

CHRISTMAS UNWRAPPED

The History of Christmas

1. December 25th

It is a story everyone knows. After a rude refusal by a local innkeeper, Mary and Joseph bedded down in a barn in Bethlehem. The next day, Mary gave birth to a son, the Son of God. Those are the biblical origins of Christmas. But centuries before Jesus walked the earth, early Europeans were celebrating light and birth in the darkest days of winter. In the Norse country this winter celebration was known as Yule. Around December 21st, the winter solstice, fathers and sons would drag home the biggest log they could find and set it on fire. The Yule log warmed, but it also looked ahead. Each spark was said to represent a pig or calf to be born in the spring. Also dragged inside were evergreens, the one plant that could make it through a Norse winter. Evergreens proved that life persisted in this dark time. "There is a natural attraction to that which lives through the winter when one is struggling to survive through the winter. The evergreen is that part of nature that seems impervious to the coming of winter and the diminishing of the sun and so it's an absolutely natural symbol, one which I think you react to almost without thinking about."¹ For as long as the Yule log burned, about 12 days, feasting and revelry reigned supreme. In fact this was one of the few times that meat was abundant, since cattle had just been slaughtered for the long winter. "There is a necessity to kill most of the cattle, because you can't keep them alive over the winter when there is nothing to feed them on. You keep a few alive for breeding. But there is an opportunity for a great blowout, for a great feast, a time to party."² The party raged inside in defiance of winter's deadly howl. "There is a spooky feel about the northern Yule tide festivals. You may be alright there in the halls with your blazing fires, but outside there are demons, there are spirits."³ In Germany, the pagan god Odin lent his name to this mid-winter holiday. Early Germans were terrified of Odin, whose nocturnal flights decided who would prosper or perish in the coming year. Later, we'd see another Christmas sky-rider, Santa Clause. But for now, staying inside became the smartest choice in this frightening time of the year.

A thousand miles away in Rome, winter was less harrowing, but the December festivals were just as elaborate. One week before the winter solstice, Romans began celebrating Saturnalia, a month long orgy of food and drink. Named for the god Saturn, which meant plenty, Rome's established order was turned on its head during this wild delirious time. "The Saturnalia celebrations were certainly times of revelry, of turning the social order upside down, of having the master pretend to be the slave and the slave pretend to be the master, sort of a time out of time, in which one could celebrate a kind of disorder in the universe."⁴ One of the holidays important feasts was Juvenalia, which celebrated the children of Rome. "Although these early festivals are not necessarily about children particularly, but they are about fertility. Children did have their particular place. The indulgence of children of course is very much a part of our modern

¹ Rev. Forrest Church, Minister, All Souls Church, NYC

² A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England

³ A.W. Purdue

⁴ Elaine Pagels, Religion Dept., Princeton University

Christmas, and but it did have its place even in these ribald⁵ drunken festivals that the Romans had.”⁶ Among the upper classes in Rome, solstice celebrations were significantly more sober. Many influential Romans worshipped Mithra, the god of the unconquerable sun. To this small but powerful sect, the birthday of Mithra was the holiest day of the year. “December 25th was the winter solstice in that part of the world, and it was also understood to be the birthday of the sun god, Mithra. And Mithra was said to be born from a rock. Shepherds came to worship him as he was an infant god born out in that pastoral place in the fields, and many of those stories, of course, have come into Christian tradition.”⁷

