

Christmas and the Stars

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At least once a year men, absorbed in their daily affairs, pause and fleetingly ponder over the story of the silent night of nativity, a mysterious night whose stars appear to be more glorious, more prophetic, more significant than those of any other night. What is the origin of this ancient and mysterious holiday? What is the meaning of the Christmas tree which brightens our thoughts of the fireside? What is the Advent Star or Bethlehem Star which persistently returns as our closest association with the Yuletide?

Perhaps few of us realize that these questions concern some of the most fundamental phases of the history of human civilization. Their interpretation sheds light upon the earliest stages of man's awakening culture, thousands of years before the invention of script. The records of those ages were not expressed in writing. Rather, events, knowledge, hopes, views, and religions were perpetuated and communicated verbally in the strange form of phantastic, childlike imaginative stories. It was the infancy of humanity, it was the age of mythology wherein veiled truths were preserved.

Mythology is not meaningless legend. It is only another form of recording. It is a language in itself and if we wish to study man's mind, his civilization of some ten thousand or more years ago, we must resort to mythological stories, the only relics preserved by tradition. Just as from the present appearance of the cosmic universe we can read its history, so through mythology we are enabled to read the ancient history of mankind. A mythological story very clearly associates Christmas rites with the winter-solstice. This is the nucleus of all yuletide symbolism.

SYMBOLIC APPROPRIATENESS

Christmas as the winter-solstice celebration was observed by the Romans who inherited this custom, in an integrated form, from preceding ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean area. Edward Tyler, F.R.S., in the second volume of his *Primitive Culture* writes: "The Roman winter-solstice festival, as celebrated on December 25 in connection with the worship of the Sun-god Mithra, appears to have been instituted in this special form by Emperor Aurelian about A.D. 273, and to this festival the day owes its apposite name of Birthday of the Unconquered Sun, *Dies Natalis Solis invicta*. With full symbolic appropriateness, though not with historical justification, the day was adopted in the Western Church, where it appears to have been generally introduced by the fourth century, and whence in time it passed to the Eastern Church, as the solemn anniversary

of the birth of Christ, the Christian *Dies Natalis*, Christmas Day."

There is no question but that the already very ancient and deeply rooted religion of the Sun offered strenuous resistance to the invasion of Christianity. Although externally it caused considerable religious change in the civilized world when Constantine, that ardent votary of the Sun, abandoned the faith of Apollo for that of Christ, internally the change was not of any great import. For the most part, the ancient rites of solar worship are paralleled in modern Christendom in several ways, two being most outstanding: by the ceremonies connected with turning toward the East and secondly, in the continuance of the great sun festivals countenanced by or incorporated in Christianity. Easter, being another festival originally connected with both solar and lunar rites, is perhaps more ancient than Christmas itself.

THE YULE LOG

If the correlation of Christmas with the winter-solstice is an established fact, let us proceed to interpret the present rites and customs. In many places in Europe, Christmas is celebrated by bonfires and the burning of a yule-log. Linguistically, the word yule or its ancient form "Hiaul" or "Huul" signifies the Sun in some languages. The English word "wheel" is etymologically derived from yule, the old name for the Sun, and the wheel is one of the most ancient symbols of the Sun, the spokes representing the Sun's rays. Yuletide may be directly translated as Suntide. Christmas as the winter-solstice really means a great turning point in the apparent celestial movement of the Sun; the Sun has reached the lowest position on the sky, astronomically speaking, a declination of 23.5 degrees below the celestial equator. Practically speaking, this means the shortest days and longest nights of the year. Ages ago, the night must have seemed long and dreary to primitive man in his unlighted cave. It must have been a distressing experience filled with eerie scares and visions so vivid to his primitive mind. When he discovered, many thousand years ago, that the sun does not go down on the sky to disappear forever but that it returns and there will be a

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victory of light over darkness, he recognized that particular day to be a most solemn occasion of the year, a day of grace, blessing, and joy. That day was the symbol of all bright and joyful hopes, heralding the glory of the coming springtime with its flowers and singing birds, the blessing of the new crop and food with the life-giving heat of summer days. The sun and its position on the sky was therefore of paramount concern to mankind since the earliest days of history.

