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Our Pagan Christmas

R. J. CONDON

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FOREWORD
BARBARA SMOKER

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Foreword

"IF YOU don't believe in Our Lord, you obviously can't have anything to celebrate at Christmas! So why do you send Christmas cards? Why have a Christmas-tree? Why a special Christmas dinner instead of corned beef or fish-fingers?!"

Those of us who make no secret of our rejection of Christian beliefs are often subject to jibes of this kind unless we are also, like Bernard Shaw, anti-Christmas ascetics, eager to do a normal day's work on December the 25th, avoiding the company of revellers and keeping to our vegetarian diet and alcoholic abstinence. Most of us do not aspire to such Shavian ascetism. Though concerned to appear consistent, we would hate to feel excluded from the general jollification. With the aid of this little book, we can boldly join in the feast without losing face!

For in these pages, so ably researched and lucidly written by R. J. Condon for the National Secular Society, we have the unassailable historical facts to justify us and help us prepare confident rejoinders to the taunts of Christians who would exclude us from the feast of friendship and the "Christmas spirit" of empathy and alcohol.

However, the book has more serious aspects than simply enabling the non-Christian to join in the Christmas revels with a clear conscience. Its concise, factual information also enables the average busy reader to see in its true perspective the doctrinal Christian insistence on the historical Jesus. And it is on this bogus doctrine that an immeasurable amount of rigid authoritarianism, social injustice, and human misery has depended for almost two thousand years.

Although the historical facts have appeared in many previous publications, this seems to be the first booklet of its kind for the general reader on the popular subject of Christmas. As long as the facts remain unfamiliar to the public at large, there is certainly an educational need for such a publication in this popular style, at this popular price.

At the same time, it gives us a good opportunity to reprint some apposite extracts from an essay of biblical criticism ("Who Was Jesus Christ?") by the 19th-century founder of the National Secular Society, Charles Bradlaugh. These extracts appear as an appendix to the booklet. The final sentence gives Bradlaugh's conclusion that there is no historical substance in the Gospels beyond a possibility that an actual man was the focus for the mythology. R. J. Condon, however, does not accept even this as a serious possibility, since there is no acceptable evidence for an historical Jesus, and the mythological development can be adequately accounted for (and, indeed, more easily accounted for) without a human life being brought into it at all.

Christianity's take-over of our pagan mid-winter festival, to the extent of actually claiming a monopoly in it, is an expression of the privileged position of institutionalised Christianity that prevails in

the western world, and by no means least in irreligious Britain. Christianity's usurping of Yuletide may seem a relatively unimportant feature of this, but it plays its part in reinforcing that position of privilege.

Schoolchildren, for weeks before the feast, are immersed in the Christian Nativity story, in their morning assemblies, their singing lessons, their projects, compositions, and drama. They hear little or nothing about the festival's universal frame of reference and its truly ancient origins. This, to say the least of it, is hardly fair on the non-Christian children in our multi-cultural society (the Jews and Muslims as well as the little atheists and agnostics)—and is thus, contrary to the theoretical cohesiveness of the Christmas spirit, in practice divisive.

The Nativity myth, with its pagan heritage of rejoicing, helps to keep us happy under the yoke of Christian privilege—fiscal privilege through charity status, disproportionate broadcasting time, and, above all, the anti-educational, self-perpetuating privilege of indoctrinating children, both in the State school system and in the thousands of State-subsidised church schools that segregate children according to their denominational backgrounds. The social effects of this segregation can have highly disastrous consequences, as we have seen all too clearly in Northern Ireland.

Ironically enough, if anyone ought to abstain from the seasonal celebrations of the fourth week of December on grounds of credal consistency it is, as R. J. Condon shows, the believing Christian! The pantomime, the Christmas tree, candles, mistletoe, holly, feasting on special kinds of meat, the mince pies and the flaming sun-shaped Christmas pudding—all were pagan in origin and symbolism, and all were anathema to the Fathers of the Church. But that is not all. Even the Christian Nativity scene is originally pagan—representing the rebirth of the Sun-god on earth, born of a virgin at midnight on the 24th of December, laid in the manger of a stable, and visited by three gift-bearing kings or magicians.

