

Christmas Around the World

Although Christmas is celebrated in many countries around the world, it has different connotations. Christians celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, other countries celebrate this time and season in conjunction with their own individual celebrations as a time. Although Christmas is celebrated in the US on December 24 and 25th, most likely Jesus's birth took place in the fall or spring. Shepherds normally would tend their sheep in open fields from March till the end of October depending on the weather. They then would take them to protected enclosures for the cold months.

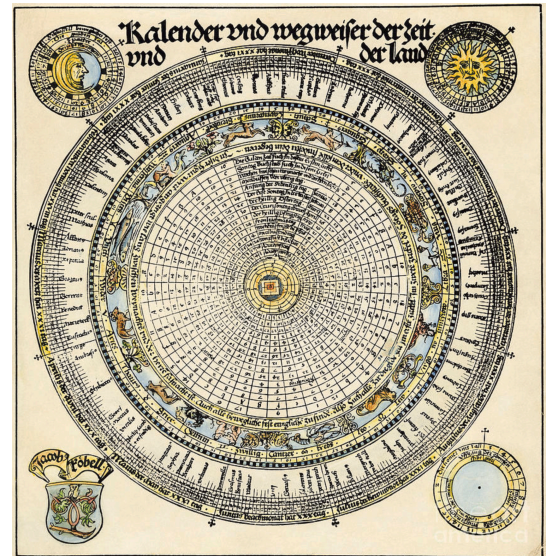


Tradition or Economy of Effort?

So why do we use December or January dates to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ? There are quite a few theories about this, and a lot of it has to do with multiple festivals that were going on at the time. One theory states that early Christians wanted to coordinate their celebrations with that of the Roman festivals already in place. One such festival called *dies solis invecive nati* (day of the birth of the unconquered sun) was widely observed there by linking the Rebirth of the sun with the birth of God's son. Many modern Christmas customs such as decorating a house with greenery, exchanging gifts and enjoying festive meals, originated with this pagan celebration.

There is another difficulty surrounding the act of trying to pin point when Jesus was born. For one thing, there are two different calendars in use. Most Protestants and Catholics and many in the secular world follow what is called the Gregorian calendar, which was introduced by Pope Gregory VIII in 1582. This calendar is the one that is used to set the date for December 24 and 25th.

However, many orthodox churches (mainly in the Slavic and "Stan" countries of eastern Europe and western Asia, which follow the old Julian calendar. This one was introduced in 46 BC by emperor Julius Caesar. This particular calendar is 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar; Christmas falls on January 6th and 7th on this calendar.



Another theory is that they chose a day nine months after March 25, which is the spring equinox. That's the day that they believe God added light when creating the universe so that makes it perfect day that God introduced Jesus into the world as the *light of the world*.

The first recorded Christmas celebration

The first recorded celebration of the birth of Christ was in 336 AD by Emperor Constantine I as Roman converted to Christianity. Although this was made an official holy day, the date of Jesus's birth has been contested ever since. The holiday was first called the Feast of the Nativity and to England by the end of the 6th century.

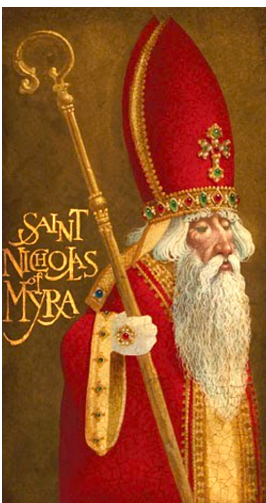
There were many pagan Roman holidays and festivals at that time and Constantine wanted to keep some of the Roman traditions alive and so the celebrations coincide. Christmas trees are an example. Early Roman traditions of decorating trees with lights and ornaments is still being observed today.

Two main ways the world celebrates the Christmas Season

Faith based celebrations usually include attending church services and spending time with loved ones, lighting candles, and feasting at family gatherings.

Secular based celebrations are mostly tradition, pagan ritual, or legend based. They include the decorating of Christmas trees (which range from conical shaped pine to palm or olive branches, feasting on traditional foods (which range from turkeys to carp, specialty wafers and bratwurst, or KFC to candy canes).

So where did belief in Santa Claus come from?



The origins of the legend of Santa Claus is rather obscure. Its origin dates back to a Turkish monk named Saint Nicholas (born about 280 AD). He was a true philanthropist and gave away all his inherited wealth to help the poor and sick. He traveled the country side distributing gifts and money, and was known to be a protector of children and sailors.

Although St. Nicholas was a real individual, the stories revolving around him have morphed into our modern day Santa Claus.

