

THE WINTER SOLSTICE & CHRISTMAS

We are in the Winter Solstice, the period at which the Sun entering the sign of Capricornus has already, since December 21st, ceased to advance in the Southern Hemisphere, and, cancer or crab-like, begins to move back. It is at this particular time that, every year, he is born, and December 25th was the *day of the birth of the Sun* for those who inhabited the Northern Hemisphere. It is also on December the 25th, Christmas, the day with the Christians on which the “Saviour of the World” was born, that were born, ages before him, the Persian Mithra, the Egyptian Osiris, the Greek Bacchus, the Phoenician Adonis, the Phrygian Athis. And, while at Memphis the people were shown the image of the god *Day*, taken out of his cradle, the Romans marked December 25th in their calendar as the day *natalis solis invicti*.

Sad derision of human destiny. So many Saviours of the world born unto it, so much and so often propitiated, and yet the world is as miserable – nay, far more wretched now than ever before – as though none of these had ever been born! “The Year is Dead, Long Live The Year!” H. P. Blavatsky

And let no one imagine that it is a mere fancy, the attaching of importance to the birth of the year. The earth passes through its definite phases and man with it; and as a day can be coloured so can a year. The astral life of the earth is young and strong between Christmas and Easter. Those who form their wishes now will have added strength to fulfill them consistently. (HPB, “1888”)

The Winter Solstice

or **hibernal solstice**, also known as **midwinter**, is an astronomical phenomenon marking the day with the shortest period of daylight and the longest night of the year. It occurs when one of the Earth's poles has its maximum tilt away from the Sun. It happens twice yearly, once in each hemisphere. In the Northern Hemisphere this is the December solstice and in the Southern Hemisphere this is the June solstice.

The axial tilt of Earth and gyroscopic effects of its daily rotation mean that the two opposite points in the sky to which the Earth's axis of rotation points (axial precession) change very slowly (at the current rate it would take just under 26,000 years to make a complete circle). As the Earth follows its orbit around the Sun, the polar hemisphere that faced away from the Sun, experiencing winter, will, in half a year, face towards the Sun and experience summer. This is because the two hemispheres face opposite directions along Earth's axis, and so as one polar hemisphere experiences winter, the other experiences summer.

Worldwide, interpretation of the event has varied across cultures, but many have held a recognition of rebirth, involving holidays, festivals, gatherings, rituals or other celebrations around that time.

The solstice may have been a special moment of the annual cycle for some cultures even during neolithic times. Astronomical events were often used to guide activities such as the mating of animals, the sowing of crops and the monitoring of winter reserves of food. Many cultural mythologies and traditions are derived from this.

This is attested by physical remains in the layouts of late Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeological sites, such as Stonehenge in England and Newgrange in Ireland. The primary axes of both of these monuments seem to have been carefully aligned on a sight-line pointing to the winter solstice sunrise (Newgrange) and the winter solstice sunset (Stonehenge). It is significant that at Stonehenge the Great Trilithon was oriented outwards from the middle of the monument, i.e. its smooth flat face was turned towards the midwinter Sun.

The winter solstice was immensely important because the people were economically dependent on monitoring the progress of the seasons. Starvation was common during the first months of the winter, January to April (northern hemisphere) or July to October (southern hemisphere), also known as "the famine months". In temperate climates, the midwinter festival was the last feast celebration, before deep winter began. Most cattle were slaughtered so they would not have to be fed during the winter, so it was almost the only time of year when a plentiful supply of fresh meat was available. The majority of wine and beer made during the year was finally fermented and ready for drinking at this time. The concentration of the observances were not always on the day commencing at midnight or at dawn, but at the beginning of the pagan day, which in many cultures fell on the previous eve.

