene 1)

According to an old legend, the devil died when Christ was born. So in some parts of medieval England there was a custom during Christmas where the church bell tolled for one hour before midnight called the "Devil's Funeral."

The origin of Christmas actually is related with the sun. The true meaning of Christmas is thus to celebrate the return of the sun to warm the earth for a resurrection of new growth. "The sun is the reason for the season." Christmas has been celebrated since "time past and time future...where past and future are gathered... pointing to one end... which is always present." [T.S. Eliot]

□

# ***CHRISTMAS BEFORE CHRIST***

On the first Christmas, when Jesus was born, there shone the brightest star in the heaven and alike they rejoiced the angels above and the shepherds below. Following the star, the wisemen of the East, the magi, reached Jerusalem and informed Herod about the divine babe.

Accept it or not but Jesus was first acknowledged as a Redeemer of the world by the wise men of the East. The missing links of Christianity and paganism of East can be further connected with the wise men who were the first to recognize the infant Christ's divinity. It were the wise men, the pagans of the East, who travelled a difficult path for many days to see the Messiah of the Jews. But the Jews themselves were not concerned about it. The rabbis and the Jewish priests were ignorant about it. And when the shepherds were reporting the news of the birth of Christ, they tried to ignore it claiming that if such a thing happens, God will first intimate us for we are the true exponents of God. Thus, while the Chosen People of God shut their doors for their Messiah, the heathens opened theirs and readily accepted Jesus.

On the otherhand, Herod had the premonition of this divine child who was to become his rival. Unable to trace out the baby, he ordered the killing of all the children in and around Bethlehem. Had the star led the wisemen straight to his birth place the massacre could have been prevented.

The same story also goes true for Krishna, Abraham and Moses, the predecessors of Jesus. Kansa fearing that Krishna would prove fatal to him, killed all the children. Nimrod and Pharaoh similarly ordered to kill the children after they had a prophesy of a child to be born who would destroy them. So when this concept of the "dangerous child" is repeated with Jesus and Herod, the Gospel writers seem to merely uphold a long-run tradition rather than presenting the reality of the time.

## **Pagan Myths**

Of the many stories of Christianity borrowed from the pagan myths the story of Nativity is no exception. R.J. Condon very systematically points out in his book: *The Pagan Christmas* that in ancient Egypt the prototype of the nativity story was very popular and was applied to their Pharaohs and gods. (1974:9).

On the walls of the temple of Amen at Luxor built by Amenhotep this legend is depicted in four scenes. In the first scene the Ibis-headed God, Thoth, informs the virgin queen Mut-em-ua that she is to bear a son--- Horus which is the divine child. In the second phase, the god Kneph, or the "Holy Spirit" assisted by the goddess Hathor, impregnates the virgin by holding the "ankh"--- symbol of life-to her mouth. In the next scene, which is the nativity scene, the mother is seated on a stool which was the custom and a nurse is holding the child. In the last scene, the child is enthroned and is presented gifts. Three men, behind the ram-headed kneph are offering gift with one hand and blessing with other. This picture which shows the four phases of Nativity - the Annunciation, Conception, Birth and Adoration - is described in the first and second chapters of Luke's gospel.

The divine origin of Jesus can be related to the nativity stories of Alexander the Great and sage Apollonius of Tyana. Among the popular stories of Alexander's birth, one says that when Olympias, before her marriage to Phillip, was sleeping, dreamt of a thunder bolt falling into her stomach from heaven which was later to be born as Alexander. It is also said that a serpent, who was actually the god Jupiter, consorted with Phillip's wife and the result of this union was Alexander. Before the birth of sage Apollonius, Proteus, the god of Egypt, appeared before his mother and asked her to bear him in her womb.

The concept of a virgin mother is quite familiar in pagan mythology. The Indians, Scandinavians, Chinese, Egyptian, Teutons all knew the virgin-mother goddess. But virgin Mary was modelled directly upon the Egyptian Isis because the two are virtually indistinguishable. The qualities which made Mary so reverent to the Catholics are the same which made Isis popular among Egyptians. Both gentle mothers who could intercede with the Almighty creator. The figure of Isis nursing her infant Horus was superimposed on Madonna and child. The temples of Isis and Madonna stood side by side. In the sixth century, however the last of the temples of Isis was converted to a Church and that put an end to the legend of the popular Egyptian Goddess Isis.