The legend of Santa Claus

The name Santa Clause came originally from the Dutch pronunciation - Sinnterklaas. Over the years he has gained many names around the world. Santa Clause or Father Christmas, Papa Noel, St. Nick, Père Noël, Kris Kringle, Weihnachtsmann (Christmas man), Babbo Natale, Papai Noel, in Russia, Der Moroz (Grandfather Frost) Noel Baba, and Święty Mikołaj. (Information courtesy of blog.busuu.com)

Most of the traditional stories around Santa Claus involve the giving of gifts (rewarding children that are good) and the punishment of children who are not nice (everything from coal to switching them with birch branches). In some countries gifts just happened to appear in children's stockings magically. Other countries use pillowcases and shoes. But the gifts seem to be appearing at various times from December 6 to January 7. Here is a list of these magical European gift givers.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christmas_and_winter_gift-bringers_by_country

Krampus - a half goat half demon who uses a stick or a rod on the naughty children.



A person in costume as Zwarte Piet

Black Pete - Zwarte Piet - a Moorish appearing character.

Knecht Ruprecht found in German folklore. He accompanied St. Nicholas and Weihnachtsmann as well.



****Note:** There are many other legendary creatures that accompany St. Nicholas. All of which have very unusual behavior geared to keeping children's behavior in line.

Another enforcer that originated in the Alpine region of Europe. Her goals are to make sure the local people are observing true traditions of the season - or she kills them.



The main traditional belief is the magical delivery of presents to the children - a carry over from St. Nicholas. In America, Santa enters the home from the chimney.

Santa Claus and his reindeer fly the entire world delivering presents to children. However, there are several other characters that are used around the world to magically deliver the presents.



The first time the evergreen was used as a Christmas tree was either in Tallinn, Estonia, or Riga, Latvia. (Each city says it is the true home of the first Christmas tree.) It is not known with any certainty. In the 16th century, German Christians brought the trees inside their homes as a symbol of everlasting life. However, globally, Christmas trees are not always conifers. Some countries use an olive branch, or a palm tree, or some sort of a model made out of coconut and chicken feathers. They are decorated with various things such as ribbons, candy, and electric lights.

Traditional feather trees first created in Germany in the late 1800s. Made out of goose feathers and wire, the branches were spaced far enough apart to keep the candles from burning them down. They wanted to stop people from decimating the forests and so these artificial trees were sold commercially.



In Iceland, children leave their shoes by a window so the Yule Lads (two mischievous sons of trolls) will leave small gifts in them.

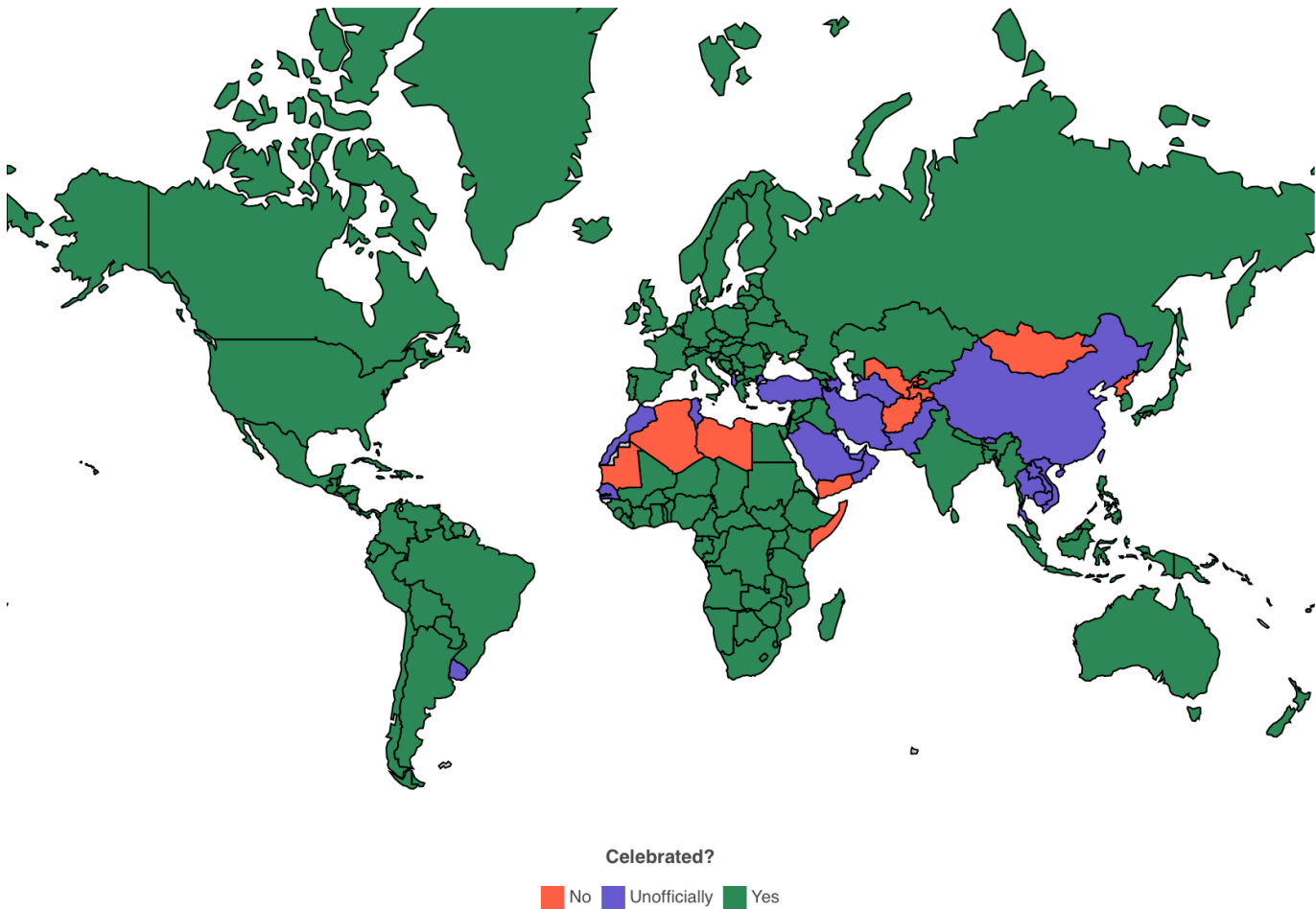
Other traditional Legends and beliefs from around the globe.