Because the event was seen as the reversal of the Sun's ebbing presence in the sky, concepts of the birth or rebirth of sun gods have been common and, in cultures which used cyclic calendars based on the winter solstice, the "year as reborn" was celebrated with reference to life-death-rebirth deities or "new beginnings" such as Hogmanay's *redding*, a New Year cleaning tradition. Also "reversal" is yet another frequent theme, as in Saturnalia's slave and master reversals. The pagan Scandinavian and Germanic people of northern Europe celebrated a twelve-day "midwinter" (winter solstice) holiday called Yule (also called Jul, Julblot, jólablót, midvinterblot, julofferfest). Many modern Christmas traditions, such as the Christmas tree, the Christmas wreath, the Yule log, and others, are direct descendants of Yule customs. Scandinavians still call Christmas "*Jul*". In English, the word "Yule" is often used in combination with the season "yuletide" a usage first recorded in 900. It is believed that the celebration of this day was a worship of these peculiar days, interpreted as the reawakening of nature. The Yule (Jul) particular god was Jólnir, which is one of Odin's many names.

Roman cult of Sol

Sol Invictus ("The Unconquered Sun") was originally a Syrian god who was later adopted as the chief god of the Roman Empire under Emperor Aurelian. His holiday is traditionally celebrated on December 25, as are several gods associated with the winter solstice in many pagan traditions. It has been speculated to be the reason behind Christmas' proximity to the solstice.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_solstice

ASTRONOMOS (Greek)

The title given to the Initiate in the Seventh Degree of the reception of the Mysteries.

In days of old, Astronomy was synonymous with Astrology; and the great Astrological Initiation took place in Egypt at Thebes, where the priests perfected, if they did not wholly invent the science.

Having passed through the degrees of Pastophoros, Neocoros, Melanophoros, Kistophoros, and Balahala (the degree of Chemistry of the Stars), the neophyte was taught the mystic signs of the Zodiac, in a circle dance representing the course of the planets (the dance of Krishna and the Gopis, celebrated to this day in Rajputana); after which he received a cross, the Tau (or Tat), becoming an Astronomos and a Healer. (See *Isis Unveiled* Vol. II 365). Astronomy and Chemistry were inseparable in these studies.

“Hippocrates had so lively a faith in the influence of the stars on animated beings, and on their diseases, that he expressly recommends not to trust to physicians who are ignorant of astronomy.” (Arago.)

Unfortunately the key to the final door of Astrology or Astronomy is lost by the modern Astrologer; and without it, how can he ever be able to answer the pertinent remark made by the author of *Mazzaroth*, who writes: “people are said to be born under one sign, while in reality they are born under another, because *the sun is now seen among different stars at the equinox*”?

Nevertheless, even the few truths he does know brought to his science such eminent and scientific believers as Sir Isaac Newton, Bishops Jeremy and Hall, Archbishop Usher, Dryden, Flamstead, Ashmole, John Milton, Steele, and a host of noted Rosicrucians.

Theosophical Glossary, HPB 39-40

The Divine Birth

Excerpts from Robert Crosbie's article

Take, then, such a being as Christ, who to us for the most part stands as the unique example of a divine birth. Up through all the stages that we have passed, He passed; as we now are, He once was; whatever knowledge He had, He had to gain from the universal ocean of knowledge; whatever power He had, He gained from the exhaustless reservoir of infinite force; whatever philanthropy, whatever altruism, whatever beneficence, whatever kindness and selflessness in His heart, He drew from that exhaustless ocean of Compassion which is Spirit itself.

We have the same power. The *moment* we recognize that fact, we will begin to act as spiritual beings. Whenever we no longer believe we are mortal, but see that we must be immortal, we will begin to act that way. When we see that we are not separate from our fellow-beings above or below, that we are bound together by a thousand chords, physical and metaphysical, we will begin to act as we see members of the body act toward each other; coherently, concordantly, fraternally, toward all men, regardless of how they act.

Great beings come among us in our guise; but they are divine beings who have taken a divine birth into human form. What is, then, from that point of view, a divine birth? They come knowing *why* They come. They choose Their time, Their place, Their circumstances, Their epoch and Their work.

And They come for the sake of the younger brothers, yourself and myself; not to emancipate us – no man can emancipate another from the bonds of ignorance – but to point to us the road of emancipation. That road is so simple that the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err. It begins in simple altruism, in the simple practice in thought and speech and act of the Golden Rule. It is the life of doing service, spoken of in the Gita; but the moment a man endeavors to live a life of service to his fellow men, then, and not until then, does he discover his spiritual ignorance.