It is not, perhaps, a bad thing that human beings are less consistent than they like to think, and no one resents the way that Christians now join wholeheartedly in celebrating the universal pagan festival from which they alone stood aloof during the first dozen generations of Christianity. But it does seem a bit much that they should now claim sole rights in it!

Yes, the word "Christmas" is, of course, Christian. But it was unknown before the eleventh century. And, anyway, what does it mean? It means the day on which the Mass is celebrated in honour of Christ's birthday—which makes it no more appropriate to Protestant sects that have ousted the Mass than to non-Christians.

Even the modern (19th-century) custom of sending greetings to one's friends at the turn of the year, though originating as a purely secular custom, has been seized upon as another opportunity for Christian propaganda; so, year after year, clergymen actually denounce the depiction of such traditional secular subjects as snow-scenes with robins, in favour of the supposedly Christian Nativity scene.

As a counterblast to this wholesale Christian take-over of Yule-

tide, I introduced a range of "Heretic Cards" in 1973, and the success of this enterprise prompted the executive committee of the National Secular Society to urge their colleague Dick Condon to write this little booklet for publication by the NSS at a price that would allow people to buy extra copies for enclosure with cards sent to selected friends and relatives.

For some years, R. J. Condon has been contributing articles to *The Freethinker* (the periodical published in association with the National Secular Society since 1881) on the pagan origins of "Christian" festivals. So we knew he was our man. And we were not mistaken. I have read his typescript with delight—storing up facts for conclusive use in repartee when chivvied, as usual, next Christmas.

BARBARA SMOKER

President, The National Secular Society
1974

OUR PAGAN CHRISTMAS

R. J. Condon

PART ONE: THE SOLAR REBIRTH

IT IS doubtful if those Christians who annually bemoan the festive season as "pagan" realise the extent to which they are right. For in celebrating Christmas we continue a practice of our remote ancestors, who had done much the same thing every year at the winter solstice for many centuries before the coming of Christianity.

ROMAN HOLIDAY

Had we lived at the period assigned to the birth of Jesus and wished to observe the various modes of celebrating the already ancient feast, no better place could have been chosen for the purpose than Rome, then the capital city of a great empire. People from many countries lived in Rome, and in the generally prevailing religious tolerance they followed their native forms of worship. Whatever credal differences they might have had, a fortnight or so before the end of December would have found almost everyone preparing for a great festival, the Saturnalia, which lasted from the 17th to the 24th of December. During this period of revelry slaves changed places with their masters, and all manner of licence was permitted. The holiday concluded on December 25th with a greast feast, the Brumalia, when parties were given and presents exchanged.

In the Roman calendar December 25th was called Natalis Solis Invicti, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. That was when the sun, three days after reaching the lowest point of its annual course through the heavens, once more began to rise higher in the sky, the first indication that winter would come to an end and that the animal and plant life on which humanity depended for its existence would flourish anew. So everyone celebrated, and above all it was an occasion of religious rejoicing.

The Persian sun-god Mithra had a large following in Rome, particularly among the military. At midnight, the first moment of December 25th, the Mithraic temples would be lit up, with priests in white robes at the altars, and boys burning incense, much as we see in Roman Catholic churches at midnight on Christmas Eve in our own time. Mithra, his worshippers believed, had come from heaven to be born as man in order to redeem men from their sins, and he was born of a virgin on December 25th. Shepherds were the first to learn of his birth, just as shepherds are said (according to "Luke", alone among the evangelists) to have been the first told of the birth of Jesus. At sunrise, the priests would announce: "The god is born".

Then would come rejoicing, followed by a meal representing the Last Supper which Mithra ate with his disciples before his ascension into heaven.

The Egyptians who lived in Rome would also have been celebrating at this time. Horus, they said, was born of a virgin as the saviour of mankind. In the Egyptian temple would be found a crib or manger, with a figure of the infant Horus lying in it, and a statue of his virgin mother Isis standing alongside, not at all unlike the Christmas cribs in our own churches.

The Greeks of Rome, too, would have been paying respect to the figure of a child-god. In Greece itself the festival was held on January 6th. That was when the virgin goddess Kore gave birth to Dionysus, one of whose names was Ies or Jesus. For 400 years the Greek Church celebrated the Nativity on January 6th, as the Armenian Church still does.

