

As Muslims who live in the West, we find ourselves surrounded by a culture of capitalism which utilizes anything in its means to further its spread and acceptance. Amid this culture is the widespread acceptance of the 25th of December being the birthday of Jesus Christ. However, as Pastors and Priests of the Christian faith have accepted over the years, this is an erroneous claim. Nevertheless they have continued to re-enact the nativity in their churches and narrate stories surrounding it which clearly demonstrates both their lack of desire for the truth and the way in which they easily accept falsehood and implement it into their religion.

Additionally, there is a phenomenon among a number of Muslims to partake in the Christmas festivities where they erect Christmas trees and exchange gifts. Ignorantly they have assumed that Christmas is typically associated with nationalism rather than theology, and in their fervent desire to assimilate into a British identity they feel obliged to get involved. However, as this essay aims to demonstrate, Christmas is deeply theological and based in pagan, and not Christian beliefs.

This essay hopes to discuss practices in the West which are common during this time of the year as well as discuss numerous paganistic religions from which Christianity has adopted this festival.

Christmas also known as Christ's Mass is probably the most popular celebration that takes place in the West. It is an annual holiday which celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ on the 25th of December. Generally, festivities are combined with secular and pagan customs and begin on the 24th of December until after Boxing Day (26th of December). For a long time people have assumed that Christmas Day is the actual day of the birth of Jesus Christ. However, there is much proof to the contrary which is found in the bible and the books of history.

A close reading of the New Testament provides no specific date for the birth of Jesus. Additionally, only two gospels of the four actually narrate the nativity story although both apparently contradict each other. The Gospel of Luke describes how the archangel Gabriel came to Mary to inform her of a son to be born to her. She responded that she was a virgin to which the angel then stated "nothing will be impossible with God" to which she replied "here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according with the Lord's word"<sup>1</sup>. While pregnant, Mary and her Husband traveled to Bethlehem to register in a census. Having found no room at the inn they lodged in the barn. Meanwhile an angel appeared to some shepherds nearby and informed them of Jesus' birth and a 'heavenly host' appeared to them and said "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."<sup>2</sup> Based on the accounts in Luke of the shepherds' activities, the time of year depicted for Jesus' birth could be either spring or summer thus contradicting the notion that Christ was born in winter .

The Gospel of Matthew contradictorily narrates a different version of events, and relates that the 'good news' was told to Joseph (and not Mary) in a dream, after which he fled with his family to Egypt seeking safety from Herod. Matthew also included the story of the foreign magi (three wise men) although Luke mentions shepherds who are guarding their flock nearby. These contradictions are clearly apparent and have clearly confused most Christians as there is no clear narration detailing Christ's birth, to the extent that most Christians are ignorant of the fact that Jesus is narrated as having traveled to Egypt in the early part of his life. Thus we see many nativity plays which differ from one another where Christians randomly pick and choose events which they believe will increase the entertaining value of the play.

Additionally, paganism manages to sneak into the story in the narration of Matthew. We are told of the magi 'from the East' who come to 'worship' Jesus. The magi's are considered Midian Zoroastrian priests who were experts in astronomy by most historians. Some Muslim commentators have argued that 'worship' here meant *sujud* at *ta'zheem* (prostration out of respect), which is likely if the story is true as Persians were known to prostrate in front of their kings out of respect. However, the narration of Luke contradicts this entire event by stating that shepherds, and not magi, visited Jesus which seems more probable due to the fact that Luke's version is more consistent with Christian theology. Additionally he narrates the verse "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests."<sup>3</sup> Which refutes many Christian beliefs as it implies three things; **a)** that God is not the baby Jesus which is born to Mary based on the fact that God is "in the highest heaven" and Jesus is a baby on Earth; **b)** that Jesus is a man of those "on whom His favor rests."; and **c)** God is in/above the heavens and not everywhere as most Christians and pantheists claim.