The legend of the birth of Mithra is quite closely related to the Christian myth. When Mithra was born a star fell from the sky, the Zoroastrian priests, called Magi, followed the star to worship him. They brought golden crowns to the newborn king. The shepherds witnessed the birth. It was celebrated as Mithrakana. Mithra was born as man to redeem men from their sins.

## **Christ in Krishna**

The story of Jesus is the repetition of the Hindu legend of Krishna, slightly altered in many details, but broadly identical. Krishna was born three thousand five hundred years before Christ in a prison. Kansa, like Herod, felt threatened and sent out guards to massacre all male infants of his state. At the age of sixteen, like Jesus, Krishna left his home and began travelling over the country, preaching. Krishna, the Hindus believe, is the redeemer of their sins.

So when we peel off the true meaning of Christmas and its customs we see that it's a pagan celebration of nature and Jesus is a mind-born child of pagan customs. There is little scope to celebrate the birth day of some body who is nobody in Christian religion. Kersey Graves says in *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors*, that god is not honoured by these festivities because :

If history and tradition are to be credited, God had many well-beloved sons, 'born of pious and holy virgins, besides Jesus Christ. And some of them are represented as being his 'only begotten.' and others as his 'first begotten' sons. And all these cases appear to be equally as well authenticated as the story of Jesus Christ. (Qtd.Gipson Arnold 1993:4)

The Christmas story is the story that tells how God-born-man-in-a manger in Bethlehem. For the skeptics, cynics and unconvinced he remained a carpenter's son (Mt 13:55). Thomas Flynn questions why have Christmas at all in his "The Trouble with Christmas." He believes that for the humanists and infidels celebrating winter solstice instead of Christmas would not be a brilliant compromise. Rather than looking at Christmas as "culture's default holiday," or as a way of celebrating the return of spring we could instead celebrate our human achievement of getting through the winter painlessly with developed technology. If humanists can do away with Christ why keep the mass then ? If Christians-turned-infidels could throw the Babe why are they reluctant to part with the bathwater. So the humanist way of celebrating Christmas is throwing out the babe with the bathwater and glorifying technology and human power to change the world.

But many conscious Christians even do not celebrate Christmas. They know that Christmas doesn't honour Christ but sells merchandise. Moreover, Christmas spirit is destroyed and deluded by heavy commercialism. The shrewd commercialism set in by the pagan Romans during Saturnalia still continues. So the Bible warns : "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Rev 18:4). In spite of the many warnings in the Bible, the Christians still celebrate the pagan festival with all its older revelry. The spirit of commercialism far more exceeds the spirit of Christ. In "Yuletide Greetings," (*"American Atheist,"* Dec. 1985:10) of B.M. Saner we read :

*So, in line with this old pagan custom,  
From which our holiday grew;  
But freed from the latter's delusions,  
I send my best greetings to you.*

□

# ***IN SEARCH OF A CHRISTMAS DATE***

It is rather surprising that there has been no single account of the life of Christ. His many disciples gave many interpretations and we find no uniformity between them. The early Christians till the fifth century never knew about Christmas. No one was ever sure of the authentic date, day and month of Christ's Nativity. Because no where in the New Testament is the date of birth of Christ determined. No single date could be fixed upon to celebrate Christmas. Some celebrated it on 19th April, some on 20th May and even a few on November 17. There is not one word in the New Testament, or anywhere in the Bible, telling us to observe Christmas.

It has been only 1600 years since the churches started celebrating Christmas on December 25. Till then the Christmas were a part of the pagan festivities held at midwinter and even now they are ! Because Christ was not born on 25th December rather it has been unanimously chosen to be celebrated as his birthday for convenience; convenience of converting a mere pagan custom for their own use.

325 CE is an important date in the history of Catholic Church. This is the date when the church was officially organized. This is the date when the resurrection of Christ was named after the goddess of Spring as Easter.

Pope Julius I in 350 officially accepted December 25 as the birth of Christ which was a day when pagans were celebrating for Sun-God. To celebrate Sunday or the day of the sun, the Christmas made their Sabbath on Sunday and not Saturday. Similarly, from the pagans comes the Monday or moon-day. So did other pagan days and festive occasions become Christian holidays. Till then, a week did not have seven days. It was in the fourth century that Emperor Constantine established seven days in a week based on Jewish tradition.