While Romans were worshipping the sun god, a new religion was taking hold throughout the empire. At first, Christians didn’t celebrate the birth of Christ. His resurrection was the essential fact of the new religion. By the fourth century, however, the question of the holy birth became impossible to ignore. “There were questions within the church about how do we even imagine Jesus. Some people believe that Jesus was purely a spiritual emanation of God and others believed that Jesus must have actually appeared on earth, and so the decision to celebrate Jesus’ birth meant that Jesus was actually a human or a human form.”⁸ For Christians, the fact of his birth was settled, but the date remained a mystery. The Bible doesn’t mention exactly when Christ was born, but certain facts suggest it probably was not in December. “If you are going to sort through the ruins of the scriptures, Jesus was probably born in the spring. If the shepherds are out in the fields watching their flocks by night, we’re not talking about one of the cold spells at the heart of winter.”⁹ If pagan Rome was already celebrating the birth of Mithra on December 25th, it seemed natural to honor the birth of the Christ-Child at the same time. By the fourth century, the church made it official. December 25th was declared ‘The Feast Day Of The Nativity.’ “But of course it’s a very short step from the feast day of the risen sun, s-u-n, to the feast day of the risen son, s-o-n, so in a sense, it’s a very good choice and the symbolism is there because the feast day of the unconquered sun was about fertility, about birth, and so obviously is the Christian Christmas.”¹⁰ The church knew it could not outlaw the pagan traditions of Christmas, so it set out to adopt them. The evergreens, traditionally brought inside, were soon decorated with apples symbolizing the Garden of Eden. These apples would eventually become Christmas ornaments. And holly, a traditional mid-winter decoration, was recast to represent Christ’s crown of thorns. “People already had their own agenda for this season, and that agenda was not one that was really radically changed when the names got changed from non-Christian to Christian names. The church pretty much had a policy of live and let live. If people would call themselves Christians and do lip service to the birth of the savior, then let them do with it anything they want to do with it. But on the other hand, by assigning the nativity to that time of year, the church really gave up the opportunity to control the way that celebration took place.”¹¹ The tension between piety and revelry at

⁵ ribald: vulgar or indecent in speech, language, etc.; coarsely mocking, abusive, or irreverent; scurrilous

⁶ A.W. Purdue

⁷ Elaine Pagels

⁸ Penne L. Restad, Historian, University of Texas

⁹ Rev. Forrest Church

¹⁰ A.W. Purdue

¹¹ Stephen Nissenbaum, Historian, University of Massachusetts

Christmas would reach its logical and extreme conclusion in Puritan England when the holiday would be considered so unchristian it was done away with all-together.

2. God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

By the middle ages, Christianity had largely replaced the old pagan religions of Europe. On December 25th the faithful were called to gothic cathedrals like Notradam and Salisbury Cathedral in England for Christ's Mass, soon to be called Christmas. But out in the streets the holiday was still more raucous¹² than religions. "If you went to England around Christmas time, anytime before say 1800, you'd probably feel ill at ease; you wouldn't think it was Christmas at all. What would you think it was? Maybe Mardi Gras, maybe New Years Eve, maybe Halloween, because Christmas in old-time England was really a carnival."¹³ The houses of London were littered with brawling drunken villagers and couples engaged in the most unholy activities. And each Christmas a beggar, or student was temporarily put in charge, after being crowned the 'Lord of Misrule.' The rest of the peasantry also got their once a year chance to grab power from the ruling classes. "They would go around to the houses of the rich, they would bang on the doors and demand entry, and once they were let in, the lord of the manor had to give them the best stuff that he had, he had to give them his best food, he had to give them his best beer, his best of everything. But if he didn't, they would threaten or actually perform a trick. One surviving Christmas song says if you don't give us what we want, then down will come butler, bowl and all. Some historians think that it performed the role of a safety valve. You might say that a wealthy man could make up for an entire year of small or large injustices to the poor, by giving a generous Christmas handout just once in the year."¹⁴

