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## **A Brief History of Christmas**

(1341 words)

Many Americans don't celebrate Christmas at all, but the holiday is arguably the biggest one in the American calendar. Do you wonder about the origins of the American Christmas tradition? Here's my summary of the History Channel's Christmas Unwrapped: The History of Christmas. Part of our American Christmas tradition is for people to use the phrase "the true meaning of Christmas." What that usually refers to is that during the season of Jesus' feast day it's appropriate to be reverent towards God and extra loving towards each other. But I point out that the holiday has more going on than that. The History Channel's program is extremely relevant to the annual discussion of the "true meaning of Christmas" and I encourage you to watch it if you can. But if you don't catch it on TV, here's an outline. The following historical facts are from the History Channel, but the opinionated statements are mine.

### **Christmas Started Without Jesus**

It turns out that early Europeans observed a winter solstice celebration centuries before Jesus was born. In Norse country it was called Yule and it lasted for as long as the huge Yule log took to burn, which was about twelve days. In preparation for the cold, dark season people would kill almost all their livestock since they couldn't feed them through the winter. As the days got shorter, people ate as much of this meat as possible, and the feasting and revelry became the annual Yule celebration.

In Rome, the winter solstice marked the period known as Saturnalia. During this festival people drank, had wild parties and generally overturned the normal social order. While this was going on, the upper classes of Rome worshipped Mithras, the sun god, whose feast day was December 25th and who was believed to have been born in a field and worshipped by shepherds, which are the same details as in the story of the baby Jesus.

Early Christians didn't celebrate Jesus' birth, focusing on his resurrection, but by the fourth century the new Roman Catholic Church needed to establish the holiness of that birth, so it began to put together a story. It knew it would never manage to outlaw the pagan traditions already in place, so it adopted them, turned them in to the story of how Jesus entered the world, and that's how December 25th became Jesus' feast day.

### **It Had More Sex Than Saints**

In England during the middle ages, religious people went to church on December 25th for "Christ's mass," but for most people it was just a regular day. But among those who did celebrate, they made it a festival of drinking and sex that would look more to us like Mardi Gras or New Year's Eve. It was a saturnalian free-for-all with little connection to Jesus except in name.

In fact, December 25th got so out-of-control that by the 17th century the Puritans had had enough of it. Those devout people actually tried to outlaw Christmas in both England and the English colonies in America. They saw Christmas as a disgusting, sinful tradition that had to be stopped. Their efforts didn't work, but the holiday was greatly minimized for a long time, so much so that the U.S. Congress stayed in session on all Christmas Days until the 1840's.

### **America Needed a Tradition**

When the United States was established in 1776, the early Americans wanted to get rid of all things English, including Christmas. But over time they also needed new culturally shared holidays so eventually, Americans began to invent their own version of Christmas.

One new aspect of the American Christmas was how it addressed the growing class divide of the industrial U.S. In the early 1800's the holiday became quite dangerous as working class people turned it into a time of violent payback for the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. In response to growing economic imbalances, writers like Washington Irving and Charles Dickens created works of fiction with a spirit of generosity and the idea of sharing wealth with the poor. These popular stories established giving as a central Christmas theme and gave the upper classes guidance about their responsibility to the poor. Christmas gave people a chance to correct some of the socioeconomic unfairness of the newly industrialized America.

The view of the family was also changing. Traditionally, the American family was supposed to discipline children and turn them into little laborers that worked long hours (it's hard to imagine now, but it's true). Then things changed and by the end of the 19th century the family became more of a nurturing body that protected children. Christmas, with its emphasis on giving gifts, allowed people to pour attention on children without seeming to spoil them and the holiday became a celebration of children, honoring them with presents.

### **Why Shopping Is Central**

The creation of the American version of Santa Claus in the mid-1800's did a few things: it reinforced the idea that Christmas distributes wealth, it solidified the focus on children and it removed gift-buying from the marketplace and placed it in the context of family. Shopping became an expression of love and affection. This diminished the obvious commercialism of gift-buying, but it required parents to fulfill their children's expectations. Thus did shopping become the central activity of the Christmas season, and it's such a huge part of the American Christmas that there are unspoken rules about gift-giving in the workplace, between family members, and at what point in a relationship you're supposed to exchange Christmas presents. If you just started dating on December 2nd, do you exchange gifts on the 25th? If so, how expensive should the gifts be? Et cetera!

### **But Where Was God?**

By the late 1800's Christmas was just about everywhere in the U.S, except in church. In fact, the author of 'Twas the Night Before Christmas was an Episcopalian minister who initially stayed anonymous because the poem wasn't religious; after all, it didn't mention Jesus once. The celebration of Jesus' birth was an established part of the American Catholic tradition, but for quite a while American Protestant churches pretty much ignored it. For decades they stayed closed on December 25th until their parishioners made it clear that they wanted services on that day.

### **Does Christmas Even Need Jesus?**

By the 1920's the sex and revelry were gone from Christmas, and by the 1950's it was all about kids and presents. While it still had a religious focus, it's simply not true that Jesus' birth was the original reason we have Christmas. December 25th was part of a pagan festival that changed into a holiday of gift-giving that American churches didn't want anything to do with until almost the 20th century. There was no golden age during which most people observed Christmas primarily as a holy day. Christmas is as much about the big decorated tree as it is about the manger.

I think if Christmas were really just about Jesus, the holiday wouldn't occupy public space as it does. Strictly religious holy days tend to be observed only by those who practice that faith. The American grand-scale yuletide traditions -- big decorations, big eating, big shopping -- support the religious significance of the day, but they don't have much to do with it.

### **Pick Your Own True Meaning**

So, the true meanings of Christmas include Jesus and God, but here was never a time during which the majority of Americans treated December 25th as a focused holy day. Although the American Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, it's as much about children, shopping and presents, an interesting outcome for a holiday with a rich pagan history of drinking, overeating and sex.

So, if you celebrate Christmas, celebrate however you choose. For some it is about the baby Jesus, but for others it's just a good reason to indulge in eating, drinking, extra shopping, etc. I know when I tell someone "Merry Christmas," it has nothing to do with any church. I'm just wishing them a good season of fun.