## **Sorry Christmas**

The early Christians never celebrated the birth of Jesus until the time of Hippolytus, the Bishop of Rome in the first-half of the 3rd century. He conveniently chose January 2. In 354 A.D., however, the Roman Church declared to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25. Although there is no biblical evidence of it this was done only to boost Christianity's popularity and to turn away people's attention from the festival of Saturnalia. The Church was aware that the new converts would never give up their merriest of festivals--- the Saturnalia. This festival of merrymaking was so popular that when the pagan--- Romans became Christians, they regretted giving up this festival and continued its celebration with the same spirit but in a different name.

St. Boniface, the apostle to the Germans wrote a letter in 742 to Pope Zacharias that he could not convert the pagan Germanic tribes of the Franks and the Ademans because they stuck to their "Wild observance" of the winter festivals. So the Pope banned all celebrations during Christmas as did several succeeding Popes but the ban had a reverse effect on the whole newly Christianized Europe who were equally engaged in merrymaking and wild rituals. So, regardless of the paganism instilled in it, the Church had to adopt the Saturnalia as the Christian festival of Christmas with all its traditional evergreen decorations and glittering firesides.

St. Chrysostom in 373 A.D. consented on celebrating Christmas on December 25 but unlike the hullabaloo and "profane ceremonies" of the pagans. While the heathens may celebrate their profane ceremonies, he said, the Christians may perform their holy rites undisturbed. So the Christians celebrated December 25, the anniversary of the Son of God. St. Chrysostom interpreted that Christ himself is the "Sun of Righteousness" and the "Light of the World," making the cock his animal representative. In doing so he unconsciously justified that Christ was just another variation of the Sun-gods--- Sol, Mithra, Apollo

of the pre-Christ era. Added to this, Sunday which was the day of the sun was declared as the Lord's Day. What a funny coincidence !

However December 25, 1647 was not a MERRY Christmas, it was a SORRY Christmas in England when the parliament of England passed a law to do away with Christmas altogether. It became a crime to celebrate Christmas even in the privacy of the home. The serious-minded Puritans were offended by the Christmas celebration and saw the occasion as dangerously non-Christian. The Puritanical Cromwellian protectorate parliament in England sat every Christmas day from 1644-56.

## **The Outlawed Christmas**

In 1642, the Puritans forbade all the Church festivities which were a blend of paganism and Christianity. Christmas was regarded as a blasphemous survival of popery and paganism in some European countries after the Reformation. Especially in Scotland where Reformation took a more extreme form due to the influence of Calvinism and John Knox, December 25 was not a holiday until after the Second World War. The Stalinist Albania had officially abolished the festival.

In New England, December 25 was a workday and anyone who refused to go to work on that day was dismissed and school children who stayed back at home were severely punished. The office on that day would begin at 5 O'clock so that workers forgo church service. Christmas was outlawed and banned till the 19th century. The Church resumed the spirit of merrymaking in the 19th century only after the Irish and German immigration who carried on the wave of enthusiasm with its former glory to all parts of Europe and America. The Germans brought the Christmas tree, the Irish the candle and the Catholics the crib, carols and hymns and the three Masses on Christmas.

For sometime March 25 was celebrated as the day when Christ was born and resurrected which was the vernal equinox. Then January 6 was celebrated every where as the birthday of Jesus Christ along with the festival of Isis. But later in the fourth century Pope Liberius of Rome changed it to December 25 keeping January 6 as the day of Epiphany Feast only. The silence over the Nativity Feast until 4th century AD shows that the Nativity concept was that of the celebration of Epiphany Feast held on January 6 which was celebrated as the birth and baptism of Jesus simultaneously.

