

# This Season of the Year

## The Relationship Between Christmas and Freemasonry

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**T**onight, I want to share with you some a few things about the season we are in.

At its surface, the Christmas holidays have no intrinsic connection to the fraternity. What I mean by that is nowhere in our degrees do we find Freemasonry linking itself to any nationally or world-practiced holiday.

Now, we all know Freemasonry is not a religion nor a substitute for religion. It requires of its members a belief in a Supreme Being but advocates no sectarian faith or practice.

Masonic ceremonies include prayers of course - both traditional and impromptu - to reaffirm everyone's dependence on the Supreme Being and to seek divine guidance.

And, as we also know, Freemasonry is open to men of any faith, but religion itself may not be discussed at Masonic meetings.

Now we don't "discuss" religion because it can be a divisive subject between men,

however, nothing prevents us from referring to it - otherwise we'd not have readings from the Volume of Sacred Law in our rituals or that volume and others displayed on and used at our altar.

No, the secrets of Freemasonry are concerned with modes of recognition, not with the means of salvation. I say all this tonight to set the stage for what will be said later.

And, what will be said has to do with what today is considered a Christian holiday, however, it was not always such and our education tonight expounds on that - along with where many of the traditions we celebrate originated.

As Masons, we should certainly understand that this fraternity did not evolve from paganism or agnostics and absolutely not from the influence of atheists. We are undeniably a spiritually based fraternity, seeped in Christian teachings by a generation of founders who were heavily influenced by Christianity. They also had a clear understanding that religion contrary to the church of the 1600s and 1700s, is,

compatible with science and man's search for truth.

So, when we look for the relationship between Christmas and Freemasonry we need to start by asking a question: *What is Christmas Spirit?*

In general, as Masons, we are encouraged to be joyful, charitable, generous, kind, and forgiving and practice goodwill toward men — all of which are behaviors that sometimes run completely counter to our inclined responses to the stresses caused by holiday travel, shopping, and the traffic that comes with it, the overwhelming glitter and tinsel - and dozens of strange bell-ringing Santas on the sidewalks and in the stores.

It is, however, only in the last 150 years or so that Christmas has been celebrated the way we currently celebrate it and gained the significance that it currently has.

Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, published in 1843, influenced many of the aspects of Christmas that are celebrated today in Western culture. Those features are family gatherings, seasonal food, and drink. The popularity of that book played a significant role in portraying Christmas as a holiday emphasizing family, goodwill, and compassion.

Yes, Christmas Spirit *is* goodwill toward all beings. To be filled with spirit is to be filled with the energy of love which then manifests physically through good deeds. Christmas spirit is something we should all be able to relate to because it speaks to the social-rights and social obligations

that we have to each other to maintain a decent civil society – just like Freemasonry.

In short brothers, Christmas spirit is in your heart – again – just where Freemasonry is supposed to be in each of us.

That spirit can feel warm and comfortable. You can't buy it, and while Christmas Spirit is contagious, it's a lot like Freemasonry – if you don't have it in your heart to start with the chances are zero you can successfully manufacture it. No, benevolence, goodwill and altruism and simply being jolly is something that one can pretend to have, but the pretension doesn't last long, and it's most often readily seen as artificial and pretentious in those who don't really have it.

As we continue to look for the relationship between Christmas and Freemasonry, we must look at how this Christmas Season came about in the first place.

At one time in the world this was the season for the celebration of hope as we moved from the darkest day of the year to the days that began to get brighter.

We now celebrate that season and the birth of Christ who taught very specific lessons when dealing with your fellow man. These lessons are taught in other religions as well and everyone in this room knows for sure how these great lessons taught in all religions are also intertwined in the philosophy, principles, tenets, and beliefs of our Craft.

The lessons in all religions relate to tolerance, justice, hope and kindness, love - to name only a few. These lessons are obvious and taught throughout the rituals and lessons of Freemasonry. It is because of this that it should be clear to us all that Freemasonry truly embodies the idea of the Christmas season – but does so each day of the year – every year – all the time – not just in December.

In our lodges we labor, not just at this time of year, to plan and perform acts to help our communities. We strive to teach and show by example our members - our brothers - to deal honestly and fairly with all whom we encounter. We strive to stand on the level with our brothers whether we have known them for years or a day.

Men who adhere to our principles and our beliefs don't care what the religious affiliation is of another member – or any man - or - their political affiliation.

We know that if they are in this room with us, they believe that we have the right to our beliefs just as we believe they have the right to theirs.

The positive energy we attempt to generate in our lodges hopefully makes its way back into the community through the acts of the individual Mason – so we do indeed hope our behavior is highly contagious to others.

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We have been accused of running the world, but we know that is most certainly not the case. I do believe, and history shows, that Freemasonry has at times

changed many things in the world, but as far as running it? We don't even come close.

## **The Man Behind the Story of Father Christmas/Santa Claus**

Now, we all know Santa Claus lives at the North Pole and, because he is a good man who always seems to get better and better – could it be he is a Freemason?

The legend of Santa, like all legends, have a starting point. And his began with St. Nicholas who a Bishop who lived in the fourth century in a place called Myra in Asia Minor (now Turkey).