The hardest thing in this world is to do good, but when a man starts out to practise the Golden Rule, he gets his reward by finding out how ignorant he is in the attempt to do good. He makes as his modulus through life to think good, do good, say good; then he begins to ask questions of those who have shown down the ages that They know *how* to do good, and behold, he finds that practically the only good They could do for humanity was by precept and by example.

When a man begins to ask questions, then he sees that the greatest service a man can render a fellow-man, is to point the path of freedom from bondage. There be many who can aid a man sick in body to recover his health; there are multitudes who can help a man whose mind is empty to fill it; but who can help to fill the empty heart? Who can help the desolate soul? Who can help to bring peace and calm and courage to the lost spirit so lost that it no longer believes in the reality of its own existence, the nature of its own identity?

That is the real help which comes from first doing service and next from asking questions. After that, the way grows clearer and clearer until, in no long time, the man is able to hear the voice of spirit as apart from the voice of matter; the man is able to contact the life that is endless in the midst of the life that is mortal. To reach that point, where comes the first faint auroral glimpse – the herald of the dawning moment when he finds the real God in himself – is the divine birth for that man. It waits for us all; it presses unceasingly upon us all, demanding that we do service, that we ask questions not in regard to the road to physical birth or physical death, but to the road of knowledge of our essential being and immortal powers. (*"Theosophy"* Magazine, Vol. XI, p. 86-88)

(also in the *ULT* pamphlet no. 23 “Christmas”)

Christmas Then and Christmas Now

by *H. P. Blavatsky*

We are reaching the time of the year when the whole Christian world is preparing to celebrate the most noted of its solemnities – the birth of the Founder of their religion. When this paper reaches its Western subscribers, there will be festivity and rejoicing in every house. In North Western Europe and in America the holly and ivy will decorate each home, and the churches bedecked with evergreens; a custom derived from the ancient practices of the pagan Druids “that sylvan spirits might flock to the evergreens, and remain unnipped by frost till a milder season.” In Roman Catholic countries large crowds flock during the whole evening and night of “Christmas-eve” to the churches, to salute waxen images of the divine Infant, and his Virgin mother, in her garb of “Queen of Heaven.” To an analytical mind, this bravery of rich gold and lace, pearl-broidered satin and velvet, and the bejewelled cradle do seem rather paradoxical. When one thinks of the poor, worm-eaten, dirty manger of the Jewish country-inn, in which, if we must credit the Gospel, the future “Redeemer” was placed at his birth for lack of a better shelter, we cannot help suspecting that before the dazzled eyes of the unsophisticated devotee the Bethlehem stable vanishes altogether. To put it in the mildest terms, this gaudy display tallies ill with the democratic feelings and the truly divine contempt for riches of the “Son of Man,” who had “not where to lay his head.” It makes it all the harder for the average Christian to regard the explicit statement that – “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven,” as anything more than a rhetorical threat. The Roman Church acted wisely in severely forbidding her parishioners to either read or interpret the Gospels for themselves, and leaving the Book, as long as it was possible, to proclaim its truths in Latin – “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” In that, she but followed the wisdom of the ages – the wisdom of the old Aryans, which is also “justified of her children”; for, as neither the modern Hindu devotee understands a word of the Sanskrit, nor the modern Parsi one syllable of the Zend, so for the average Roman Catholic the Latin is no better than Hieroglyphics. The result is that all the three – Brahmanical High Priest, Zoroastrian Mobed, and Roman Catholic Pontiff, are allowed unlimited opportunities for evolving new religious dogmas out of the depths of their own fancy, for the benefit of their respective churches.