## **Why not January 6 ?**

December 25 i.e., "New Christmas" was called "the birth of Christ after the flesh" by John Chrysostom--- the day of the unconquered SON. This new reference indicated a pre-existing feast which celebrated "the birth of Christ after the spirit". The spiritual birth of Christ was observed on January 6 as the feast of Epiphany. On this date Christ was baptized and spiritually anointed as the Messiah. Baptism gave him a new life of a greater significance. So January 6 was celebrated as the birthday of Jesus. In "The Cherry Tree Carol" also the unborn Christ says :

*The sixth day of January  
my birthday will be,  
When the Stars in the Elements  
will tremble with Glee.*

Gradually things changed and this tradition was lost. January 6 was retained as the "Epiphany" when either the magi were supposed to have visited or Christ was baptized or both. People started celebrating the miraculous birth of Christ on a fake date. Nativity of spirit was long forgotten with the incorporation of the pagan custom of celebrating physical birthday.

According to a Roman almanac, the Christian festival of Christmas was celebrated in Rome by AD 336. In the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, however, a festival on January 6 commemorated the manifestation of God in both the birth and the baptism of Jesus, except in Jerusalem, where only the birth was celebrated. During the 4th century the celebration of Christ's birth on December 25 was gradually adopted by most Eastern Churches. In Jerusalem, opposition to Christmas lasted longer, but it was subsequently accepted. In the Armenian Church, Christmas was never accepted; Christ's birth is celebrated on January 6. After Christmas was established in the East, the baptism of Jesus was celebrated on Epiphany, i.e., January 6. In the West, however, Epiphany was the day on which the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus was celebrated.

Some theologically absurd reason for celebrating Christmas on December 25 is that according to the calculation of Dionysius, the creation of the world began on March 25. Christ was the new creation. So he must have been conceived on March 25 and born on December 25--- exactly nine months later. But this calculation conveys no meaning and lacks authenticity. He only tried to replace the sun's official birthday, declared by the Roman Emperor Aurilian, as Christ's birthday. Yet another reason the authorities give is by citing the Gospel stories about the conception of John the Baptist in September, six months before the birth of Christ in March--- the birth of Christ thus proved in December.

## Why December 25 ?

All this is fanciful. If Jesus was born on a specific day, that day must have been known. But the church for centuries has been romancing and has no idea of the day, date or even month of the divine birth. Antonmaria Lupi, a learned priest of the eighteenth century, remarked that "there is no month of the year to which the nativity has not been assigned at one time or another."

We can justify the celebration of Nativity on December 25, according to the ancient pagan custom of celebrating festival at the time of seasonal changes. And Christmas occurs at the time when the days start to lengthen which was when Mithra, the Persian Sun-god was believed to be born and Rome celebrated Saturnalia, the birthday of their Sun-god.

For nearly a thousand years the celebration of Christmas by Christians was a most solemn day, and all manifestations of joy and happiness were rigorously prohibited. Gibbon in his monumental work on the Roman Empire says : "The Roman Christians, ignorant of the real date of his (Christ's) birth, fixed the solemn festival of the 25th day of December or Winter Solstice, when the pagans annually celebrated the birth of Sol."(Vol. II : 383).

There was a time in the third century when Mithraism was the strongest rival of Christianity for the allegiance of the Roman world. As Christianity gained ascendancy over its rival, it became a custom to use the old festival day for the celebration of the birth of Christ. In this way the church undertook to Christianize a celebration deeply rooted in Roman culture.

"Christmas", defines the Standard dictionary, "is celebrated on December 25 as the birthday of Christ." It means Christ may not have been born on this day. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Christmas customs are an evolution from times that long antedate the Christian period--- a descent from seasonal, pagan, religious and national practices, hedged about with legend and tradition" (15th edition, article, "Christmas").

The *Encyclopedia America*, 1944 edition, further explains : "It was, according to many authorities, not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian church, as the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than their birth.... A feast was established in memory of this event [Christ's birth] in the fourth century. In the fifth century the Western Church ordered it to be celebrated forever on the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol [the sun], as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed." So Christmas spells paganism !

□

# ***LET'S PUT CHRIST BACK INTO CHRISTMAS***

Santa Claus is perhaps the most popular figure with children, even more popular than Jesus Christ ! And often we merge the two into one. Take Jesus out of Christmas and it will survive but without Santa, Christmas festivities will collapse. Though Christmas is intended to celebrate Christ's birthday but someone else steals the limelight !

Santa Claus seems to have usurped Jesus' place in the hearts of most children. He becomes the centre of the sacred season which is a matter of little discomfort to many Christian parents. Some therefore, ironically call him the fourth member of the Trinity.