Even though there are many major discrepancies in the nativity story, a brief look at Christianity proves that the early Christians disregarded the birthday of Jesus as is evident through the fact that Iraneus and Tertullian<sup>4</sup> did not list Christmas as a Christian festival and omitted it from their list of feasts.<sup>5</sup>

There is additional proof which states that Christians held birthdays as sinful. Origen<sup>6</sup> states "of all the holy people in the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners (like Pharaoh and Herod) who make great rejoicings over the day on which they were born into this world below."<sup>7</sup> Thus theologically, celebrations surrounding birthdays were not only non-existent, but also impermissible in early Christianity.

This then begs the question, when and where did Christmas come about? We find in most records that Christmas began to be practiced as a festival as early as the 4th century by Roman Christians and gained significant prominence when Charlemagne<sup>8</sup> was crowned

in the year 800 AD on the 25th of December. Originally, the pagans celebrated a number of festivals during the winter solstice such as Saturnalia, Sol Invictus and Yule. All of these had a profound contribution in forming Christmas during the spread of Christianity throughout Europe.

Saturnalia was the festival that the pagan Romans celebrated in order to commemorate the temple of Saturn, a god worshipped by the Romans. On this day, just as Christmas day, public festivities would ensue which involved sacrifices and the making and giving of small presents (saturnalia et sigillaricia). Additionally there was a time of general relaxation, feasting, merry-making, and a cessation of formal rules<sup>9</sup>. During Saturnalia, business was postponed and even slaves feasted. There was drinking, gambling, singing, and even public nudity. It was the 'best of days' according to the poet Catullus<sup>10</sup>, a time to 'eat, drink, and be merry'. Pagans decorated their houses with clippings of evergreen shrubs and decorated living trees with bits of metal and replicas of their God, Bacchus. It is noted that Tertullian complained that too many Christians were imitating paganistic practice of adorning their houses with lamps and wreaths of laurel during the winter solstice. In addition, the Talmud and Mishna<sup>11</sup> relate accounts of a pagan festival called Saturnura which has claimed its origins to Adam, the first man, who noticed that the days were getting shorter and assumed that it was punishment for his sin. Afraid that the world was returning to the chaos and emptiness that existed before creation, he fasted for eight days out of repentance. Once he realized that this was the natural cycle of the world, he celebrated for eight days, a tradition which later turned into a pagan festival.<sup>12</sup>

Another pagan festival which has heavily influenced Christmas is Sol Invictus which was celebrated by Romans in veneration of solar deities such as Elah Gabal (also known as Baal), Sol and Mithras. Followers of the god's would gather together on the 25th of December and celebrate Dies Natalis Solis Invicti or 'the birthday of the unconquered sun', the object of veneration. They considered the sun 'unconquered' due to the fact that it 'survives' the reduced daylight hours during the winter solstice. This festival most closely resembles Christmas in that it is on the same day to the extent that a Syriac Bishop wrote: "It was a custom of the Pagans to celebrate on the same 25th December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and revelries the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnised on that day."<sup>13</sup> As is evident, the Church chose the 25th of December as a religious celebration in order to sanctify the fact that Christians were celebrating an openly pagan festival. To that extent the Catholic Encyclopedia states, "The well-known solar feast, however, of Natalis Invicti, celebrated on 25th December, has a strong claim on the responsibility for our December date"<sup>14</sup>.