The rules of Christmas would soon change however, as a wave of religious reform swept through England in the early seventeenth century. Led by Oliver Cromwell, the Puritans overthrew the King's forces in 1645 and vowed to rid England of all that was decadent. High on their list was English Christmas and in 1652 they outlawed it all-together. Shops were ordered to stay open. Churches were forced to stay closed. "The Puritans were always, I think, deeply attracted to those things that they were most opposed to. They had a fear they might have too good of a time. I don't mean to trivialize them, but there was a deep fear that if these things were legalized, they themselves might enjoy them and their souls would be lost."¹⁵ The Puritans may have said good reddsens to Christmas, but the people never really stopped celebrating it. The holiday merely went underground. If Christmas pie was illegal, it began to be known as mince pie instead, which was just as delicious. "The deeper need for Christmas in the human heart, the need for celebration, at a time of darkness; those needs made the battle against Christmas, it gave it a few temporary wins, but it couldn't possible secure a final victory."¹⁶ In 1656, the men of Canton, Canterbury passed a resolution saying that if they could not have their Christmas day they would have the king back on his throne. They soon got their wish. The monarchy was restored with Charles II, and Christmas was restored with him. It seemed the English could live without a king, but not without

¹² raucous: harsh; strident; grating or rowdy; disorderly

¹³ Stephen Nissenbaum

¹⁴ Stephen Nissenbaum

¹⁵ Rev. Forrest Church

¹⁶ Rev. Forrest Church

Christmas. "It has been argued that one reason for the restoration of the monarchy is because by restoring the monarchy you also restored Christmas sort of, restored the proper English Christmas with its rituals, its traditions, and its carousing. Christmas is brought back if you like by popular acclaim."¹⁷

The fight against Christmas may have been lost in England, but the Puritans had high hopes for the new colonies in America. In 1620, a small group of separatists came ashore at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Even more orthodox than their English cousins, these men and women hoped to rid themselves once and for all of the Christmas scourge. In 1659, Puritans in Boston followed their English brethren in outlawing Christmas. Anyone caught exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. Like in England, however, Christmas remained impossible to contain. The 1719 Boston almanac doesn't list a Christmas holiday, but it does recommend that in late December you not let your children and servants run too much abroad at night. "From almost the beginning in Massachusetts, there is evidence that some people practiced Christmas and that when they did so, it was in fact an opportunity to get drunk, and one of the most interesting little side-lights on this, is the finding of historical demographers that there was actually a bulge in conceptions, the conception of children that took place during Christmas."¹⁸ Not all the colonies had such trouble with Christmas. Captain John Smith, leader of the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, wrote that their first new world Christmas was kept with plenty of good oysters, wild fowl, and good bread. Jamestown settlers were also the first to drink eggnog as a Christmas drink. The 'nog' coming from the word 'grog,' which means any drink made with rum. After Independence however, all things English fell out of favor in America, Christmas included. In fact, on December 25, 1789, the United States Congress sat in session and continued to stay open on Christmas day for most of the next sixty-seven year. "At this same time there are people who are writing in their diaries that: 'isn't it too bad we don't have any holidays'. So after the Revolution, here is an entire nation that works hard, has forsaken many holidays, has given up many holidays, because they were holidays that were mandated by the crown, and it is time to start thinking about how to populate the calendar."¹⁹ As the nineteenth century dawned, Christmas would be one holiday that would pull the new nation together, but it wouldn't be the carnival Christmas of old England, nor would it be particularly religious. America would invent its very own Christmas and in the process reinvent it for the whole world.

3. O Tannenbaum

New York City, 1820, within the space of a generation New York had gone from a back-water port town to the center of American commerce. Great wealth came to a few during these years and moderate livings to the burgeoning middle class. But the industrial revolution had also created a class of the unemployed and unconnected, whose very existence threatened the cozy world of New York's middle rung. This was never more clear than at Christmas time. "Class conflict was emerging with the earliest stages of industrial capitalism, and so what had previously just had an edge of menace, a little bit of trick, but much more good will, much more treat, now changed and the menace became increasingly obvious, and increasingly serious. So that by the 1820s the