The Roman gladiators, war-captives from Germany, would have been celebrating Yule, the northern European mid-winter festival. Yule, or the Wheel, signified the turning point of the year, when the sun was checked in its downward movement and began to roll back, like a wheel. The wheel was a universal solar symbol.

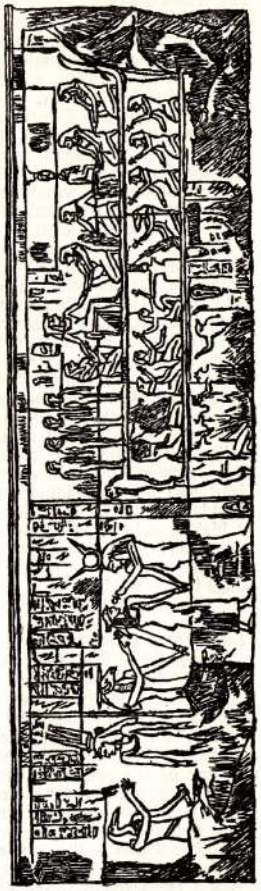
Even the Jews would have been making holiday. Their Chanukah, or Feast of Illuminations, fell on Chasleu 25th. Chasleu or Kislew was the Babylonian month Kisilimu, approximating to December, the Jews having adopted the lunar calendar of Babylonia during their captivity in that country. Chanukah is supposed to have been instituted in 165 B.C. by Judas Maccabeus as a joyful feast in honour of his victory over the Syrian King Antiochus IV, who had set up a pagan altar in the Jewish Temple and sacrificed swine upon it, on the sun's birthday. According to the Jewish Encyclopaedia, however, Chasleu 25th had long been a Jewish winter solstice festival.

CHRISTIANS TAKE OVER

The Christian Church, when it began, stood aloof at the festive season, and as late as 245 A.D. we find Origen protesting against the very idea of celebrating the birthday of Jesus as if he were an earthly king. Moreover, the birth of Christ could hardly have been fixed on so notorious a day as that of so many pagan sun-gods. But Christianity would soon adopt much from the pagans, though not without pointed remarks from the latter. Not until the fourth century, however, would the Church be powerful enough to silence its rivals and brazenly announce that henceforth the birth of the true Sun of Righteousness would be celebrated on the day of the Natalis Solis Invicti. Not that the Christians were averse to joining in the fun. Far from it, as the third-century Church father Tertullian ruefully testifies in his work On Idolatry:

> *By us, who are strangers to Sabbaths, and new moons and festivals once acceptable to God, the Saturnalia, the feasts of January, the Brumalia and the Matronalia are now frequented. Gifts are carried to and fro, New Year's Day presents are made with din, and sports and banquets are celebrated with uproar. Oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to their religion, who take care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians.*

THE EGYPTIAN NATIVITY



Not the least of Christian borrowings from paganism is the Nativity story itself. Some 1700 years B.C. its prototype was being applied to the first-born sons of the Pharaohs, the kings and sun-gods incarnate of Egypt. The legend is portrayed in four scenes on the wall of the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Amen at Luxor, built by Amenhotep III.

In the first scene the ibis-headed god Thoth, the Egyptian Gabriel, hand upraised in a manner reminiscent of Christian paintings of the Annunciation, hails the virgin queen Mut-em-ua (Mother-of-one!) and informs her that she is to bear a son (Amenhotep) in the character of Horus, the divine child. Next comes the Descent of the Holy Spirit. The god Kneph, "spirit" by name, assisted by the goddess Hathor, impregnates the virgin by holding the "ankh" symbol of life to her mouth. Conception is indicated in the queen's fuller form. The third scene is the nativity, with the mother seated on the stool then used in childbirth. A nurse holds the new-born child.

Finally, we have the Adoration. The child is enthroned, receiving gifts and homage from gods and men. Behind the ram-headed Kneph are three human figures, kneeling and offering gifts with one hand and life with the other. The egyptologist Samuel Sharpe declared:

> *In this picture we have the Annunciation, the Conception, the Birth and the Adoration, as described in the first and second chapters of Luke's gospel; and as we have historical assurance that the chapters in Matthew's gospel which contain the miraculous birth are an after addition not in the earliest manuscripts, it seems probable that these two poetical chapters in Luke may also be unhistorical, and borrowed from the Egyptian accounts of the miraculous births of their kings.*

(Egyptian Mythology and Egyptian Christianity)