Christmas, signifying the turning point and rebirth of the sun, was therefore worshipfully sanctified with many rituals which through the centuries have lost their meaning to the minds of those who mechanically perpetuated these inherited customs. The ceremonious burning of the yule-log differs only slightly from the lighting of the Christmas tree, which represents the light to guide the Sun-god back to life. The festival cakes of corn and fruit laid on the sacred altars of the ancient Egyptians and Persians as an offering of gratitude to the Lord of Life, through the train of symbolism relegated from civilization to civilization, has as its modern counterpart the burning plum pudding during our Christmas eve of rejoicing.

STAR OF BETHLEHEM

The light which is profusely used during yuletide festivities discloses in itself the solstitial nature of the observance. Space does not permit the presentation of the many curious customs of various nations both in Eurasia as well as among Pre-Columbian civilizations in America. Most of them, however, refer to a certain form of unusual star appearing on the sky at or shortly before the winter-solstice event. The Advent Star, or in purely Christian language, the Bethlehem Star, was a phenomenal celestial light heralding the glorious event, the grace of God, the new Suntime.

In the words of W. T. Olcott: "The feast of rejoicing that a turning point in the Sun's course has been reached, the life giving orb has attained the end of its journey of menacingly dwindling hours of daylight and has started back on a course that brings with it each day an increase of warmth and light." The Advent Star of the ancient Egyptians was the famous Sothis, known today as Sirius, which heralded the coming of the Egyptian new year in its heliacal rise. The story of a star having a similar role was preserved through the ages. The Bethlehem Star heralding the birth of Christ is an outstanding example.

Our present civilization belongs to the Nordic race. When two thousand years ago the savages of the north-land invaded and beheld Rome, even while destroying

it, they became civilized. They fell under the influence of the Mediterranean civilizations of which Rome was then the only powerful representative. At that age the Nordic people already knew about the winter and summer-solstice, celebrating with special emphasis the summer-solstice as the principal public sun festival. Because of uninviting weather in the northland, the winter-solstice was not convenient for public festivals. That is why Stonehenge, the famous sun temple built in England in the 17th century B.C., has its principal axis directed toward the point where the sun rises on the day of the summer solstice.

LINK WITH THE PAST

The Mediterranean climate was not prohibitive to public gatherings during the winter-solstice, however, and the sun festival of the Christmas season dominated events connected with the sun's annual rebirth, the sun's return northward in the sky. After their impact with Rome, the Nordic races gradually replaced their summer festival with the winter-solstice festival, which is our Christmas. If, therefore, we observe that most churches in Europe have their principal altar facing the rising sun, and keep an eternal light which is extinguished only in the three symbolic Easter days, and above all, that they adapt the ancient solar thought to Christian allegory in a very plain Christmas service chant "Sol novus oritur" meaning "We celebrate the new Sun," we realize the definite link connecting us with ages past to an ancestry beyond recorded history. While its refining influence remains undisputed, Christianity represents a not too heavy super-position upon a remote and uncharted age of mythology.

The traces of this mythical age never can be effaced from mankind's experience anymore than our childhood can be separated from our individual adulthood. Something is mysteriously true about the fairytales of our childhood. We saw the same real world in the light of imaginations which had some distant image of reality, but they were the charm of our infancy. Similarly, myths as endless analogies are the soul of poetry, half-human stories filled with unfading life and beauty, masterpieces of art belonging to the past and in our age checked by the scrutinizing mind of the positivist philosopher and the scientist. Yet, despite the realism of our technical civilization, the ancient beauty and charm of Christmas will warm the hearts of countless people with a dream of a silent and holy night, the night of a great and glorious hope of a better future. This is the essential meaning of the most ancient heritage—the birth of light, the birth of Christ.