¹⁷ A.W. Purdue

¹⁸ Stephen Nissenbaum

¹⁹ Penne L. Restad

Christmas season in cities like New York was really a time of gang rioting, a really very very nasty scene, so nasty in fact that in the year 1828 the New York City Counsel, for the first time, instituted the professional police force for the city as a direct result of a particularly savage Christmas season riot the year before."²⁰ New York's upper class was worried, so worried, that a few of them set out to change the way the holiday was celebrated. Washington Irving was America's bestselling novelist and in 1819 he used his expertise to write Brace Bridge Hall: an enormously popular series of stories about Christmas at an imaginary English manor house. Here the classes mingled effortlessly, as squires welcomed friendly and grateful peasants into their homes. And in 1843, England's most popular writer, Charles Dickens, tackled the Christmas problem with A Christmas Carol. It was a bestseller in London and America and the lessons of the story struck a powerful cord on both sides of the Atlantic. "Christmas Carol, I think, showed the Victorians what could be the use and the meaning of Christmas in a society which was quite pleased with itself in a way, but which nevertheless had fears about inequality, about too much materialism, about perhaps just too rapid change."²¹ There have been countless treatments of the Christmas classic, some in print and some on screen. This television version is from 1958 but the themes are straight out of the nineteenth century. [Shows a little clip from the movie] "I think the character of Ebenezer Scrooge taught a very important lesson to middle class people. Because the Christmas season presented them with a real problem: what do we owe to the different people in our world? What do we owe to our families? What do we owe to our employees? What do we owe to the anonymous poor?"²² At first Ebenezer Scrooge refuses to face those problems, but after his visions of Christmas past, present, and future, Scrooge learns that family and charity cannot be ignored at Christmas time. "It really is a conversion story, I mean it really is about this hard-hearted man being reborn to Christmas observance. That conversion story is important for Victorians to be thinking about their own conversion to the holiday, because it is very much that they're being reconverted. So many of them had given up on the holiday, so now they have to come to terms with their own reconnection with that, and Scrooge is a way of doing that."²³ "There's this lovely story of Dickens going around America on one of his famous reading tours, and this American factory owner going to a reading of Christmas Carol, and on the way home saying to his wife, 'next year we shall close the factory on Christmas day.'²⁴

Nineteenth century American were discovering Christmas after a two-hundred year drought of Puritan disapproval, but the holiday would never had taken hold if society wasn't ready for it. One important shift was occurring right inside the family itself. "Before the nineteenth century, the family existed as what we might think of as an engine of discipline designed to train children to work hard. After 1820, 1830, the family was very quickly and perceptively becoming an agency that was designed to provide the emotional nursery for children so that they could grow up being sensitive little people, and who took a lot of pleasure in the family and in the world itself."²⁵ Christmas was

²⁰ Stephen Nissenbaum

²¹ A.W. Purdue

²² Stephen Nissenbaum

²³ Leigh Eric Schmidt, Religion Department, Princeton University

²⁴ A.W. Purdue

²⁵ Stephen Nissenbaum

tailor made for this transition. Now there was a holiday where attention could be lavished on children without seeming to spoil them. "The moment of Christmas where parents started to pay attention to their children, I've sometimes come to think of this as the invention of quality time within the family. Parents would discover the joy that they could take out of watching the joy in their children's faces when they gave their children presents"²⁶ Americans now knew why they were celebrating Christmas but they didn't know exactly how to go about it. The old pagan revelry was clearly inappropriate for a Victorian home, but some ancient traditions were perfect for reviving.

