

“Why Christmas?”

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I love Christmas! I don't consider myself Christian, but I love Christmas just the same. I love secretly shopping for loved ones who will be surprised by what little nuggets of fun and beauty I have found for them; I even love wrapping those gifts so they look merry and joyful placed under a tree with lights aglow on it; I love the lights on trees – ours has seven strands of 100 white lights per string; I love the smell of fresh pine filling the house and seemingly dissolving the boundary between outside and in; I love the carols, whose theology I don't always agree with, but whose larger message of love and hope and peace I can most certainly sing with full voice and full heart.

I love that during this season of merry-making there is more than the slightest chance that a stranger you greet in the store will return your warm “Hello” or “Happy Holidays!” It gives me hope that at some time in our human existence there may just come a moment when we can, for more than a few weeks annually, transcend our differences and see one another as equally human, equally worthy of love and liberty. I just love Christmas. But if recent news reports are to be believed I have no right, given that I am not Christian, to celebrate Christmas.

There has been quite a hullabaloo this year about wishing others a “Merry Christmas,” in response, I suspect to the White House sending “Happy Holidays!” messages in their annual cards instead of “Merry Christmas!” And Wal-Mart's declaration that their employees will wish each shopper a “Merry Christmas” instead of a “Happy Holidays.” I have heard much about the idea of putting Christ back in Christmas, which if you are Christian isn't a half bad idea. Unfortunately, resurrecting Christ in Christmas has nothing to do with wishing someone “Happy Holidays!” After all, and

despite popular belief, we are not a Christian nation, but a nation founded on religious freedom and the right for religious expression. Many Americans confess they believe in some form of Higher Power, but not all believe God to be synonymous with Jesus. So, given our religious diversity and our inability to often determine the religious beliefs of others simply by looking at them, it only makes sense if wanting to pass along a wish of good will at this time of year to offer a “Happy Holidays!”

But let’s return to putting Christ back in Christmas. I mean, here we are Unitarian Universalists celebrating Christmas. Why? If Christmas is meant to be all about Jesus and we are not all sure what to do with Jesus, then why do we celebrate? If within our tradition Jesus is a prophet, an important teacher, an exemplary human being and for some, even divine because all creation is divine, then how do we reconcile his Christ identity with his human? Can we put Christ in Christmas even if we are not all Christian? Yes.

For practicing Christians putting Christ back in Christmas, may be the reminder to oneself of Jesus’ sacrifice of his life for them. It might mean that they are to be grateful and humbled by his surrendering of himself for their sins, their wrongdoing. The season of Christmas is in honor of Jesus coming into the world, of God sending an emissary among humanity to put us right, to turn us toward the care of those less fortunate than we and to stir in us the fight for justice. For Christians, putting Christ in Christmas is not supposed to be about gift giving or politics, but about faith. A faith in the sacrifice of one man, the son of God, who came to cleanse the world of sin and heal the brokenness between God and humanity.

But not all Unitarian Universalists are Christian and many are not even theists, which means they do not believe in a divine entity. So why is it again that we celebrate Christmas? How is it that we can also put Christ in Christmas?

We need not claim Jesus as our savior to interpret the meaning of Christ for ourselves. In fact, that is what our liberal religious tradition calls us to do – to interpret and reinterpret religious understanding in a more broad and open manner. Christmas might not be the celebration of Jesus' birth for you, but that does not suggest you find no meaning in the story, no power in the images, no significance in its rituals.

Christ, literally means 'messiah,' an 'agent' of God, an 'anointed one'. An agent of God, someone who among people does the work of divine creation. This is a human Jesus, who comes to tell of a love and hope available to all people. It is the message of our humanist ancestors also. That for a better world to be, it must be for all people and that it will take our hands and our hearts to create it – that no external force will come and make things better, that we must take responsibility for easing the ills of the world ourselves.

Christ: an anointed one, one who is set apart for a special task, one who bears the mark of the divine; one who represents the incarnation of God, in love. The real Christmas story is not only about the hope and promise of a baby and new life, but the taking of human form by the Transcendent. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, the incarnation does not belong solely to Jesus, but to us all. Our liberal religious faith teaches us that every human being, every living creature and element of nature holds worth and value if not divinity. It means that the story of a child who comes to save humanity is our story too. For it is our calling, our duty, to exercise our best selves

through our deeds and our words, and by our doing so the realm of heaven will exist on earth.

But Christmas isn't just about God becoming human or humanity's divine essence or our ability to better the world; it is also about honoring the natural cycle of death and life, darkness and light. The messiah coming, the one who brings good news that even in the deepest darkness the light is returning; that life stirs deep within that which appears dead. We fill the darkness of winter with lights and song, waiting for the days to grow longer again, hoping that the darkness in our lives will come to an end as well. This is the assurance of the star in night sky; it is the promise of the turning earth.

Christmas is a celebration of a story, historic or mythic, that tells of the coming of hope and light and love into the world. This is how I see it: Christmas is the celebration of the idea of Christ, of the Divine residing within, the mark of returning light, the hope of salvation and something better yet to come. We need not be Christian to find Christ in Christmas, and we need not find Christ to know the power and the glory of Christmas. "We need only to seek joy and peace; offer warmth and kindness; and live with love. For if we do not the season has passed us by without our even knowing it."¹

No one person can claim the sole truth of Christmas. No other can determine for you what meaning you make of a star and a child, trees and lights, gifts and songs. The hard work of putting Christ in Christmas is for each of us to make sense of ourselves, if at all. So, why Christmas? Because, Christmas belongs to us, if we wish it to.

¹ Roger Greeley from *Celebrating Christmas* (adapted)