He was a very rich man because his parents died when he was young and left him great wealth. He was also a very kind man with a reputation for helping the poor and giving gifts to those who needed it but giving them anonymously. There are several legends about St. Nicholas, although we don't know if any of them are true.

The most famous story about St. Nicholas tells how the custom of hanging up stockings to leave presents in first started.

It goes like this:

There was a poor man who had a daughter. He was so poor, he did not have enough money for a dowry, so his daughters couldn't get married. One night, Nicholas secretly dropped a bag of gold down the chimney and into the house. The bag fell into a stocking that had been hung by the fire to dry.

Finally, determined to discover the person who had given him the money, the father secretly hid by the fire every evening until he caught Nicholas dropping in a bag of gold. Nicholas begged the man to not tell anyone what he had done because he did not want to bring attention to himself. But soon the news got out and when anyone received a secret gift, it was thought that maybe it was from Nicholas.

Because of his kindness Nicholas was made a Saint, but did you know that St. Nicholas is not only the saint of children but also of sailors?

One story tells of him helping some sailors that were caught in a violent storm off the coast of Turkey. The storm was raging around them and all the men were terrified that their ship would sink beneath the giant waves. They prayed to St. Nicholas to help them. Suddenly, he was standing on the deck before them. He ordered the sea to be calm, the storm died away, and they were able to sail their ship safely to port.

The historic St. Nicholas was exiled from Myra and later put in prison during the persecution by Emperor Diocletian. In 1087, his bones were stolen from Turkey by Italian merchant sailors. The bones are now kept in the Church named after him in the Italian port of Bari. On St. Nicholas feast day (6th December), the sailors of Bari still carry his statue from the Cathedral out to sea, so that he can bless the waters and so give them safe voyages throughout the year.

So, now we know who St. Nicholas was, but how did he turn into Santa Claus?

In the 16th Century in northern Europe, after The Reformation, the stories and traditions about St. Nicholas became unpopular.

But someone had to deliver presents to children at Christmas, so in England, he became 'Father Christmas' or 'Old Man Christmas', a character from stories and plays during the middle ages throughout Europe. In France, he became known as 'Père Noël'.

In some countries, including parts of Austria and Germany, present givers became the 'Christkind' a golden-haired baby, with wings, who symbolizes the newborn baby Jesus.

In the early United States, his name was 'Kris Kringle' (from *Christkind*). Later, Dutch settlers in America brought the old stories of St. Nicholas with them and Kris Kringle and St Nicholas became 'Sinterklaas' or as we now say, 'Santa Claus.'

By the way - did you know that Rudolph might be a girl? Only female reindeer keep their antlers throughout winter. By Christmas time most males have discarded their antlers and are saving their energy ready to grow a new pair in the spring.

## **The History of Christmas Tree**

Now, that pine tree or artificial tree in your house came from a custom of using evergreen Fir trees to celebrate winter festivals (pagan and Christian alike) for thousands of years.

Pagans used branches of it to decorate their homes during the winter solstice, as it made them think of the spring to come.

The Romans used fir trees to decorate their temples at the festival of Saturnalia. Christians use it as a sign of everlasting life with God.

Nobody is sure when the tops of fir trees were first used as Christmas trees, but it's like to have started about 1,000 years ago in Northern Europe. Many early Christmas Trees were hung upside down from the ceiling using chains (attached to chandeliers and lighting hooks).

Other early Christmas Trees, across many parts of northern Europe, were cherry or hawthorn plants (or a branch of the plant) that were put into pots and brought inside so they would hopefully flower at Christmas time.

If you couldn't afford a real plant, people made pyramids of woods, and they were decorated to look like a tree with paper, apples, and candles. Sometimes they were carried around from house to house, rather than being displayed in a home.

The first documented use of a tree at Christmas and New Year celebrations is argued between the cities of Tallinn in Estonia and Riga in Latvia.

Both claim that they had the first trees; Tallinn in 1441 and Riga in 1510. Both trees were put up by the 'Brotherhood of Blackheads' which was an association of local unmarried merchants, ship owners, and foreigners in Livonia (what is now

Estonia and Latvia). A painting from Germany in 1521 shows a tree being paraded through the streets with a man riding a horse behind it. The man is dressed a bishop, possibly representing St. Nicholas.

The first person to bring a Christmas Tree into a house, in the way we know it today, may have been the 16th-century German preacher Martin Luther. A story is told that one night before Christmas, he was walking through the forest and looked up to see the stars shining through the tree branches. It was so beautiful that he went home and told his children that it reminded him of Jesus, who left the stars of heaven to come to earth at Christmas

The first Christmas Trees came to Britain sometime in the 1830s. They became very popular in 1841 when Prince Albert (Queen Victoria's German husband) had a Christmas Tree set up in Windsor Castle.

In 1848, drawing of "The Queen's Christmas tree at Windsor Castle" was published in the Illustrated London News. The drawing was republished in Godey's Lady's Book, Philadelphia in December 1850 (but they removed the Queen's crown and Prince Albert's mustache to make it look 'American').

Now we know where the Christmas Tree originated, but what about the decorations and the lights?