The Christmas tree has its roots in Germany where decorated evergreens had always been a part of the winter celebrations. But the tree might have stayed there if not for the royal marriage in 1840 of Victoria the Queen of England to her cousin Prince Albert of Germany. Albert brought his German ways to Windsor Palace including the annual Christmas tree. In 1848, the London Illustrated News published this engraving of the royal family standing by the first Christmas tree most English had ever seen. In just a few years, a decorated fern could be found in nearly every English home at Christmas. "Within a few years, if you look at Victorian diaries or letters, people are saying, 'we had a Christmas tree as is customary or we had a Christmas tree as we have always had' and of course they hadn't always had one at all. It is a custom which had started in the 1840s, but by the late 1850s people believed the Christmas tree was part of the English Christmas."²⁷ Americans embraced the Christmas tree just as quickly as the English had. In fact, its connection to the old world was one of its strongest selling points. "For a lot of Americans these are going to be new holiday traditions, not something their parents observe, especially in the case of the more austere Protestants. So there looking for reason for what they're doing and one of the most convenient reasons they can have, is they can say 'well this is the way it's done in Germany, or this is the way it's done in England."²⁸ All of a sudden, Christmas traditions were popping up everywhere. In 1828, Joel R. Poinsett, America's minister to Mexico, brought back a green and red plant that seemed perfect for the new holiday. And in 1843, the English firm of J.C. Hoarsely printed the first Christmas card. A newly efficient postal service in England and America helped make Christmas cards and overnight sensation. It seemed as though every vestige of the old bacchanalian²⁹ Christmas was gone, but even the Victorians couldn't clean up Christmas completely. "Victorians were particularly keen on mistletoe because of course you could actually kill a lady or a lady could kiss a man that normally, in the normal course of events, would not be allowed to kiss. So in a society which was fairly strict, one vestige of that licentious Christmas from earlier times is the sprig of mistletoe. No Victorian Christmas gathering was without it."³⁰

By mid-century, Christmas was everywhere in America, in the streets, in the homes, in the market-place. The one place you could not find Christmas was in church. Most Americans were protestant, and the Protestant Church had ignored Christmas for years. But Protestant Victorians longed for official religion on this sacred day. "What a number of them do initially is say 'well, if we can't find a Christmas service in our

²⁶ Stephen Nissenbaum

²⁷ A.W. Purdue

²⁸ Leigh Eric Schmidt

²⁹ bacchanalian: a festival in honor of Bacchus, or a drunken feast; orgy

³⁰ A.W. Purdue

Baptist church, or our Presbyterian church, let's go see what the Catholics are doing, or let's go see what the Episcopalians are doing.' And increasingly, that puts pressure on these later-day Puritans to have Christmas services because there is a way in which lay people begin to expect it."³¹ Church services, mistletoe, and Christmas trees. America's new holiday now seemed firmly in place, but Victorian America had one last contribution to the Christmas season. A jolly elf who shimmed down the chimney would soon personify Christmas for generations to come.

4. O! Saint Nick

We borrowed the Christmas tree from Germany and the Christmas card from England, but one Christmas icon was developed right here in America: Santa Clause. Long before Santa, however, there was Saint Nicholas: a Greek orthodox bishop who became one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages. On December 6th, Saint Nicholas Day, good children woke to gifts from the kindly saint. Bad children sulked away with nothing. In Holland, he was known as Sinterklaas, and when the Dutch came to this country they brought tales of their gift giving Nicholas with them. This quaint custom caught the imagination of Clement Clarke Moore, a well-healed Episcopal minister in New York City. In 1822, Moore wrote a poem for his children about a good natured saint who came down through the chimney on Christmas Eve. 'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in hope that Saint Nicholas would soon be there. Moore dreamed up dasher, dancer, and the rest of the reindeer along with Santa's entrance through the chimney. But at first, he was embarrassed by the poem. He worried it was too frivolous for a man of the church. "Clement Moore was a minister. Here a minister, who should be on the other side, is promoting a secular Christmas with reindeer and all the rest of it, but it was no mention in the poem of anything religious. In fact, that's why he didn't reveal who he was. In the beginning, he didn't reveal the authorship."³² Moore soon owned up to the poem when it became clear that every child in America was scanning the horizon for reindeer on Christmas Eve.