THE THREE KINGS

Albertus Magnus, greatest of the 14th-century scholars and a teacher of Thomas Aquinas, wrote in his Book of the Universe that "the mysteries of the Incarnation, from the Conception through to the Ascension into heaven, are shown to us on the face of the sky and are signified by the stars". He noted, too, that the constellation of Virgo rose above the horizon at the moment of the birth of Christ at midnight on December 24th. Long before, at the same moment in the year, the pagan priests had proclaimed: "The Virgin has brought forth; the light is waxing". Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the second century, wrote that "The Gnostics truly declared that all the supernatural transactions asserted in the gospels were counterparts (or representations) of what took place above".

Many scholars have seen the key to the Nativity story in astronomical allegory. Take, for instance, those three kneeling figures who were known to the Egyptians ages before they were supposed to have followed a star to Bethlehem. We are told that wise men or Magi came from the east, in search of a king whose star they had seen in the east, and Catholic legend says that these wise men were three kings. Now if, on a clear evening in midwinter, we look eastward, we see the most striking of all constellations mounting the sky. The three stars so conspicuous in Orion's belt point to the east from whence they came, as if announcing a marvel. And the marvel comes; Sirius, the most brilliant of all the host of heaven, rises in the east in line with those three stars, known of old as the Three Kings, a name they still bear in some parts of Europe. To the Egyptians, Sirius was the most important star of all, for they regulated their calendars by its heliacal rising. At one period in Egypt, Sirius reached its highest point at midnight on December 24th, the moment of the solar rebirth, and accordingly the star was known as the Herald of the Sun. Thus it was true, astronomically speaking, that the Three Kings had "seen his star in the east", the Herald proclaiming the advent of the real King of Kings.

THE STABLE AT BETHLEHEM

The tradition that Jesus was born in a stable may be similarly accounted for. When the sun was being reborn in Virgo, the constellation directly under the earth was Capricorn, the Goat, also known as the Stable of Augeas. Thus the sun was said to have risen from the Stable. All the sins committed on earth gradually drifted down to Capricorn; hence the filthy condition of the Stable whose cleansing was one of the twelve zodiacal labours of Hercules, himself a sun-god. The second-century Church father Justin Martyr remarked that Christ was born when the sun had its birth in the Augean Stable, Jesus coming as a second Hercules to cleanse a foul world. There is another Stable in the constellation Auriga, on either side of which are Taurus the Bull and Ursa Major, known in Egypt as the Ass of Typhon. Here we have the Ox and Ass of the traditional Nativity scene.

CRIB AND MANGER

The crib and manger originated in Egypt. There the earth was mystically spoken of as the Mount, whose summit was Apta (ap-ta

or upper earth), this being the birthplace of the sun. But "apta" was also the word for "crib" and "manger", which accordingly became symbols of the birthplace. Hence the exhibition of the solar child in one or other of these makeshift cradles was an annual feature in the streets and temples of ancient Egypt.

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

Stars heralding the births of gods and great men were a mythological commonplace in the ancient world. The birth of Buddha (to the Virgin Maya) is said to have been announced in the heavens by the rising of an unusual star, by which wise men known as "holy rishis" were informed of the event. Stars signalled the births of Krishna and Lao-Tsze, and of Moses and Abraham in Jewish legend. The Persian Zend-Avesta, compiled long before the Christian era, attributes a remarkable prophecy to Zoroaster. It reads:

> *You, my children, shall be the first honoured by the manifestation of that divine person who is to appear in the world. A star shall go before you to conduct you to the place of his nativity, and when you shall find him, present to him your oblations and sacrifices, for he is indeed your lord and an everlasting king.*

The oblations would probably have been gold and precious spices, the traditional gifts to the sun in Persia. This prophecy could well have been known to the writer of the Nativity story in Matthew's gospel. It was certainly known to the author of the apocryphal Arabic Gospel of the Infancy, for we read there that "the Wise Men came from the East to Jerusalem according to the prophecy of Zoradasht" (Zoroaster).