To usher in this great day, the bells are set merrily ringing at midnight, throughout England and the Continent. In France and Italy, after the celebration of the mass in churches magnificently decorated, “it is usual for the revellers to partake of a collation (reveillon) that they may be better able to sustain the fatigues of the night,” saith a book treating upon Popish church ceremonials. This night of Christian fasting reminds one of the Sivaratree of the followers of the god Siva, – the great day of gloom and fasting, in the 11th month of the Hindu year. Only, with the latter, the night’s long vigil is preceded and followed by a strict and rigid fasting. No reveillons or compromises for them. True, they are but wicked “heathens,” and therefore their way to salvation must be tenfold harder.

Though now universally observed by Christian nations as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, the 25th of December was not originally so accepted. The most movable of the Christian feast days, during the early centuries, Christmas was often confounded with the Epiphany, and celebrated in the months of April and May. As there never was any authentic record or proof of its identification, whether in secular or ecclesiastical history, the selection of that day long remained optional; and it was only during the 4th century that, urged by Cyril of Jerusalem, the Pope (Julius I) ordered the bishops to make an investigation and come finally to some agreement as to the presumable date of the nativity of Christ. Their choice fell upon the 25th Day of December, – and a most unfortunate choice it has since proved! It was Dupuis, followed by Volney, who aimed the first

shots at this natal anniversary. They proved that for incalculable periods before our era, upon very clear astronomical data, nearly all the ancient peoples had celebrated the births of their sun-gods on that very day. “Dupuis shows that the celestial sign of the VIRGIN AND CHILD was in existence several thousand years before Christ” – remarks Higgins in his *Anacalypsis*. As Dupuis, Volney, and Higgins have all been passed over to posterity as infidels, and enemies of Christianity, it may be as well to quote, in this relation, the confessions of the Christian Bishop of Ratisbone, “the most learned man that the middle ages produced” – the Dominican, Albertus Magnus. “The sign of the celestial Virgin rises above the horizon at the moment in which we fix the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ,” he says, in the *Recherches historiques sur Falaise, par Langevin prêtre*. So Adonis, Bacchus, Osiris, Apollo, etc., were all born on the 25th of December. Christmas comes just at the time of the winter solstice; the days then are shortest, and Darkness is more upon the face of the earth than ever. All the sun Gods were believed to be annually born at that epoch; for from this time its Light dispels more and more darkness with each succeeding day, and the power of the Sun begins to increase.

However it may be, the Christmas festivities, that were held by the Christians for nearly fifteen centuries, were of a particularly pagan character. Nay, we are afraid that even the present ceremonies of the church can hardly escape the reproach of being almost literally copied from the mysteries of Egypt and Greece, held in honour of Osiris and Horus, Apollo and Bacchus. Both Isis and Ceres were called “Holy Virgins,” and a DIVINE BABE may be found in every “heathen” religion. We will now draw two pictures of the Merrie Christmas; one portraying the “good old times,” and the other the present state of Christian worship. From the first days of its establishment as Christmas, the day was regarded in the double light of a holy commemoration and a most cheerful festivity: it was equally given up to devotion and insane merriment. “Among the revels of the Christmas season were the so-called feasts of fools and of asses, grotesque saturnalia, which were termed ‘December liberties,’ in which everything serious was burlesqued, the order of society reversed, and its decencies ridiculed” – says one compiler of old chronicles. “During the Middle Ages, it was celebrated by the gay fantastic spectacle of dramatic mysteries, performed by personages in grotesque masks and singular costumes. The show usually represented an infant in a cradle, surrounded by the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, by bull’s heads, cherubs, Eastern Magi, (the Mobeds of old) and manifold ornaments. The custom of singing canticles at Christmas, called Carols, was to recall the songs of the shepherds at the Nativity. “The bishops and the clergy often joined with the populace in carolling, and the songs were enlivened by dances, and by the music of tambours, guitars, violins and organs. . . .” We may add that down to the present times, during the days preceding Christmas, such mysteries are being enacted, with marionettes and dolls, in Southern Russia, Poland, and Galicia; and known as the Kalidowki. In Italy, Calabrian minstrels descend from their mountains to Naples and Rome, and crowd the shrines of the Virgin-Mother, cheering her with their wild Music.