The eagerly waiting children on Christmas eve think that Jesus is the same as Santa. The parents tell them "Santa is a Christmas-time story but Jesus is real." A wryly amusing joke in *Purity* say, a lady took her small son to see a department store Santa Claus. "And what would you like for Christmas ?" asked the jolly old saint. The child stared at him, horrified. "Good grief !" he wailed. "Didn't you get my letter ?" (December 1992 : 10)

Children feel cheated on hearing the Santa fable which they take for real. And in their frustration start saying : "If Santa Claus be a myth then Jesus Christ is no big deal. We ought to look into his matter too !"

## **Legends of St. Nicholas**

For sixteen centuries, the beloved St. Nicholas has been the inspiration for many legends and for varying interpretations of existing ones. Every Christmas-eve a fat old saint with red-ropes trimmed with fur and white-silvery beard riding on a sledge on the night sky comes to give gifts to the children. Children hang their stockings and see it filled with small gifts of toys and candles the next morning. It is said that Santa Claus slips the gifts at night through the chimney.

Washington Irving, the American writer, published a comic guide in 1809, in which, he described Santa Claus as coming down through chimneys smoking a pipe. So the Americans accepted Santa Claus as part of the Christmas festivities. Santa and turkey, borrowed from the November Thanks giving, were thus added to the Christmas celebrations.

Santa Claus is the corruption of the name St. Nicholas who did exist in the 4th century and was a Bishop of Myra in the Asia Minor. He was the patron saint of the children and became known for his unexpected giving of gifts especially to the poor and worthy.

A legend says that a poor peasant was unable to marry his three daughters off. Hearing this St. Nicholas at the mid of the night dropped three bags of gold through his chimney. So he was frequently depicted as carrying these three bags of gold. And as the patron saint of merchants, this symbol eventually became the symbol of the pawnbroker--- a merchant who would give you assistance and protection when you needed help.

In the middle ages when all drama was forbidden except for the three, the miracle plays, about the lives of the saints and their miracles; the mystery plays, enacting the stories of the Bible and the morality plays, about Christian doctrines and principles, children loved to perform miracle plays about their favorite St. Nicholas. They would march through the streets led by St. Nicholas on his horse, wearing his red bishop's robes and his mitre as he dispensed coins, candy, and trinkets to children.

Santa was the beloved saint of the people particularly in Holland, and was given the nickname of Santa Claus; Claus meaning Nicholas in Dutch and Santa being the Latin version of Saint.

The mythology says that Odin or the German god of warriors Wotan later came to be known as St. Nicholas or Santa Claus when his aggressive nature and a shaggy-image mellowed and gave way to his truly benevolent nature. From the war-god he came to be known as the god of wisdom. Stories also link

him to Jesus Christ through his suffering, dying and resurrecting for the quest of knowledge. Odin was crucified on a tree for nine long days. At the end someone kills him with a spear. This suffering and death brought him back to life again. He became immortal through his resurrection. Every year he visits the houses and his visit gave birth to the Halloween tradition.

## **Claus Vs Christ**

The church canonised Nicholas as a Saint and decreed December 6 as his Feast Day. However, he always had two festival days, one on May 9th, the day of the Thargelia of Apollo, and December 6th. When the Eastern and Western Churches splitted, the Eastern church retained May 9th while the Western church accepted December 6th. Every year on December 6 which commemorates St.Nicholas' death, Odin on his horse visits all the houses on an inspection tour and rewards the children who had been good throughout the year. Even till today children in Holland, France and Spain would keep their shoes outside filled with hay for the horse of Odin. And the next day, the fodder disappeared and there were gifts inside; the fodder believed to be eaten by the horse and gifts filled by Odin.

In Italy, "Befana" the female representative of Santa Claus used to give the gifts. In Russia, "Grand father Frost" would leave gifts for children and elders alike. Santa Claus is also considered the Scandinavian Wotan driving through the night sky with gifts for those who honour him at Yuletide. In Germany, when a child is born the other children are given gifts to prevent them from being jealous of the infant. This belief continued. So when Jesus was born, all the children received gifts from "Father Christmas."

