

The Joy of Hope



Of late, many would contend that it is not politically correct to even mention “Christmas” in a mixed setting for fear that you could offend someone, citing the religious nature of the holiday. But if you really examine the traditions of the season, the mixture of various cultures and religions is blatant. The season cannot be pigeonholed to any one set of traditions. The admixture of what we celebrate on December 25 lends itself to beliefs of every kind. Santa Claus has definitely taken center stage in the most recent times due to the opulence of the Western world. So, without any fear of offending during this vast admixture of a holiday season, we take the opportunity to send you the warmest and politest of season’s greetings.

Christmas off to a Rough Start in the New World



It is not just in the 21st century that Americans have become uncertain about where this winter holiday should fit into our culture. In the very first years of the European colonies in America there

was already a debate. The governor of the first colonists who landed at Plymouth Rock in what is now Massachusetts was of the persuasion that it was a very “un-Christian” celebration. History records that it was banned by the Pilgrims.

Early in the 17th century, some Puritan groups separated from the Church of England. Among these were the Pilgrims, who in 1620 founded Plymouth Colony.

Christopher Jones, master of the Mayflower, wrote in the ship’s log:

“At anchor in Plymouth harbor; Christmas Day, but not observed by these colonists, they being opposed to all saints’ days... A large party went ashore this morning to fell timber and begin building. They began to erect the first house about twenty feet square for their common use, to receive them and their goods... No man rested all that day.”

On Christmas Day, 1621, after one full year of being in the new land, two other shiploads of newcomers had joined the hardy Separatist band in the Plymouth colony. They had a new brand of Protestant religion. It looked to be more religious in one way, but betrayed itself in its fruit. Governor William Bradford wrote in his own journal:



"Year 1621, only I shall remember one passage more, rather of mirth than of weight. On ye day called Christmas-day, ye Govr [William Bradford] called them out to worke, (as was used,) but ye most of this new-company excused them selves and said it wente against their consciences to work on that day. So ye Govr tould them that if they made it mater of conscience, he would spare them till they were better informed. So he led-away ye rest and left them; but when they came home at noone from their worke, he found them in ye streete at play, openly; some pitching ye barr, & some playing ball, and such like sports. So he went to them, and tooke away their implements, and told them that was against his conscience, that they should play while others worked. If they made the keeping of it a matter of devotion, let them stay in their houses, but there should be no gaming or revelling in the streets. Since which time nothing hath been attempted that way, at least openly."

A few years later, the Puritan state church became even more strict in their disapproval of the celebration of Christmas. These Puritans were not Separatists (as were the Pilgrims at Plymouth), although their colony, established at the present site of Boston, was established as a religious and political sanctuary. They completely banned the celebration of Christmas.

In Puritan New England, Christmas remained a

working day, the violation of which was punishable by fine or dismissal from the colony. In 1659, the Massachusetts Puritans declared the observation of Christmas to be a criminal offense by passing the Five-Shilling Anti-Christmas Law:

Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas, or the like, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or any other way upon such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for each offense five shillings as a fine to the country.

The Five-Shilling Law was finally repealed in 1681, under pressure from London. A child missing school on Christmas Day in Boston public schools as late as 1870 would be punished and possibly dismissed. Workmen missing work could also be penalized or dismissed.

In 1687, the Rev. Increase Mather of Boston wrote:

"The generality of Christmas-keepers observe that festival after such a manner as is highly dishonourable to the name of Christ. How few are there comparatively that spend those holidays (as they are called) after a holy manner. But they are consumed in Computations, in Interludes, in playing at Cards, in Revelling, in excess of wine, in mad Mirth..."



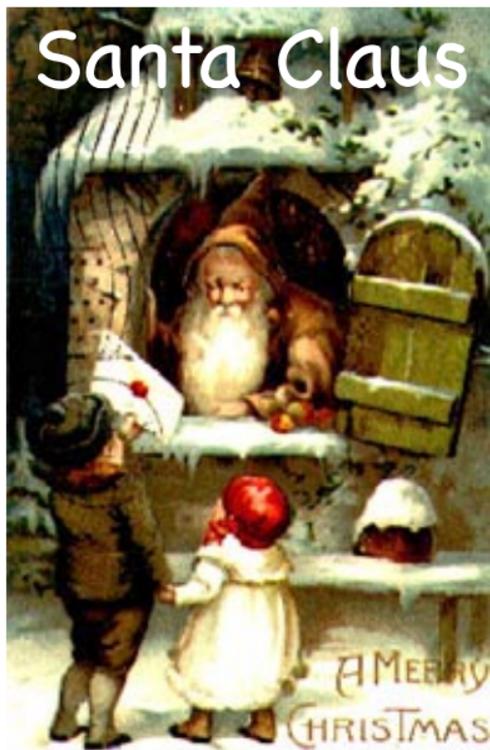
The Puritans brought strong religious impulses to bear in all colonies north of Virginia, but New England was their stronghold, and the Congregationalist churches established there were able to perpetuate their viewpoint about a Christian society for more than 200 years.