There are a few different claims as to who invented or popularized the first strings of 'electric' Christmas Tree lights.

In 1880, the famous inventor Thomas Edison put some of his new electric light bulbs around his office.

And in 1882 Edward Johnson, who was a colleague of Edison, hand-strung 80 red, white, and blue bulbs together and put them on his tree in his New York apartment (there were two additional strings of 28 lights mounted from the ceiling).

In 1890, the Edison company published a brochure offering lighting services for Christmas. In 1900, another Edison advert offered bulbs which you could rent, along with their lighting system, for use over Christmas. We find an account in a diary from 1891 where settlers in Montana used electric lights on a tree. However, most people couldn't easily use electric tree lights at this time as electricity wasn't widely installed in homes. But the wealthy liked to show off with lights installed just for Christmas, this would have cost about \$300 per tree at the time - \$300 in the year 1890 is equivalent to \$7,775 today.

Electric tree lights first became widely known in America in 1895 when President Grover Cleveland brought a tree into the White House decorated with lights because his young daughters liked them. The tradition of the National Christmas Tree on the White House lawn started in 1923 with President Calvin Coolidge.

## **The Tradition of Mistletoe at Christmas**

Have you ever wondered why walking under or holding mistletoe over the head of a gal is supposed to guarantee a kiss?

Well, the mistletoe plant grows on a range of trees including willow, apple, and oak trees. (There a lot of mistletoe growing in the trees on our fence line on the left as we drive into the lodge parking lot).

The tradition of hanging it in the house goes back to the times of the ancient Druids. They believed mistletoe was thought to possess magical powers which bring good luck to the household and ward off evil spirits. It was also used as a sign of love and friendship in Norse mythology.

When the first Christians came to Western Europe, some tried to ban the use of mistletoe as a decoration in Churches because of its relationship to the practices of pagan Vikings.

The custom of kissing under mistletoe comes from England although the original custom was that a berry was picked from the sprig of mistletoe. When a berry was picked in front of person you wanted to kiss it signals them that you wished to kiss them. When the berries were all picked, the kissing was supposed to stop.

Now, the unwelcome news. The name mistletoe comes from two Anglo Saxon words - 'Mistel' (which means dung) and 'tan' (which means) twig or stick. So -

you could translate Mistletoe as 'poo on a stick' which tends to make it lose a lot of its appeal...

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Before I close, I'd like to tell you the backstory about two special songs we relate to Christmas.

This is probably the most famous carol of all is *Silent Night*.

In 1816 Pastor Joseph Mohr wrote the words of 'Stille Nacht' as a poem in Mariapfarr, Austria. Two years later, Mohr had moved to Oberndorf known as all things... the Church of St. Nicholas.

According to storytellers, the organ in that church broke down – of all nights – on Christmas Eve the afternoon before the Christmas Eve service.

Music was desperately needed for the Christmas Mass, so Mohr suddenly thought of his two-year-old poem and gave it to his friend Franz Gruber, a local schoolteacher and composer, who was struck by the beauty of the words and immediately sat down and composed a melody for guitar, rather than the church organ.

Remarkably, the melody was completed in time for the Midnight Service, and so was born on the eve of Christmas, the carol, *Silent Night*.'

In December 1914, *Silent Night*, already a favorite carol, took on a new sentimental edge during the first Christmas truce of World War One. It was, it seems, one of the few carols which both English, French, and German soldiers knew, so as

the guns fell silent for an all too brief period that Christmas Eve as the strains of *Silent Night* filled the air on battlefields across Europe.

Now, *Jingle Bells* is one of the liveliest songs we sing this time of the year.

There are bells on bobtails ringing, and horses dashing through the snow, and spirits made bright, and laughter galore. Its tune and lyrics today are clearly synonymous with Christmas, not to mention every time we hear sleigh bells.

There's only one problem: *Jingle Bells* doesn't mention the word Christmas. And, according to the checkered history of the song and its composer, it was written as a drinking song.

This jaunty tune is about frolicking with ladies. If you doubt any of that, just read *all* the lyrics sometime.

It was written in a tavern and first played in a public setting or an audience during a Sunday school program at Thanksgiving to herald the coming of winter and the November holiday.

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As we live in a time that technology affords us all the sad news and tragedy in the world as it is happening - and while people argue whether to say, "Merry Christmas" versus "Happy Holidays," we should remember the truth that this season of the year dates back much further than its Christian beginnings.

With no disrespect or impertinence to any religion intended – one of the important values of the Christmas season

itself may literally be found in its earliest meaning.

The value of the world stopping for a while to reflect, think, ponder, and demonstrate good will and wishes to others cannot go out of fashion.

As Freemasons, we'd all like to believe we do that throughout the entire year – not just in December – but we know we falter on occasion because we too are always striving to become better, and that is a life-long journey.

Brothers, may we all strive to continue to be unified in our wish for peace on Earth and goodwill toward men every day of the year - not just this particular season of the year.

I say this in the most secular way possible – I wish you all a very Merry Christmas– and may this season of the year bring you a special joy and happiness that inspires the promise of a better tomorrow.