The mythological blending helped create a patron saint of the children and the poor from a savage war-god Odin. However, the modern version of Santa Claus comes from the poem "The Night Before Christmas", written by Dr. Clement Moore in 1823. Washington Irving and Charles Dickens also popularized Santa Claus through their novels. The modern Santa has been tremendously remodelled by the Americans and has very little to do with his older counterpart.

However, when everybody is Santa, the pressure to live up to some magical creature with limitless generosity and limitless resources is off. Children sense the material limitations of their own family. There are no more wonderings why Santa treated Sam better than Gracy. Sam's family has a larger income, a bigger house, and these are the facts of life.

Children become disillusioned and bitter. But parents can lead the children away from the Santa deception. They can retain the best and remove the worst of Santa Claus. By telling their children that Santa is a tradition--- a tradition symbolizing the spirit of selfless giving, we can wipe away the threat and false hopes relating to Santa Claus and still retain the tradition.

Though the fairy tale of Santa Claus can not be abolished, nor does it seem necessary because children love fairy tales and Santa Claus is the most charming one of all but parents, unduly overstress the Santa Claus figure. But replacing Santa Claus, the giver of joy with the crucified Christ can take the joy out of the Yuletide celebration. Santa is a nice story just for Christmas time, but Jesus is real for all time.

□

# ***THE RELICS OF A PAGAN PAST***

Many Christian customs including the celebration of Christmas in midwinter have an unmistakable pre-Christmas origin. Practically all the Christmas-tide customs are relics of a pagan past. When Christmas is around, the first thing we see are well-lit Christmas trees decorated and colourfully designed. And the Christmas tree, mistletoe, holly, yule-log and even Santa Claus have their fascinating roots in the ancient Oriental and Egyptian pagan era. The Christmas celebration has a pagan ancestry. So the rituals attached to it can never be Christian in origin.

A legend says that when Martin Luther was wandering in the forest on a Christmas eve he was so much impressed on seeing the marvel of the twinkling stars on sky that immediately after returning home, he lit up candles and decorated the fir tree with shiny tinsel to remind the world that when he was born the sky welcomed Christ with glittering stars.

Decorating Christmas tree and hanging presents was introduced at Strasbourg in as late as 1605 and in England and France in 1840. It gained popularity during the reign of Queen Victoria. But the origin of the Christmas tree dates back to the ancient Babylonian myth and the pagan cultures of the East.

In the Mediterranean, the cybelene cult took a procession to the cybelene temple carrying god Attis on the sacred pine tree where Attis has been crucified. Attis is a Sun-God who was born of a virgin, crucified, and then resurrected each spring. The Romans decorated the tree and hung toys. They also placed twelve candles to mark the zodiac signs and placed the image of the sun god at the top.

In the sixteenth century, people decorated the fir tree hung with apples with the “star of Bethlehem” at the top of the tree and the Christmas crib and lights. The tree was called the Paradise tree and seen as the “Tree of life,” symbolizing the Garden of Eden.

## **The Golden Bough**

Pope Saint Gregory I in a letter to St. Augustine of Canterbury advised him to permit and encourage harmless popular customs like decorating homes and churches with plants and evergreens which could be given a Christian interpretation. For example, evergreens were traditionally used for Christmas decorations for two simple reasons they were the only ones available in winter and since ancient times, pagans held the belief that evergreens have been symbolic of eternal life.

Tree-worshipping was valued as much for its ecological importance as for its symbolic significance. The earliest evidence of tree worshipping is recorded in India from where it spreaded to different cultures of the Mediterranean and even to the Jews.

The pagans believed that the vertical shape of the tree symbolized the centre-of-the-world phenomenon also called as the world-axis. Moreover, the underground roots and the branches above reconciled the three worlds in one--- the heaven, the earth and the underground--- the roots being the underground world, the trunk as earth and the branches as the heaven.

However, a new dimension was added to all these symbolisms which attracted the Christian world to tree-worship and later to absorb it as one of the integral parts of their culture. Since the Cross where Christ was crucified was believed to be sacred, the tree out of which the Cross was made, was sacred too. Now the vertical arm of the Cross corresponded to the vertical symbolism of the tree as centre-of-the-world or the world axis and the Cross of Redemption was believed to be the centre-of-the world making crucifixion the central theme of the cosmos.