It is this type of religious state government that many people today fear. Religious holidays being so connected to government paints a gloomy picture for those who hope for more tolerance. But tolerance can also be a guise for another form of suppression. For fear of a lawsuit, the shopkeeper restrains himself from even giving a cheery greeting now during the holiday season. Now it is not the established church, but instead the law of political correctness that binds us. ♦



The tradition is a long and very controversial one — the kind old man who gives gifts to poor children. Maybe it originated with an old man who was called a “saint” by the powerful religion of the Roman Empire — St. Nicholas. Maybe it was rather a cultural myth from some Scandinavian country that found comfort in the gentle and generous white-haired man. Perhaps the tradition evolved from something much more sinister, as is believed by some. Regardless of its origin, this Santa Claus ritual has overwhelmed our Western world.

Though we do not know exactly where it came from originally, we have historical records that still remain from the not-too-distant past. Oh, how lovely the thought of kindness as depicted in the very old card from Europe (above). This dates from before Santa grew so fat and clothed himself in such gaudy attire.





The Santa we know today had his beginnings in 1823 with Clement C. Moore's poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," in which he described St. Nicholas as "chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf."

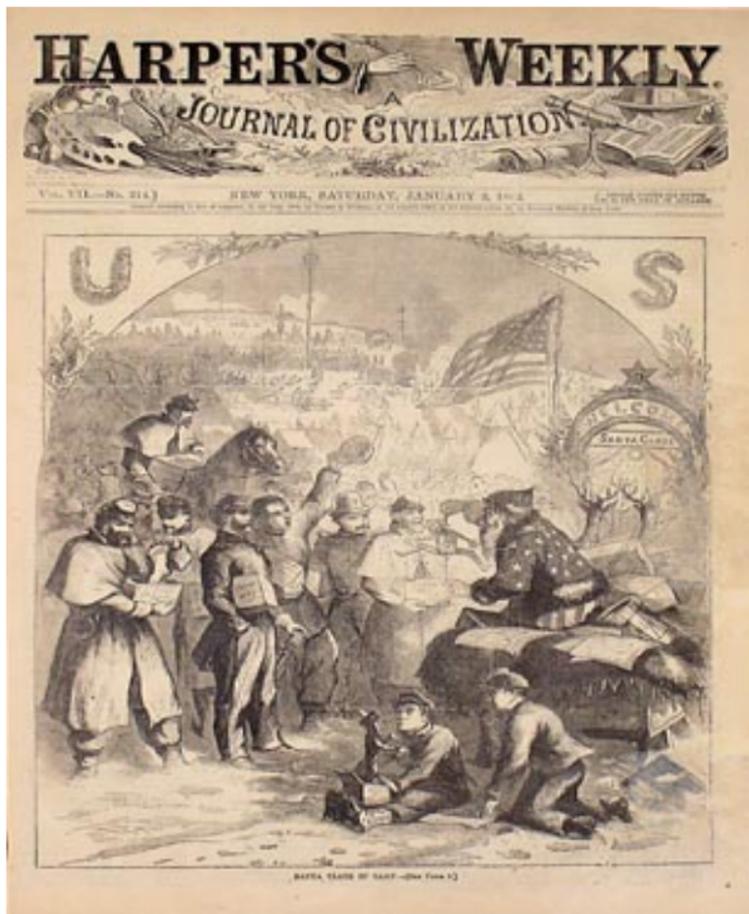
Forty years later, Thomas Nast, a political cartoonist,

created a different illustration each year of Santa for the cover of *Harper's Weekly*. His Santa was a plump, jolly old fellow with a white beard and smoking a long-stemmed pipe.

In 1863, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln asked Nast to do an illustration showing Santa with the Union troops. Many historians say this was one of the most demoralizing moments for the Confederate army — seeing Santa side with the North.

In the South, the Union had blockaded their ports

by 1863, and very little was able to get through. Southern families explained to their children that even “Santa” could not get through the blockade.



Finally, from 1931 to 1964, Haddon Sundblom created a new Santa each Christmas for Coca-Cola advertisements, which appeared worldwide on the back covers of *The Post* and *National Geographic* magazines. This is the Santa we know today with a red suit trimmed with white fur, leather boots and belt, a long white beard and a pack of toys slung onto his back.