Less clear, was what exactly Santa Clause looked like. At first, Santa came in all shapes and sizes: a pagan sorcerer, a frightening Nome, even a drunkard on a turkey-driven sleigh. Then in 1863, Thomas Nast, a cartoonist for Harper's Weekly, settled the matter once and for all with his version of the Christmas saint. Nast's Santa was rounder and jollier than his austere Catholic cousin. He looked, in fact, like a man of his times, a man who would fit right in with the rotund³³ bewhiskered robber barons of the late nineteenth century. But Santa was a robber baron in reverse. "Instead of taking from the less fortunate, he gave to the less fortunate. He gave to people regardless of whether they'd done something or not, in other words, he gave to children. Instead of gathering together wealth, he gets rid of wealth and he does it yearly."³⁴

A captain of industry with a heart of gold. It's no wonder that by the 1840s Santa Clause was an irresistible image to America's retailers. Here was a guy that could sell anything at Christmas, but make it seem like you were not buying gifts at all. "Santa

³¹ Leigh Eric Schmidt

³² Alan Dundes, Folklore Dept. U.C. Berkeley

³³ rotund: round in shape; rounded or plump; fat

³⁴ Penne L. Restad

Clause provided a way for both children and parents to pretend that Christmas presents were not in the realm of the commercial market place, that Christmas presents existed in the realm of pure domestic affection. So Santa Clause played a very important role for both parents and children. He took presents out of the realm of commerce."³⁵ If the image of Santa could sell merchandise, retailers soon figured that a real life Santa would boast sales even further. Santa has been showing up in department stores since the mid-1800s and since then, nothing has loomed larger to a child at Christmas than this annual pilgrimage. "You want to talk to Santa Clause, where do you go? You go to the shopping mall. Now this is strange for a saint to be living pretty much full time in a department store. It doesn't bother Americans, because we are after all a capitalistic society. It makes perfect sense for us to have our national saint in a department store. That's commercial sense for us. Dollars and cents."³⁶ Author and humorist, Jean Shepherd immortalized this rite of passage in 'A Christmas Story' an autobiographical account of one boy's Christmas. "You know I had been thinking for weeks what I wanted for Christmas. I figured the best thing to do was to tell Santa Clause about that. And I looked up at that Santa Clause. And he had these big watery blue eyes and a huge beard and all that, and he's looking me right in the eye, and he was so impressive that my mind went blank. It's like if all of the sudden, you're sitting on the President's lap and he says, 'what would you like me to pass in legislation sonny.' I mean your mind is going to go blank, you can't remember any of this stuff. And so at that point Santa Clause looked at me and he says, 'Alright, huh, huh, huh, how about a football kid.' A football? I wanted a bb gun. So he pushed me off his lap and this elf grabbed me and threw me down a slide that went down into the snow and I laid there for a minute and I knew that I was not a fit person to talk to the great. Santa Clause was obviously a star."³⁷

5. Rudolph

A celebrity of this magnitude obviously needed a side-kick. In 1939, Robert May a copywriter at the Montgomery Ward department store dashed off a promotional children's book to lure Christmas shoppers into the store. May's story told of an ostracized reindeer with a big red nose. "This physical, shall I say disability, turns out to be an asset because it's a foggy Christmas Eve and this light on the nose enables poor old stumbling Santa Clause to get through. So you have this handicap, sort of child figure, helping the benighted³⁸ parental figure make Christmas possible."³⁹ Rudolph brought Christmas full circle. It was now the children who really made Christmas possible. Only they understood the meaning of this enchanted day. From Washington Irving to Montgomery Ward a battle for Christmas had been fought and won by kids.

6. I'll Be Home For Christmas

By the 1920s few vestiges of the carnival Christmas were left in America. One exception was this Christmas parade in New York City, where a glimpse of Santa Clause was worth the all day wait. But by the 1950s Christmas was strictly a family affair with

³⁵ Stephen Nissenbaum

³⁶ Alan Dundes

³⁷ Jean Shepherd, Humorist

³⁸ benighted: intellectually or morally ignorant; unenlightened or overtaken by darkness or night