Worshipping oak tree was considered pious among the Indo-European tribes. In Greece oak was believed to be sacred as the god Zeus and in Italy it was offered to Jupiter. The Druids among the Celts of Gaul were helpless without oak for performing rituals. In fact “Druids” means “oak men”.

So connections can be made between oak tree, yule-log and the mistletoe. The mistletoe which grew on an oak tree was thus considered sacred because the Druids believed that whatever grow on an oak was chosen by God and sent from heaven. It was believed to induce fertility and it was the remedy for all poisons. Mistletoe was also seen as a life protecting shield for the oak because when every tree goes leafless in winter even the oak, mistletoe is all green.

Mistletoe was a miraculous plant, believed the pagans, and it had healing powers. The mistletoe branch symbolized the pagan god, Tammuz, the Saviour. This celestial plant symbolized the reconciliation of the divine with man and thought to bring together the heaven and earth, though the tree is rooted in an earthly tree it doesn't touch the ground. The mistletoe was associated with fire, may be because it turns yellow when it withers and thus is known as “The Golden Bough”.

The Romans accepted the mistletoe as the symbol of peace and enemies declared truce under it. Holy mistletoe and ivy were considered the symbols of fertility. After many years of struggle, the mistletoe was ceremoniously carried into the church and the heathen plant was pardoned and accepted in the church at the higher altar. The mistletoe gained a new religious significance in Christmas :

*The mistletoe bough at our Christmas board  
Shall hang, to the honor of Christ the Lord:  
For He is the evergreen tree of Life...*

## **The Winter Solstice**

In a Norse legend, the kissing under the mistletoe is related to the story of the death of Balder, the sun-god and his resurrection after three days. As Balder had a forewarning of death, his mother Frigga prayed to every element of nature not to harm him but left the mistletoe. The evil-god Loki took this opportunity and gave an arrow made of mistletoe to the winter-god. The blind winter-god shot the arrow at Balder who immediately ceased to shine. After three days he revived. At this Frigga out of utter joy acknowledged and bowed the mistletoe and kissed everyone who went by it. From this comes the custom of kissing under the mistletoe and has been a part of the Christmas. This custom was also prevalent in the Roman Saturnalia and the Babylonian rite of Mylitta.

Holly is again a pagan plant but since it has some relevance with the life of Christ it is holy even for the Christians. One legend says that Christ's crown of thorns was made of holly leaves and the red-berries were the drops of blood.

Oak was also used for yule-log. Yule-log was introduced by the Germanic tribes as part of the Winter Solstice. Thor, the god of thunder, was annually greeted with the feast of Jul, where a great fire was kindled. From “Jul” comes the present-day “Yule”, “Yuletide” and “Yule-log”. A trunk of the tree especially of an oak or pine tree was selected as the Yule-log. As oak was sacred for the Druids so was pine for the Germans. All the customs were carried on with the pine. The pine trunk was used as the Yule-log on the winter solstice and pine branches were decorated with glittering stars and offerings to the God.

Yule-log was often known as Christbund or Christklotz among the Christians. And many superstitions were associated with it. For example, the people believed that the Yule-log helped cows to calve and there would be as many chickens as there are sparks flying from the burning log. Pieces of the burnt log was kept in the houses to protect them against fire and lightening.

The Yule-log was burnt to worship the sun to rekindle its light and fire, induce fertility and give life once again from its apparently dead position and expiring light. Later, this custom was carried on to the Christmas-eve celebration.

To our surprise, the early Christians were forbidden to imitate this pagan custom of decking houses with evergreen Christmas trees, but let's see what the Bible has to say about it : "Thus saith the Lord, learn not the way of heathen..... 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" (Jeremiah 10:6). God has clearly warned the people against following the heathen ways of decorating trees at home.

## **The Eucharist Feast of Aztecs**

The Christians borrowed another system from the Aztecs which became their custom. The Eucharist Feast comes from the Aztecs who had a similar peculiar New Year feast. They used to prepare a huge fruit cake with the blood of the children sacrificed, in the shape of a man representing the Sun-God.

Even lighting candles was slowly adapted as a Christian custom. Candle-lighting was customary at the Jewish feast of Hanukkah. But again long before this tradition, the candles were a part of the rituals of the pagan sun-worshippers. Sun and the cosmic bodies symbolized light and light means life and wisdom. So the pagans lighted candles to glorify their gods.

