

The Origin of Christmas Traditions and Practices

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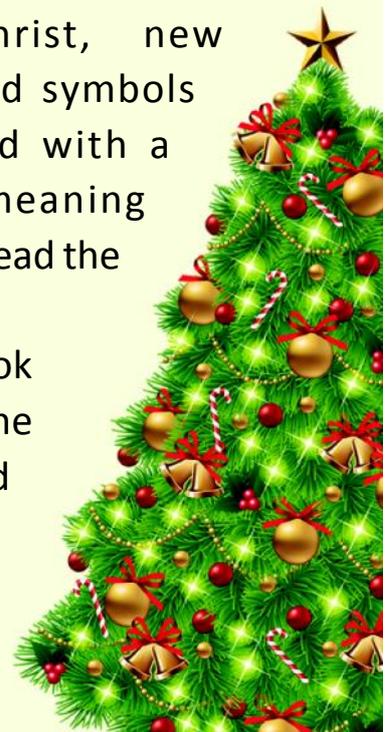
Christmas is the time for rejoicing, decorating the houses with greenery, wreaths and lights. As a holy day, Christmas is an amalgamation of traditions from a number of cultures and countries. The Christmas tree, the Christmas cards, Santa Claus, the mistletoe, the Yule logs, bells and carols originated from different countries, but now, they have become an integral part of Christmas celebrations.

No one is certain of the date of Christ's birth. The idea to celebrate the Nativity on December 25th was suggested by the church fathers in 4th century AD to counter the effect of festivities of other religions which existed at that time. On this day, the Romans celebrated *Natalis Solis Invicti*—the birthday of the

Invincible Sun God, called Mithra. The common folk in Rome enjoyed this festival which lasted a number of days. The church needed a different reason to celebrate this day. So, it was declared as the day of Christ's birth.

While many of the traditions of Christ date back to centuries before Christ, new cultures and symbols were added with a Christian meaning and thus spread the faith.

Let us look at some of the symbols and practices, their origin and significance.





The Star

It is universally believed that certain movements of the stars are the harbinger of great events. In Christian tradition, the star is associated with the Nativity (birth of Christ.) It refers to the star of the East that led the wise men to Bethlehem. Stars of various sizes have long been an integral part of Christmas, which are put on the decked trees.

Light

Light has always been associated with knowledge, truth and enlightenment. One of the prayers in the *Rig Veda* states *Tamasoma Jyotir Gamaya*, meaning 'From darkness lead me to light'. The light during Christmas represents Jesus—the light of the world. Lights are put on the trees to represent the

glory and beauty of the stars of Bethlehem, on the night Jesus was born.

Christmas Trees

The custom of the Christmas tree (undecorated) is believed to have started in Germany in early 700 AD. St. Bonice, a monk, who was preaching to the German Druids, wanted to prove that the oak tree is not so sacred or inviolable as they believed. When he felled an oak tree, it crushed all the shrubs underneath except a small fir sapling. He considered this a miracle and called it the 'Tree of Christ Child'. Subsequently, fir saplings formed part of Christmas celebrations.

Martin Luther, a German Protestant reformer, was the first to add lights to the trees, seeing the bright stars in the sky twinkling among the fir trees. He wanted to recapture this scene in his home. So, he erected a Christmas tree and decorated it with candles.

By 1700, the Christmas tree became an established tradition and soon spread to other parts of Europe, and later to America.

The Crowning Wreath

A wreath of laurel (a Mediterranean evergreen tree) was conferred as a mark of honour in

ancient times on poets, heroes and victors of athletic contests. It symbolises Christ's victory over death and forces of darkness.

Mistletoe

Two centuries before Christ, the Druids—a learned class and priests among the Celts — gathered mistletoe and burnt it as a sacrifice to their gods. Sprigs of these yellow green plants with its waxy leaves were hung in homes to ensure fortune and family harmony. The Druids called this plant, in their language, as 'All Heal'. The Scandinavians considered this plant as a symbol of hope, harmony and peace, and called it 'Mistilteinn'. During the Roman feasts they used the boughs and sprigs of mistletoe to make garlands for their gods. The church forbade the use of mistletoe since it was associated with pagan culture, and as a substitute suggested holly, which has glossy evergreen leaves. However, later mistletoe found a place in Christmas decorations.

Poinsettia

The use of poinsettia as a Christmas flower is of recent origin. The Mexicans called it 'the flower of the Blessed night', due to its resemblance to the star of



Bethlehem. In 1828, an American diplomat, Dr. Joel Poinsettia, brought this flower to the US, which was named after him. Soon it established its association with Christmas because of its flaming colour.

Christmas Cards

In 1843, Sir Henry Cole, a prominent Minister of his time, commissioned a painter called, Horsley, to design an impressive card for Christmas, with the inscription, "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year". By 1875, it became popular in America, printed by a Boston lithographer, Louis Prang. Exchanging cards became popular as a way to greet others during Christmas and New Year.

Presents and Pinatas

Giving presents is an old custom. In earlier days, Christmas presents were put in brown paper bags. Now they are beautifully packed and kept under the Xmas tree.

The piñata is a curious, playful container of sweets, which originated from Mexico. It is usually a clay jar filled with sweets and nuts. The children are blindfolded and given a stick to beat the piñata hung above. When the lucky one smashes the jar, the contents fall out for every one to grab and enjoy. Now piñatas are made of cardboards.

Santa Claus

The name Santa Claus owes its origin to an age-old story about a Christian saint called St. Nicholas. This name was gradually changed to Santa Claus, probably an alteration of the Dutch name for Father Christmas—Sinter Klaus. Originally, Santa Claus was depicted as a stern patriarch in Bishop's attire. A new look for Santa Claus emerged by the 19th



century. Now he is represented as a jolly roly-poly person in red suit and cap, who brings gifts to children on Christmas Eve. With this transformation he was given a pipe and a reindeer.

Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer

In 1939, the Montgomery Ward Department stores wanted to do something novel for its Santa Claus to distribute presents. An advertising copy writer, Robert May, conceived the idea of a shiny-nosed reindeer as Santa's helper. The poem 'Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer' was set to music in 1942. Rudolph became a famous TV star and a familiar Christmas image in most European countries.

Christmas is not a matter of origin, season or date. It is a state of mind. Christmas is the time for enjoyment, friendship, prayers and for thanksgiving to God. Let the true spirit of Christmas prevail all through the year, as this poem says:

*So remember, while December
brings the only Christmas day,
In the year there is Christmas,
in the things you do and say.
Wouldn't life be worth living,
wouldn't dreams be coming true,
If we kept the Christmas spirit all
the year through.*