Most traditions which have passed on to Christians in the UK are derived from Yule which is celebrated in Scandinavia and is used interchangeably with Christmas. Although it became a Christian festival during the process of Christianisation, it was deeply pagan and many traditions were carried over into Christianity, especially the way in which Christmas is practiced in the UK and consequently the United States. When the Germanic peoples began to convert, missionaries found it convenient to provide a Christian reinterpretation of popular pagan holidays such as Yule and allowed the pagan celebrations themselves to go on largely unchanged such as decorating Christmas trees, eating roasted Pig, hanging mistletoe and holly etc. These practices have no basis in Christian texts, and some are actually condemned. For example, as is common during Christmas, many people including Muslims erect Christmas trees in their homes adorning them with decorations such as tinsel, fairy lights and baubles. Underneath the tree there are usually a pile of presents which are opened on Christmas day. However, all of these practices originate from paganism. Erecting trees and adorning them for celebrations originated from pre-Christianity, to the extent that Jeremiah states in the Old Testament "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."<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the actual Christmas trees used in Britain stem from Norse paganism (and their celebrations during Yule), while decorations such as baubles represent the sun synonymous with the festival of Sol Invictus. A practice which resembles Saturnalia is kissing under the mistletoe, and although fornication is explicitly forbidden in Christianity, many people have adopted this pagan practice of kissing strangers using mistletoe as an excuse to satisfy sexual desires. It was first practiced in Britain during solstitial rites among the pagan Druids.

Another major myth and tradition surrounding Christmas is that of Santa Claus. The name is actually a mispronunciation of the Dutch name Sinterklass (from St Nicholas). It is widely held that Santa Claus is a representation of St Nicholas and stories surrounding his charitable life. However, there existed in Germanic and Norse mythology a figure by the name of Odin who was considered a major pagan god who would be 'seen' hunting in the sky during Yule. According to Siefker, children would place their boots, filled with carrot, straw or sugar, near the chimney for Odin's flying horse, Sleipnir, to eat. Odin would then reward those children for their kindness by replacing Sleipnir's food with gifts or sweets.<sup>16</sup> The physical appearance of Odin resembles that of Santa Claus like the beard, hat and staff, and the cloth bag held by the servants to capture naughty children. Although widespread images of Santa Claus are based upon American representations, the basis came from paganism.

Even though most of the West has immersed itself into the Christmas culture without questioning its origins or pagan connotations, the paganisation of the Christian faith has not gone unnoticed by all, rather we see in the past that Christmas was rejected by many Protestant groups during the 16th century, and in addition, Puritans of 17th century England and America banned the festival of Christmas as pagan. Oliver Cromwell also banned Christmas after the English Civil War due to the belief that it was a pagan belief which encouraged sin and immorality interpolated into the Christian faith. Christians such as Jehovah Witnesses continue to hold beliefs similar to the Puritans and reject the notion of Christmas altogether.

We also find that the process of secularization has caused Christmas in the past few years to lose all remnants of the Christian faith and has made it a secular holiday with paganistic practices. Capitalist ideals have utilized the festival to make even more money from theologically ignorant shoppers, causing them to drown in debt. As Muslims we must refrain from becoming involved in such practices whether it is in the name of nationalism or integration. The messenger of Allah stated "whoever imitates a people is one of them" [Reported by Abu Dawud].

«من تشبه بقوم فهو منهم» رواه ابو داود

And **Abdullah Ibn al-'Aas said:** "Whoever lives in the land of the mushrikeen and celebrates their Nawrooz (New Year) and their Mahrajaan (festivals), and imitates them until he dies, he will be a loser on the Day of Resurrection." This is not to say that Muslims should not shop during this period but there are some that are affected by the culture of capitalism and squander during the Christmas period. It is not an innocent festival based on regional customs, but an ideological celebration based on the theological beliefs of Christians and pagans, and used by capitalists to exploit citizens.

Allah the Most High stated, { And those who do not witness falsehood, and if they pass by some evil play or evil talk, they pass by it with dignity. } [Al-Furqan 25:72]

{وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَشْهَدُونَ الزُّورَ وَإِذَا مَرُّوا بِاللَّغْوِ مَرُّوا كِرَامًا} الفرقان: 72

Transliteration: Waallatheena la yashhadoona alzooora waitha marroo biiallaghwi marroo kiran

We as Muslims should pass this festival by with dignity, refraining from the office 'parties', Christmas celebrations, the exchange of gifts, and even exchanging Christmas greetings. There are a number of reasons for this:

**Firstly**, to become involved in a festival is to sanction the beliefs behind such a festival and as Muslims we are forbidden to sanction anything other than Islam. Just as we as Muslims distance ourselves from celebrations such as Diwali (Hinduism) and Hanukkah

(Judaism), we must also do so with Christmas. By celebrating Christmas, not only do we sanction pagan and Christian practices, but we imply that the festival is pleasing to us and that Islam is not complete as it missed out on the festival of Christmas.