³⁹ Alan Dundes

eggnog by the fire, bing on the hi-fi and a load of presents under the tree. "The joy of opening up gifts is one of the things that makes Christmas what it is. It's the mystery of all these packages and I think that's why we wrap them. It's exciting to have a package lying there with silver paper on it and you don't know what's in it. And you open it up, and there it is, it's something that is really great, that you really wanted."⁴⁰ But to give presents, you have to shop for them. And shopping has long been at the heart of the Christmas season. Critics say this yearly buying frenzy obscures the real reason for Christmas, to celebrate the birth of the Christ-Child. "It's celebrating the birth of Christ, the gift that God gave us, as much as the gifts we give our children on Christmas day. But she wants all the toys. Isn't that right?" (The little girl nods yes)⁴¹. "I think a lot of it is more commercialized than when I was younger. I remember going to church, and having family dinners, being more of an important aspect of it. It's difficult, because the children don't grow up realizing what the real meaning is."⁴²

"People say that Christ has been lost in Christmas. Implicit in that is the idea that Christ had ever been totally the center of Christmas. And as Christmas has been celebrated ever since it was instituted as The Feast Of The Nativity, there's always been other ritual, other ceremony, other activity associated with Christmas in addition to Christ."⁴³ At the All Souls Church in New York City, Christmas Eve services give the secular side of the holiday some stiff competition. "At All Souls, we sing carols, we bring in choir and orchestra who do great music from the Christmas tradition. Certainly today, most churches revel in the celebrations as completely as do the corporate malls. That's not a bad thing, it actually goes back to the sources of this kind of holiday where we recognize that people have deep needs at this time of year: to connect with that which is very important, but also to celebrate."⁴⁴ "It gets 50, 60% of the population going to one kind of Christmas religious service or another. So clearly, a lot of people haven't lost sight of the religious meaning, but what seems to be the concern here is that there's a struggle, a competition over what the real meaning is and a sense that the religious is not competing effectively with all these other competitors."⁴⁵ But perhaps Christmas in America is more a combination of the sacred and the secular and less a competition between the two. "I think that if people had Christmas with just Christ in it, it would not be a holiday that would come out into the streets the way that it does, because the trees, the carols, the shopping, all of that becomes the cultural material that holds the religion in place."⁴⁶

--- This cultural material is everywhere. Certain songs and movies have become as much a part of Christmas as the tree. "Movies such as 'It's a Wonderful Life', are hunger for them, our delight in them, reflects a deep potential goodness in the human soul. These are good movies. They have uh, people do good things and they get rewarded for them. Someone might say that this is a trivialization of Christmas. I think it probably is coming a little closer than many of the things we do to tapping the true Christmas spirit in

⁴⁰ Jean Shepherd

⁴¹ Random dad and little girl

⁴² Random woman

⁴³ Penne L. Restad

⁴⁴ Rev. Forrest Church

⁴⁵ Leigh Eric Schmidt

⁴⁶ Penne L. Restad

the broadest sense of that word.”⁴⁷ “Nowadays, kids watch new films and new TV shows and they will grow up thinking that was the way Christmas always used to be. We always reinvent, and every time we reinvent, we think that what we’re reinventing is something that has no beginning.”⁴⁸ You can reinvent Christmas or celebrate it the way your great grandparents did. The only thing you cannot do is ignore Christmas. To not catch a glimpse of a Christmas tree or hear a note of ‘jingle bells’ would be nearly impossible. And since 98% of American’s celebrate Christmas in some form, it looks like that won’t change for quite some time. “You see, it gives you a kind of sense of belonging. You are who you are because of the way you celebrate Christmas in part. I mean if you’re celebrating an Armenian Christmas, or an Italian Christmas, whatever it is, whatever your group is, if you celebrate Christmas the same way every year, there’s a sense of continuity here. And the new children are brought in and in fact are socialized, by saying, ‘well, now this is how we celebrate Christmas in our own family.’”⁴⁹ “Something touches Americans, somewhere down deep in his belly button about Christmas. You can’t really explain what it is about Christmas that he enjoys so much. He just knows that when all those red and green lights go up, you know on the street, and you see Santa Clauses walking around with their bells, there something happens to you. You enjoy it. Now you can be cynical all you want, but you still enjoy it.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Rev. Forrest Church

⁴⁸ Stephen Nissenbaum

⁴⁹ Alan Dundes

⁵⁰ Jean Shepherd