Roman history has a parallel to the story of the Magi which may have suggested some of the details in the Matthew version of the legend. Pliny, in his Natural History, mentions a visit of homage to Nero by the Parthian king Tiridates. He tells us that Tiridates was a magus or magician, and that other magi accompanied him on the journey. Dio Cassius, writing about 220AD, adds the following:

> *Tiridates . . . was driven in the chariot which Nero had sent to him . . . and bending his knee to the earth and lifting his hands, he called him his lord and worshipped him . . . For he spoke thus: "I, my lord . . . am thy slave. And I am come to thee as to my God, worshipping thee, even as Mithras . . . " But Tiridates did not travel back by the way he had come . . . "*
> (*cf. Matthew* 2: 1-12).

This passage from Dio Cassius is late, but so is the Nativity story in Matthew.

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

When the Magi arrived, neither Herod nor "all Jerusalem" knew anything of the birth of Jesus, although according to Luke 2: 15-17 shepherds from Bethlehem, five miles away, had been busy spreading the news. Herod's reaction to the failure of his visitors to bring him word of the child's whereabouts was to order the killing of all the infants—of both sexes apparently—in and around Bethlehem, an atrocity which would have been avoided had the star conducted the Magi directly to the birthplace. Josephus, who records the many

misdeeds of Herod, omits this, one of the worst of them. The Massacre is of course unhistorical; its Old Testament prototype can be found in Exodus 1: 15-22. The gospel writer may also have known of the tradition preserved in Josephus (Antiquities 2: 9: 2) that Pharaoh gave the command to kill the Israelites' male children after a scribe had predicted the birth of a boy who would one day become dangerous to him.

Both "massacres" are variations of what has been termed "the myth of the dangerous child". Krishna and Jason survived similar holocausts, and tradition has it that the life of the infant Abraham was sought by King Nimrod, who had all the children of Babylonia slaughtered as the result of a prophecy that a rival would be born there. The "dangerous child" is the infant sun-god, who is destined to destroy the evil tyrant Winter.

CHRIST THE SUN

The name, or rather title, Christ may be traced to the Chaldean Chris (hrs), a name of the sun. Its Hebrew equivalent "heres" (hrs) occurs several times in the Old Testament, where it is always translated "sun". Christ in the New Testament is said to mean "annointed", but that is because a person who is annointed becomes shiny, like the sun. Kings and priests were, and in some cases still are, annointed to confer the solar character upon them. Olive oil is always used, for the olive has been mystically related to the sun from the earliest times. In Egyptian mythology Bakhu is both the Mount of Sunrise and the Mount of the Olive Tree of Dawn. Outside orthodox Christianity it was commonly held that Jesus Christ was a personification of the sun. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that when a Manichaean became converted to Christianity, as was St. Augustine, he was required to abjure his former faith in the following terms:

> *I curse those persons who say that Zoroaster and Buddha and Christ and the Sun are all one and the same.*

THE "SAVIOUR" AUGUSTUS

There is a strong presumption that whoever added the birth story to Luke's gospel, which like Matthew's originally began with the third chapter, made use of phrases from inscriptions announcing the salvation brought to the world by the birth of Augustus, during whose reign Jesus is said to have been born. One from Prienne, in Asia Minor, reads:

> *Now, when that Providence which guides all things in our life reawakened emulation and zeal and conferred on our life the most perfect ornament by granting to us Augustus, and for the well-being of mankind filled him with virtue and sent him to us and to our offspring to be a saviour, destined to make every war to cease . . . the birthday of this god is become the beginning of glad tidings regarding him for the world . . .*

Many such inscriptions have been found, the wording much the same in all. One from Halicarnassus calls Augustus "the saviour of the whole human race . . . for peace prevails on earth . . . " Thus the Roman Emperor, like the Egyptian Pharaoh, was fabled to have been born in the likeness of the Son of God, the Saviour common to all the pagan mystery religions.