Having Santa call us to remember to drink our Coke has been an incredibly powerful advertising technique over the last seventy years. Doctors can tell us whether we are better off from having taken Santa's advice on that one!



To Tell or not to Tell?

Though it has often been considered, studied, and analyzed, the experts remain divided on the issue of whether it is good to tell your child about him — the man in the red suit.

A hope that is instilled in a tender young one can be easily crushed by the harsh realities of life. That is why there is such pleasure in observing the delight of the hopeful little faces who await that kind phantom who



visits their homes with such generosity on Christmas Eve. Life normally does not provide them with equally inspiring encounters.

But psychologists are skeptical about the benefits in the long run of allowing such a hope to simmer in a young child, only to see it mocked out of existence by peers, or to have the truth shockingly exposed to them some other way. The crushing of such a hope can be devastating.

The Scripture quotes Solomon, the son of King David, as saying, **“Hope deferred makes the heart grow sick. But when it is fulfilled it is the tree of life.”** Proverbs 13:12

To most, the Santa story seems only a harmless myth that must one day come to an end. But others wonder whether it could actually extinguish the flickering childlike trust in parents and friends.

Hope is certainly a treasure we could all agree upon as a reason to celebrate, for nothing is more incurable than the disease of hopelessness...

“For in hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”

Romans 8:24,25

The Evergreen Christmas Tree Has Deep Roots

The Romans celebrated the winter solstice with a feast called Saturnalia in honor of Saturnus, the god of agriculture. They decorated their houses with greens and lights and exchanged gifts. They gave coins for prosperity, pastries for happiness, and lamps to light one's journey through life.

Centuries ago in Great Britain, priests called Druids used evergreens during mysterious winter solstice rituals. The Druids used holly and mistletoe as symbols of eternal life, and placed evergreen branches over doors to keep away evil spirits.

Late in the Middle Ages, Germans and Scandinavians placed evergreen trees inside their homes or just outside their doors to show their hope in the forthcoming spring. Our modern Christmas tree evolved from these early traditions.

Legend has it that Martin Luther began the tradition of decorating trees to celebrate Christmas. One crisp Christmas Eve, about the year 1500, he was walking through snow-covered woods and was struck by the beauty of a group of small evergreens.

Their branches, dusted with snow, shimmered in the moonlight. When he got home, he set up a little fir tree indoors so he could share this story with his children. He decorated it with candles, which he lighted in honor of Christ's birth.

The Christmas tree tradition most likely came to the United States with Hessian troops during the American Revolution, or with German immigrants to Pennsylvania and Ohio. But the custom spread slowly. The Puritans had originally banned Christmas in New England. Even as late as 1851, a Cleveland, Ohio, minister nearly lost his job because he allowed a tree in his church. Schools in Boston stayed open on Christmas Day through 1870, and sometimes expelled students who stayed home.

The Christmas tree market was born in 1851 when Catskill farmer Mark Carr hauled two ox sleds of evergreens into New York City and sold them all. By 1900, one in five American families had a Christmas tree, and twenty years later the custom was nearly universal.

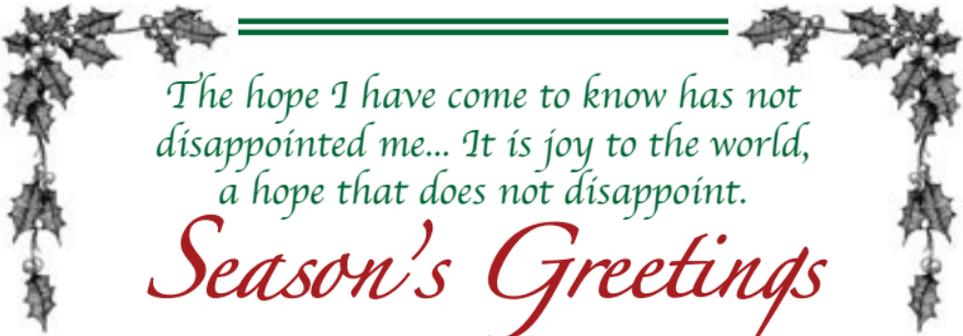
*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
Much pleasure doth thou bring me!
For every year the Christmas tree,
Brings to us all both joy and glee*

Curiouser and Curiouser

In relation to the custom of Christmas trees, some have considered the Bible passage from the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 10:2-5):

"Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. 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..."





*The hope I have come to know has not
disappointed me... It is joy to the world,
a hope that does not disappoint.*

Season's Greetings

Significant Greetings by

