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How UUs Helped Invent Christmas

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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So much has conspired to make this moment possible: for each of us to *be here* (whether online or in person) and for *there to be* this living tradition called Unitarian Universalism in which we all have the freedom to weave together not only the best of what has come before, but also contemporary innovations that feel right to us.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity twice to teach a graduate class in UU history for aspiring UU ministers, and for this Christmas Eve I would like to briefly share a few parts of our UU history that relate to how our Christmas traditions came to be, especially here in the U.S. If you are interested in going deeper, my colleague The Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie has written a fascinating—and quite short and accessible—book titled **How the Unitarians and the Universalists Invented Christmas: An Anthology of Historical Unitarian Christmas Stories.**

I'm sure the Methodists, Baptists, Catholics and others could tell their version of this story, but you came to a UU congregation for Christmas, so you are getting *our* propaganda this evening!

Still, let's be frank, Dr. Ritchie is making a pretty high-falutin' claim. What does she mean, that our UU forebears *invented* Christmas? I'll limit myself to three examples.

But it's important first to set the stage. If we could turn back the clock 400 years, we would *not* find the alleged "War on Christmas" that makes headlines around this time each year — the "war" during which fundamentalist Christians are angry about a trend toward a more inclusive greeting of "Happy Holidays." **In the 1600s, it was the *Pilgrims* — the conservative Christians of their day — who were waging a war on Christmas.** Here's the thing: the Pilgrims, who actually *read the Bible* closely, knew that there was nothing in there about the date of Jesus's birthday. And in particular, they thought linking Jesus' birth to the pagan Winter Solstice was a terrible idea.

If there had been anything like the possibility of a safe, respectful Pilgrim-Pagan interfaith dialogue back then, the pagans would've been like "*Strong agree!* Step off our Winter Solstice!"

Ironically, in the 1600s, it was all the *secular* folks who loved "making merry" on Christmas. They were all about getting their pagan Yule on in Jesus's name, while the Pilgrims frowned sternly at such frivolity. Indeed, **"For parts of the 17th century, it was illegal to observe Christmas in [parts of] colonial America"** (Ritchie 1).

Keeping this combative history of Christmas in mind, let's fast-forward 200 hundred years to the nineteenth century for our first example of the UUs helping invent Christmas as we have come to know it. In 1818, the Rev. Aaron Bancroft, the Unitarian minister of the Congregational Church in Wooster, Massachusetts, preached *against*

puritanical anti-Christmas polemics. Taking a position that feels very UU, he said that it ultimately doesn't matter if the Bible lacks a specific date for Jesus's birth. As modern humans, we shouldn't allow the past to unduly constrain us: **“As long as both the holiday and the date [are] agreeable and convenient to people,” we should be free to do what feels right to us.**

Here's a brief quote from his Christmas Day sermon from 1818:

The New Testament has not appointed anniversary services in commemoration of the birth of [Jesus]. If we celebrate this event, we should consider it as a privilege with which we are indulged, not as a duty divinely enjoined...and should any object to the time of this celebration, on the plea, that we have not conclusive proof respecting the day...our answer is, the objection on the point before us has no force.

At that point I'm told he dropped the mic and walked away. Actually, he probably continued on for another hour. After all, in 1818, they didn't have Netflix to get home to! And the sermon was the entertainment of the day.

To give you a **second example** of how our UUs helped invent Christmas, let's turn to the *Universalist* half of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. In 1789, the Universalist community of Boston “hosted the first public religious observance of Christmas in the new world” (2). Previously there had been Episcopal and Catholic masses on Christmas, but those services were mostly their usual weekly elements of mass, with only a few special Christmas parts sprinkled in. The Universalist innovation was a unique Christmas service, with all the elements specially selected for that holiday — akin to the nature of the service we are celebrating this evening (*ibid*).

A third and final example is that **Christmas trees here in the U.S. were “explicitly introduced by Unitarians (and Abolitionist Unitarians at that!)”** (4). In 1837, Harriet Martineau, a British Unitarian who is often called the first female sociologist, published a book about her travels in the U.S. She wrote about witnessing “the first American introduction of the German Christmas tree tradition” — bringing “*O Tannenbaum*” to America. It happened in 1835 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the home of a German immigrant, the Rev. Charles Follen, a Unitarian minister who was also the first professor of German at Harvard University. A few days before Christmas that year, Harvard gave Follen the very unwelcome present of firing him for being so publicly supportive of the movement to abolish slavery. Not a good look for Harvard.

That Christmas, Martineau, a fellow abolitionist, spent time with the Follen family, and she wrote about Follen’s view of how the Christmas tree could help cultivate a moral life by encouraging gift giving. Note that their focus was on the virtue of *giving* presents, not the delight of *getting* presents.

This is another point where it’s important to keep the historical context in mind:

Not only was the custom of German Christmas trees not fully established until well into the 19th century...[but also] children using the tree to give rather than receive gifts was...not widespread practice. But the idea of using the tree to teach generosity proved irresistible to the American liberals, and soon many Unitarians and others were actively promoting the Christmas tree. (6-7)

And so ends the tale, at least for now, of how UUs helped invent Christmas. But the story continues as we each discern how we feel called to meaningfully celebrate Christmas in our own day and time. I am grateful to be on that journey with all of you.