THE HOLY FAMILY

Mary was both a virgin and a mother, impossible in nature but a familiar concept in pagan mythology. Races as far apart as the Mexicans, the Chinese, the Indians, the Etruscans, the Teutons and the Scandinavians, all knew the virgin-mother goddess. There can be little doubt that the Virgin Mary has been modelled directly upon the Egyptian Isis, for the two are virtually indistinguishable. The qualities which so endear Mary to the Catholics are the ones which made Isis so popular in Egypt. Both goddesses, gentle mothers that they were, could intercede with the all-powerful Creator and stern Judge far more effectively than their Sons, and accordingly both have been styled Intercessor. Mary as Mother of God is only a reflection of Isis as Neter Mut. Other titles of Isis include Our Lady, Queen of Heaven, Star of the Sea, Saviour of Souls and Immaculate Virgin, all appropriated by her Christian counterpart. Like Isis before her, Mary is portrayed standing on a crescent moon with an arch of stars above her head. Certain images of Isis were celebrated for their miraculous movements, or the shedding of tears, and she was even said to have appeared to her worshippers on rare but special occasions. This miraculous work of "Our Lady" was naturally continued by the Christian Church which gradually took over the cult of Isis. In fourth-century Alexandria the Temple of Isis and the Church of St. Mary stood side by side, the devotees of the mother goddesses indifferently frequenting either. The end came in the sixth century, when the last remaining Temple of Isis, on the Nile island of Philae, became a Christian church.

Figures of Isis nursing the infant Horus were taken from the temples to serve as the Madonna and Child, and some are said to be doing duty yet in the churches. Madonna itself is no more than a contraction of Mater Domina or Great Mother, in Roman times a title of mother goddesses in general. By then Isis had become known as the "myriad-named", having assimilated the names and attributes of every female deity in the Egyptian pantheon. One of these was the cow-headed Nile goddess Meh or Meri, a name cognate with Mary.

Joseph, the husband of Mary and foster-father of Jesus, corresponds to Seb, the protector of Isis and, as earth-god, the foster-father of Horus during his infancy on earth. Even their names are similar. Isis was said to have suckled Horus in the house of Seb, and it was Seb who accompanied the holy mother and child in their flight from the evil serpent Herrut until they were safely hidden in the marshes of Lower Egypt. Here we have the origin of the unhistorical Flight into Egypt. Evidently the gospel writer "Matthew" took advantage of the similarity of sound between Herrut and Herod to work in this piece of Egyptian mythology.

Horus himself was but one of several types of God the Son in Egypt. Strange as it may seem, the Egyptians knew a "Jesus" some two thousand years before the Christian saviour is said to have appeared. This was Iu-em-hetep, "He who comes with peace". Jesus in the gospels is both "he that should come" and the giver of peace. Like Jesus, Iu was a miraculous healer and famed for his wise teaching. Some scholars have seen in Iu the Egyptian form of the name Jesus. Whether it is or not, a monument in the church on Caldy

Island, Pembrokeshire, testifies to the Christian use of Iu for Jesus as late as the ninth century.

Thus, while it would be an over-simplified answer to the historicity question to assert that the Holy Family are little more than copies, names and all, of characters derived from a single pagan source, it could well be that the earlier mythological system played a greater part in their shaping than is generally supposed.

PART TWO: CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

THE PANTOMIME

PANTOMIME may be traced to the "pantomimus" of classical Greece and Rome, an entertainer who acted out a mythological story, playing every part by donning a series of masks. In England the tradition took the form of the Christmas Mumming Play, still performed in a few places, whose death-and-resurrection theme owes nothing to Christianity but is plainly solar allegory.

Modern pantomime began in the early eighteenth century, inspired partly by the pantomimus of old and partly by the Italian Commedia dell'arte. Consisting of ballets on mythological themes together with the Harlequinade, it has been gradually modified into the familiar Christmas entertainment of today, its fairy-tale basis yet perpetuating the ancient solar lore. For almost all that we have of this kind, fairy stories and tales of heroes and giants, comes to us from our pagan forebears, and all has the same meaning, the relationship between sun and earth, night and day, summer and winter.

The Commedia dell'arte emerged during the Renaissance, its antecedents and those of its stock characters being matters of speculation. It has been suggested, for instance, that Harlequin is the Egyptian Har or Horus by name, still retaining his old powers of transformation and becoming invisible. On this line of reasoning Columbine would be the Great Mother under the name of one of her zootypes, the dove (Latin "columba"), while the aged Pantaloon would represent the Ancient of Days as Ra or Atum, and the Clown Set, the sly one. Be that as it may, the Renaissance was certainly a period of intense interest in the ideas of the ancient world, the first stirring of the European intellect following a thousand years of Church-imposed ignorance.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Egypt, Babylon and Rome all made use of the tree in their winter solstice festivals. In Egypt it was the palm, and in Rome the fir, while the sacred tree in Babylonia was the perfect counterpart of our modern Christmas tree, as we learn from Jeremiah 10: 2-4:

> *Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen . . . For the customs of the people are vain; for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not.*

Then as now, it was a young tree, and it symbolised the new-born sun. There was a mystical connection between sun and tree, for as

Ovid tells us in his Metamorphoses, the mother of the sun-god Adonis was changed into a tree, and brought him forth while in that state. The old, dead sun, stripped of its power and glory, and cut down nearly to the ground, is represented on a coin of the period as a tree stump, an empty cornucopia further emphasising the unfruitfulness of the winter sun. Around the dead trunk coils a serpent, emblem of renewed life, while alongside sprouts a young palm tree, as the re-born sun. Palm or fir, the same idea underlies both. Hence the placing of the Yule log on the fire on Christmas Eve and the appearance of the little Christmas tree the next morning. Christmas fires, and the lighting of candles, perpetuate another pagan custom, encouraging the sun in its weakest hour with their heat and light.

MISTLETOE AND HOLLY

The pagans held the mistletoe in considerable awe, its name "all-heal" reflecting its supposed miraculous powers. Since no part of it touched the ground, it was reckoned to have come from heaven, a living symbol of the Son of God. One form of the pagan saviour, Tammuz, was actually called the Mistletoe Branch. The celestial plant, rooted in an earthly tree, brought together again heaven and earth, which had been severed by sin. Thus the mistletoe became the token of divine reconciliation to man, the kiss being a well-known sign of pardon and reconciliation.

As a heathen plant, mistletoe was not allowed inside churches, but at one time an exception was made at York. There mistletoe was ceremoniously carried into the Cathedral on Christmas Eve and laid on the high altar, after which a universal pardon was proclaimed in the city. In Scandinavia mistletoe was the plant of peace under which enemies were reconciled, and the survival of the pagan usage in Britain may be traced to the fact that York, in the tenth century AD, was the capital of a Scandinavian kingdom founded by Halfdan.

The use of holly and other evergreens in Christmas decoration comes from their use in houses and temples at the pagan midwinter festival. Evergreens were and still are symbolic of immortality, or the continuity of life.

THE BOAR'S HEAD

The boar's head was once a regular dish at Christmas, and is still served with ceremony at a few places in Britain. Among the pagans the boar was sacrificed to the sun-god, for the injury that animal was fabled to have done him, Adonis was said to have died in consequence of a wound from a boar's tusk, in the Syrian month of Haziran (from the Chaldean "hazir" or hog), the month in which the sun completed its annual course and "died". Venus was reconciled to the boar that killed Adonis because, when brought in chains before her,

it pleaded that the killing was an accident. Yet in memory of the deed of that mystic boar, many a real boar lost its head or was otherwise sacrificed to the offended goddess. The Saxons offered a boar to the sun at the winter solstice, while a similar observance evidently existed in Rome, for the poet Martial has the line: "That boar will make you a good Saturnalia". The boar, with its round face and golden bristles (rays), was a solar symbol in Scandinavia, where also boars' heads were eaten at Yuletide. In Egypt, swine, normally "unclean" animals, were offered once a year to Osiris, in his character as Sun-god.

THE CHRISTMAS GOOSE

The most acceptable offering to Osiris, however, was a goose, and moreover it was the custom in Egypt to eat that bird only in the depth of winter. Juvenal, in his sixth Satire, says that Osiris, if offended, could be pacified only by a large goose and a thin cake. The goose was the symbol of the earth-god Seb, as well as being sacred to Juno, Cupid and Brahma. It was the cackling of the geese of Juno in the Temple of Jupiter which saved the Capitol of Rome from a surprise attack by the Gauls. The monuments of Babylonia show that the goose was sacred there also, for the priest is seen with a goose in one hand and his sacrificing knife in the other.

In Egypt the word "sa" signified both "goose" and "son". The fourth-century Egyptian writer Horapollo, in his work On Hieroglyphics, says that the ideograph of a goose was chosen to represent a son from the love of that bird for its young, being always ready to give itself up to the hunter that they might be preserved. It appears, then, that the goose signifies the Son, familiar to the pagan religions no less than the Christian, who voluntarily gives himself up as a sacrifice for those he loves. The turkey, introduced from America, is a comparatively modern surrogate for the goose.