In England, the revels used to begin on Christmas eve, and continue often till Candlemas (Feb. 2), every day being a holiday till Twelfth-night (Jan. 6). In the houses of great nobles a “lord of misrule,” or “abbot of unreason” was appointed, whose duty it was to play the part of a buffoon. “The larder was filled with capons, hens, turkeys, geese, ducks, beef, mutton, pork, pies, puddings, nuts, plums, sugar and honey.” . . . “A glowing fire, made of great logs, the principal of which was termed the ‘Yule log,’ or Christmas block, which might be burnt till Candlemas eve, kept out the cold; and the abundance was shared by the lord’s tenants amid music, conjuring, riddles, hotcockles, fool-plough, snap-dragon, jokes, laughter, repartees, forfeits, and dances.”

In our modern times, the bishops and the clergy join no more ‘with the populace in open carolling and dancing; and feasts of “fools and of asses” are enacted more in sacred privacy than under the eyes of the dangerous argus-eyed reporter. Yet the eating and drinking festivities are preserved throughout the Christian world; and, more sudden deaths are doubtless caused by gluttony and intemperance during the Christmas and Easter holidays, than at any other time of the

year. Yet, Christian worship becomes every year more and more a false pretence. The heartlessness of this lip-service has been denounced innumerable times, but never, we think, with a more affecting touch of realism than in a charming dream-tale, which appeared in the New York Herald about last Christmas. An aged man, presiding at a public meeting, said he would avail himself of the opportunity to relate a vision he had witnessed on the previous night. "He thought he was standing in the pulpit of the most gorgeous and magnificent cathedral he had ever seen. Before him was the priest or pastor of the church, and beside him stood an angel with a tablet and pencil in hand, whose mission it was to make record of every act of worship or prayer that transpired in his presence and ascended as an acceptable offering to the throne of God. Every pew was filled with richly-attired worshippers of either sex. The most sublime music that ever fell on his enraptured ear filled the air with melody. All the beautiful ritualistic church services, including a surpassingly eloquent sermon from the gifted minister, had in turn transpired, and yet the recording angel made no entry in his tablet! The congregation were at length dismissed by the pastor with a lengthy and beautifully-worded prayer, followed by a benediction, and yet the angel made no sign!"

"Attended still by the angel, the speaker left the door of the church in rear of the richly-attired congregation. A poor, tattered castaway stood in the gutter beside the curbstone, with her pale, famished hand extended, silently pleading for alms. As the richly-attired worshippers from the church passed by, they shrank from the poor Magdalen, the ladies withdrawing aside their silken, jewel bedecked robes, lest they should be polluted by her touch."

"Just then an intoxicated sailor came reeling down the sidewalk on the other side. When he got opposite the poor forsaken girl, he staggered across the street to where she stood, and, taking a few pennies from his pocket, he thrust them into her hand, accompanied with the adjuration, 'Here, you poor forsaken cuss, take this!' A celestial radiance now lighted up the face of the recording angel, who instantly entered the sailor's act of sympathy and charity in his tablet, and departed with it as a sweet sacrifice to God."

A concretion, one might say, of the Biblical story of the judgment upon the woman taken in adultery. Be it so; yet it portrays with a master hand the state of our Christian society.

According to tradition, on Christmas eve, the oxen may always be found on their knees, as though in prayer and devotion; and, "there was a famous hawthorn in the churchyard of Glastonbury Abbey, which always budded on the 24th, and blossomed on the 25th of December"; which, considering that the day was chosen by the Fathers of the church at random, and that the calendar has been changed from the old to the new style, shows a remarkable perspicacity in both the animal and the vegetable! There is also a tradition of the church, preserved to us by Olaus, archbishop of Upsal, that, at the festival of Christmas, "the men, living in the cold Northern parts, are suddenly and strangely metamorphosed into wolves; and that a huge multitude of them meet together at an appointed place and rage so fiercely against mankind, that it suffers more from their attacks than ever they do from the natural wolves." Metaphorically viewed, this would seem to be more than ever the case with men, and particularly with Christian nations, now. There seems no need to wait for Christmas eve to see whole nations changed into "wild beasts" – especially in time of war.