

# CHRISTMAS

## ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE

Eddy L Maertens

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As a child, I celebrated Christmas at my grandmother's in a festive yet devout atmosphere. The most special aspects were not the Christmas tree or the nativity scene with Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, surrounded by the ox and the donkey, but the reading of the well-known words from the Gospel of John: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14) and our silent procession to the midnight mass. They made that day a holy moment. These are moments deeply engraved in my memory<sup>1</sup>. It was all the more painful when members of an evangelical church community told me that Christmas was a pagan feast and that celebrating it was a grave sin. Was that really true?

What I experienced so intensely as a child invites deeper reflection today: what do we truly celebrate at Christmas and how do those old stories and traditions relate to our faith and our time? Starting from that question, I wish to begin this treatise.

When we place Christmas in its historical context, we see how the Christian feast of Christ's birth was embedded in a much older tradition of midwinter celebrations. In Germanic regions, "Yule" was celebrated around December 21-22 - the winter solstice: a time when fire and greenery symbolized fertility, hope, and the return of the light. In the Roman Empire, the "Saturnalia" was known, a boisterous festival of abundance and social reversal, and later the cultic feast of "Sol Invictus" on December 25, in which the sun as the unsurpassed source of life was venerated<sup>2</sup>.

The early church had no fixed date for the birth of Jesus. It was not until the third and fourth centuries that December 25 was chosen, not because Scripture prescribed it but because the date was already

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<sup>1</sup> For these moments and these words, I am reminded of a line from Guido Gezelle's poem "t Kruiske" (The Little Cross), which I would like to paraphrase: "*But those words are written, have remained deep in my head*".

<sup>2</sup>

- a. Ancient Germanic and Scandinavian midwinter festival around the winter solstice, celebrating the return of light and the sun. The name comes from the Old Norse "Jól" which means "wheel of the sun".
- b. The "Saturnalia" were celebrated in ancient Rome from December 17 to 23. It was a feast in honor of the god "Saturn", the god of agriculture and abundance. It was a time when gifts were exchanged in an atmosphere of feasting, games, and revelry. It was a time of freedom and equality; social rules were temporarily suspended during these festivities.
- c. The feast of "Sol Invictus" was officially established by Emperor Aurelian in 274 AD, with December 25 as the main holiday and it was declared the "Natalis Solis Invicti" (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun). It continued to be celebrated until the late fourth century, when Christianity became the dominant religion.

imbued with the symbolism of light and new beginning. By connecting Christ to this day, missionaries and Church Fathers could facilitate the transition from pagan to Christian celebrations. The symbol of the sun was elevated: no longer was nature or a deity of light central, but Christ himself, the true Light that overcomes darkness.

Historically, then, we see a fusion of traditions. The church incorporated existing rituals and symbols - fire, greenery, gifts, the date - and gave them a new meaning. Theologically, this is a profound reinterpretation. Where “Yule” and “Saturnalia” celebrated the cycle of nature and the return of the sun, Christmas points to an eschatological light that does not merely return annually but breaks through definitively in the coming of Christ. The feast of the birth thus becomes a proclamation: the true Light has come into the world, not as a repetition of an annual solar cycle but as a unique and lasting revelation of God's promise which has echoed through the centuries and still echoes - the promised *Immanuel - With us is God*.

This process is concretely visible in two iconic Christmas symbols: the nativity scene and the Christmas tree. The nativity scene finds its origin in a deliberate, Christian creation: Francis of Assisi set up a living nativity scene in 1223 in Greccio, central Italy, to make the birth of Christ tangible. This form of popular devotion spread quickly and anchored the Christmas story in a recognizable image. The Christmas tree, on the other hand, has a pre-Christian origin in Germanic winter traditions, where evergreen branches symbolized vitality and the return of the light. The Christianization of this tree was a gradual process; in the late Middle Ages, people in Germany began decorating it with apples (referring to original sin) and later with wafers and candles, which symbolized Christ as the “*Bread of Life*” and the “*Light of the World*”<sup>3</sup>. It was not until the 19th century that the decorated Christmas tree became a worldwide phenomenon.

Thus, Christmas became a feast that embodies both continuity with the human experience of midwinter and the radical message of faith confession expressed by the gospel. It is an example of how Christianity represented itself in the cultural patterns of its time and simultaneously transformed those patterns into a testimony of Christ as the Light of the World.

This devout atmosphere that should characterize Advent - the season of expectation and introspection - and Christmas has today been displaced by a worldly “Christmas spirit”. The focus is no longer on God's revelation in Christ but on the pleasures of the here and now. Christmas has grown into a boisterous family feast fueled by culinary excess and an abundance of gifts. In this light, it is, as it were, a dismantling of the work of the early missionaries and a return to the boisterous, licentious atmosphere of the Roman Saturnalia.

So, were those well-meaning members of the evangelical church community right after all?

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<sup>3</sup> The fruit that Eve considered beautiful and harmless is, in the Christian tradition of imagery and interpretation, typically represented as an apple. This representation does not find its origin in the Hebrew source text of Genesis, but in the Latin translation. It is based on a pun between “*màlum*” (apple) and “*malum*” (evil), two words spelled the same way but distinguished from each other by the stress on the first syllable. Within the context of the Latin “*lignum scientiae boni et mali*” (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), this has contributed to the lasting depiction of the forbidden fruit with the apple.