MINCE PIES AND CHRISTMAS PUDDING

Mince pies, popular in the sixteenth century, were compounded of mutton and spiced raisins, the latter ingredient being the forerunner of our modern mincemeat. The Church, and particularly the Puritans, looked on mince pies with disfavour as having been derived from the consecrated cakes of the pagans. They were formerly baked in a coffin-shaped pastry case, recalling the Egyptian custom of passing round at banquets a small coffin containing a figure of Osiris, to remind the guests of their mortality.

Finally, we have the traditional Christmas plum pudding, round and flaming—the most obvious solar symbol of all.

To sum up, it would be difficult if not impossible to name a single feature of the Christmas scene that is not derived from paganism. Even Santa Claus is little more than the Scandinavian Wotan, driving through the night sky from the frozen north with gifts for those who honour him at Yuletide. But there is surely no need, after the fashion of some Christian sects, to ignore the festive season once its true nature is realised. For how many of us, religious or otherwise, can honestly claim that we do not welcome the annual rebirth of the sun?

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Appendix

Selected extracts from Charles Bradlaugh's Essay, "Who Was Jesus Christ?"

We neither know the hour, nor day, nor month, nor year of Jesus's birth; divines generally agree that he was not born on Christmas Day, and yet on that day the anniversary of his birth is observed. The Oxford Chronology places the matter in no clearer light, and more than thirty learned authorities give a period of over seven years' difference in their reckoning. The place of his birth is also uncertain. The Jews, in the presence of Jesus, reproached him that he ought to have been born at Bethlehem, and he never replied "I was born there" (John vii, 41, 42, 52).

Jesus was the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. i.), from whom his descent is traced through Isaac—born of Sarai (whom the writer of the epistle to Galatians (iv. 24) says was a covenant and not a woman)—and ultimately through Joseph, who was not only not his father, but is not shown to have had any kind of relationship to him, and through whom therefore the genealogy should not be traced. There are two genealogies in the Gospels which contradict each other, and these in part may be collated with the Old Testament genealogy, which differs from both. The genealogy of Matthew is self-contradictory, counts thirteen names as fourteen, and omits the names of three kings. Matthew says Abiud was the son of Zorobabel (i. 13). Luke says Zorobabel's son was Rhesa (iii. 27). The Old Testament contradicts both, and gives Meshullam and Hananiah, and Shelomith, their sister (I Chron. iii. 19), as the names of Zorobabel's children. The reputed father of Jesus, Joseph, had two fathers, one named Jacob, the other Heli. The divines suggest that Heli was the father of Mary, by reading the word "Mary" in Luke iii. 23, in lieu of "Joseph", and the word "daughter" in lieu of "son", thus correcting the evident blunder made by inspiration. The birth of Jesus was miraculously announced to Mary and to Joseph by visits of an angel, but they so little regarded the miraculous annunciation that they marvelled soon after at much less wonderful things spoken by Simeon.

Jesus was the son of God, or God manifest in the flesh, and his birth was first discovered by some wise men or astrologers, a class described in the Bible as an abomination in God's sight. These men saw *his* star in the East, but it did not tell them much, for they were apparently obliged to ask information from Herod the King. Herod in turn inquired of the chief priests and scribes; and it is evident Jeremiah was right if he said, "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means", for these chief priests either misread the prophets or misquoted the Scripture, which is claimed to be a revelation from God, and invented a false prophecy (Matt. ii. 5, 6; *cf.* Micah v. 2) by omitting a few words from, and adding a

few words to, a text until it suited their purpose. The star—after the wise men knew where to go, and no longer required its aid—led and went before them, until it came and stood over where the young child was. This story will be better understood if the reader will walk out some clear night, notice a star, and then try to fix the one house it will be exactly over. The writer of the Third Gospel, silent on the star story, speaks of an angel who tells some shepherds of the miraculous; but this does not appear to have happened in the reign of Herod . . .

Who was Christ? Born of a virgin, and of divine parentage? So too were many of the mythic Sun-gods and so was Krishna, whose story, similar in many respects with that of Jesus, was current long prior to the Christian era.

Was Jesus Christ man or myth? His story being fable, is the hero a reality? That a man named Jesus really lived and performed some special actions attracting popular attention, and thus became the centre for a hundred myths, may well be true; but beyond this what is there of solid fact?

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