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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

A Unitarian “O Holy Night”

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“O Holy Night” has become one of the world’s most beloved Christmas carols, but many people do not know how radical and justice-oriented this song is—or how it intersects with UU history—and I would like to us to explore the journey of how this song developed and evolved.

Our tale begins 173 years ago in 1847 with a man named Placide Cappeau from a small town in the south of France called Roquemaure. He earned a living as a wine merchant, but his first love was writing poetry. Although he wasn’t particularly religious, when the local Catholic priest asked him to write an original poem to be read at that year’s Christmas mass, he readily agreed to the honor ([Collins](#) 132).

As the story goes, he began reading the birth narratives from the Gospel of Luke on a stagecoach ride to Paris. As he imagined what it would have been like to be there in person for those ancient events, inspiration struck, and he completed the poem by the end of that stagecoach journey. He titled his poem “*Minuit, chrétiens*,” which translates into English as ‘Midnight, Christians’ ([Collins](#) 132-133).

Cappeau really liked his poem, and felt that it was worthy of being set to music, so he passed it along to his friend Adolphe Adam, a classically trained musician. On the one hand, Adam was more than qualified for the task: “In his mid twenties, he wrote his first opera and thereafter wrote two operas a year until his death at age fifty-two” ([Morgan](#) 25). On the other hand, Adam was Jewish, so he didn’t believe in the

Christian theology of the song. But he did believe it was a beautiful poem. And he quickly set Cappeau's words to music as "*Cantique de Noël*" ("Song of Christmas").

Both Cappeau and the priest who originally asked him to write an original Christmas poem were delighted with the end result, and the world premiere was a mere three weeks later at a midnight mass on Christmas Eve (Collins 133).

The song quickly became a popular Christmas favorite in France until the poet Cappeau left the Catholic Church to join the socialist movement. Conservative clerics seized on that scandal along with Adam's Judaism as reason to denounce the song. Officially, church leaders declared the "*Cantique de Noël*" 'unfit for church services because of its lack of musical taste [compared to Gregorian chant] and its 'total absence of the spirit of religion.'" But it was too late. Many French people continued to sing the popular song each year (134).

A decade after "*Cantique de Noël*" debuted in French, a former Unitarian minister named John Sullivan Dwight translated the song into English as "O Holy Night." I'll give you just a little of his story. Dwight was a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School. He was then ordained as a Unitarian minister and began serving a UU congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts. That congregation still exists today as the "Unitarian Society of Northampton & Florence."

Rev. Dwight, however, found that he had increasingly worse panic attacks anytime he needed to speak in front of his congregation. This condition became so serious that he felt that he had no choice but to resign his pulpit. The good news is that he was both intelligent and a great writer. He combined those talents—along with his love of music—to become America's first influential classical music critic. And he is particularly well-known for introducing Beethoven to the American public (Morgan 25).

Dwight also continued to be involved in Unitarian circles, particularly Transcendentalism. Of particular note is that Dwight was the Director of the school at Brook Farm, a Transcendentalist experiment in communal living. I've written a whole sermon previously on the fascinating agonies and ecstasies of that utopian experiment at Brook Farm, so I won't go into detail now. Suffice it to say that although there were serious shadow sides to Brook Farm, it is also true that there were "days that began with choruses of Mozart and Haydn by the Brook Farm choir, afternoons interrupted in

order to read Dante's great work in the original, and evenings featuring dramatic tableaux, lectures, and dancing" (DeLane xi).

And in 1855, a few years after the end of the Brook Farm utopian experiment, Dwight happened upon the French song "*Cantique de Noël*" in the process of researching potential new classical music to review. Dwight, along with many of his fellow Transcendentalists, were abolitionists who supported the end of enslavement in America. Keep in mind that in 1855, the Civil War was little more than five years in the future (Collins 136).

Dwight was particularly struck by the lyrics in Verse Three. The original French translates literally as:

The Redeemer has broken every bond
The Earth is free, and Heaven is open.
**He sees a brother where there was only a slave,
Love unites those whom iron had chained.**

When Dwight fully rendered these words poetically into English as "O Holy Night" they became the now more familiar lyrics:

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
**Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;
And in His name all oppression shall cease.**

In this time when many of us are seeking to be in increasing solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, knowing more about the abolitionist origins of this Christmas carol makes the song even more powerful. And what an incredible origin story it is:

- a not-particularly-religious wine merchant is inspired to write a Christmas poem,
- the lyrics were then set to stunning original music by a Jewish man who didn't believe the words literally (but nonetheless believed them to be beautiful and meaningful), and finally,
- this French classic was translated into English by a Unitarian abolitionist.

With this background in mind, I invite you to hear the first verse of "*Cantique de Noël*" in the original French version followed by the radical third verse of "O Holy Night"

in English. *May our hearts, minds, and spirit be open to hearing this song again as if for the first time.*