Christians light candles to express joy. From Ireland, it spreaded to America, where candles guided the priests to homes to conduct *Mass*, at the time of religious suppression. In Norway huge candles were lighted and guarded continuously to prevent it from dying out on Christmas eve for it was considered an ill-omen if the fire goes out.

It is said that when Christ was born the angels came down to herald the news and sang the first carol in his praise : "Glory to God and peace to men of goodwill." And from this comes the tradition of singing carols. Carols are songs of praise and joy which sings of the Nativity and all about it. Carols were first introduced in the 13th century by St. Francis of Assisi only to drive away the dullness and dinginess of the churches prevalent then. And the Miracle plays in the middle ages helped diffuse these carols, neols and pastorali.

Carols were sung as secular songs. They were later converted into Christmas carols being sung in the churches and the credit goes to the Franciscans. After the reformation carols were a lost tradition till its revival in the 19th century. The Calvinists discouraged carols and substituted metrical Psalms instead and the Puritans suppressed carols altogether.

Sending Christmas cards, similarly, has a long tradition but it was popularized through the novels of Charles Dickens in the 19th century. Christmas cards were commercialized especially after the publication of Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol* in 1843. Traditionally Christmas cards have wintry landscapes depicting snowfalls. These cards have been so widely accepted that even in countries like Australia, Africa and South America where December is the warmest month of the year the notion of a cold, snowy, wintry Christmas is still prevalent. Christmas cards were sent as an expression of peace and goodwill. Slowly, this card culture grew so popular that people from all religions used it as a token of love and to renew old acquaintances.

By what authorities do the Christians claim Christmas to be their festival. By all means, let Christians celebrate Christmas in any way they like. But they have no monopoly of the festive season because every Christmas custom has a pagan past. The mistletoe was the sacred plant of the Druids. The burning of Yule-log was practised by the Teutonics and the sacred oak tree revered by the worshippers of the Norse god Odin was the predecessor of the Christmas tree.

□

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnold, Gipson. "The Pagan Origins of Christmas," *Atheist Network Journal*, December 1993.
- Armstrong, Herbert W. *The Plain Truth About Christmas*. Pasadena: Worldwide Church of God, 1974.
- Arthus, J.K. "A Century of Christmas Cards," *American Home*, December 1946.
- Barnett, J. H. *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture*. New York, 1954
- Benet, S. *Song, Dance and Customs of Peasant Poland*. New York, nd.
- Crippen, T.G. *Christmas and Christmas Lore*, London, 1923.
- Curtis, G.W. "Christmas," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 68 (October 13, 1883).
- Campbell, R.J. *The Story of Christmas*, New York, 1934.
- Celano, T. de. *Sancti Francisci Assisensis Vita et Miracula*. Critical edition, revised by P.E. d'Alencon. Rome, 1906. (Quotations from this, Latin, edition translated by Weiser)
- Condon, R.J. *Our Pagan Christmas*. 1984 rpt. London : National Secular Society, 1974.
- Declaration of Many Thousands of the City of Canterbury*. The Broadsheet, London, 1648 (British Museum).
- Doran, N. "The Ups and Downs of Christmas," in *The National Magazine*. London, December 1857.
- Dawson, W.P. *Christmas: Its Origins and Associations*. London, 1902.
- Flynn, Thomas. *The Trouble with Christmas*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1993.
- Flying Eagle Gasette*. London, December 25, 1652.
- Frazer, J.G. *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York, 1923.
- Grueber, H.A. *Myths of Northern Lands*. vol I. New York, 1895.
- Kellner, K.A.H. *Heortology: A History of the Christian Festivals from Their Origin to the Present Day*. London, 1908.
- Lamb, M.J. "Christmas Season in Dutch New York," in *Magazine of American History*, 10 (December 1883); 471.
- Marchant, A. A. "Christmas in Brazil," *Bulletin Pan-American Union*. Washington (December 1936).
- Radford, E and M.A. Radford. *Encyclopedia of Superstitions*. New York, 1949.
- Weiser, Francis X. *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1952.
- Religious Customs in the Family*. College Ville, Minn., 1956.

□