Allah states, {This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My Favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.} [Al-Ma'idah 5:3]

{الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتَمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا} المائدة: 3

Transliteration: alyawma akmaltu lakum deenakum waatmamtu AAalaykum niAAamatee waradeetu lakumu alislama deenan

**Secondly**, Allah describes Christians as "those who went astray" in the opening chapter of the Qur'an, thus to celebrate something that is not even sanctioned in their religion is to imply that their straying is of no consequence.

**Thirdly**, to take part in their festivities or to give greetings such as 'merry/happy Christmas' is to encourage and congratulate them in their actions instead of censuring them for their falsehood. This is in opposition to Qur'anic teachings whereby Allah states,

{They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they enjoin Al-Ma'ruf (Islamic Monotheism, and following Prophet Muhammad SAW) and forbid Al-Munkar (polytheism, disbelief and opposing Prophet Muhammad SAW); and they hasten in (all) good works; and they are among the righteous.} [Al-'Imran 3:114]

{يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَأُولَئِكَ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ} آل عمران: 114

Transliteration: Yuminoona biAllahi waalyawmi alakhiri wayamuroona bialmaAAroofi wayanhawna AAani almunkari wayusariAAoona fee alkhayrati waolaika mina alssaliheena

{Help you one another in Al-Birr and At-Taqwa (virtue, righteousness and piety); but do not help one another in sin and transgression. And fear Allah. Verily, Allah is Severe in punishment.} [Al-Ma'idah 5:2]

{وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ} المائدة: 2

Transliteration: wataAAawanoo AAaalaalbirri waalttaqwa wala taAAawanoo AAala alithmi waalAAudwani waittaqoo Allaha inna Allaha shadeedu alAAiqabi

Muslims, by the grace of Allah, have been afforded a complete way of life which details that which is best and most beneficial for the entire human race. We have the Qur'an and sunnah, and to cling to them is an aspect of the faith, regardless of the taunts

of liberal Muslims and non-Muslims who may call us 'radicals' and 'fundamentalists' since being fundamental is part of Islam as A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) narrates that the prophet (peace be upon him) said "Whoever innovates something in this matter of ours (Islam) that is not a part of it, will have it rejected." [Reported by Al-Bukhari]

«من أحدث في أمرنا هذا ما ليس فيه فهو رد» رواه البخاري

Christmas remains a stark warning and example to Muslims of what can happen to Islam if we were to accept innovations into our faith. To cling to the Qur'an and sunnah as understood by the salaf is the only way to remain within the sanctified parameters of our deen, and thus, Christmas is a notion which calls for the awareness of the Muslim laity to be mindful about those from whom they take their religion and knowledge. We thank Allah for preserving our faith and pray that he bestow upon us the ability to stay on the Straight Path.

**Notes:**

1. Luke 1:31-38
2. Luke 2:8-15
3. Luke 2:8-15
4. Early distinguished fathers and scholars of the Christian Church.
5. The Catholic Encyclopedia
6. An early Christian scholar and theologian who is considered one of the most distinguished early fathers of the Christian Church.
7. Origen, in Levit., Hom. VIII, in Migne P.G., XII, 495
8. Considered the father of Europe
9. <http://www.cs.utk.edu/~mclennan/BA/SF/WinSol.html>
10. <http://www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Article/242252>
11. Important Jewish texts
12. Avodah Zara 8a
13. Cited in MacMullen. R. Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries. Yale:1997
14. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04636c.htm>
15. Jeremiah 10:3-4
16. Siefker. P. Santa Claus, Last of the Wild Men: The Origins and Evolution of Saint Nicholas, Spanning 50,000 Years. McFarland:1997