The Icelandic Yule Lads



Setting an extra place setting at the table for wanderers.
 Belief that the souls of the dead return on Christmas Eve. They leave doors and windows ajar to allow a welcoming entrance.
 Magical spells protect the children from disease and preservation of a woman's beauty if they perform certain rituals.
 Magic in a Christmas wafer - purified water and kept everyone health for the year.

Who Celebrates Christmas?



**** Note: Although it appears that most of the world celebrates Christmas, this rendition only depicts countries that share an official holiday during these dates.**

Countries in Red - Do not

- Mauritania** - They only celebrate Winter Solstice on Dec. 21st. Nearly 100% Muslim and ignore Christmas.
- Algeria** - Less than 2% Christian. Shops may carry some Christmas items
- Libya** - Most Libyans are Muslim and Christians are violently persecuted by some of the Libyan groups.
- Yemen** - Mired in civil war and famine, the few Christians in the country are violently persecuted. Conversion is punishable by death.
- Somalia** - Christmas celebrations are banned and non-Muslim traditions are considered offensive.
- Afghanistan** - Christianity is violently attacked by the current rulers.
- Tajikistan** - Former Soviet state - outlawed all Christian and Secular aspects of Christmas. No giving of gifts or having a feast.
- Mongolia** - As a former Soviet Country, these Buddhists do not celebrate Christmas, but do put up New Year's trees and await a visit from Grandpa Winter.
- North Korea** - the Authoritarian regime has prohibited Christmas.

Countries in Purple - Unofficially

Uruguay - Government calls the 25th “Day of the Family” - however it is Christmas in all but name, which includes a visit from Papa Noel. Jan. 6th is even a bigger gift giving day - called Children’s Day celebrating the arrival of the three magi kings in Bethlehem.

Thailand - It is Buddhist is majority but they accept Christians. Santa appears in schools and the secular trappings prevail.

Cambodia - Buddhist is majority, but secular behavior of Christmas is becoming popular.

Vietnam - Very secular celebrations following the French customs ending with a feast w/a Noel cake.

Laos - 98% Muslim, but Christians are free to celebrate as they wish.

China - Secular Christmas is growing, focusing on romance and time with loved ones Santa plays a saxophone and has sisters instead of elves.

Pakistan - Dec. 25th is celebrated as the birth of Pakistan’s Founder. Small Christian population is legally allowed to celebrate, but do it very discreetly.

Turkmenistan - 90% Muslim and government ignores Christmas. Christians are allowed to worship as they want. Secular Christmas not seen.

Iran - Most Christians are Armenian immigrants. They celebrate Jan 6th-7th. Muslim Iranians can be jailed or killed if they convert to Christianity.

Turkey - Although less than 1% Christianity, they are allowed to worship. Original Saint Nicholas lived in Turkey.

Tunisia - Muslim majority - just another day. Christians celebrate freely and some themed items are found in hotels and shops.

Oman - Although primarily Muslim, Christians are welcome to celebrate. Secular aspects observed by many.

Morocco - A secular type of Christmas is becoming popular in the cities, but this is not an Islamic holiday.

Saudi Arabia - Christmas was banned in this Muslim country, but the government is loosening to the secular aspects of Christmas.

In Russia, Santa Claus was consider a threat to Communism. They do not celebrate Christmas, but do celebrate New Years.

According to the Pew Research, only 37% of the world’s peoples actually celebrate the traditional Christmas. Others use this time to celebrate other traditions.

The secular traditions and legends seems to be replacing the spiritual section in many of the countries; however, many celebrations combine the holy days with other holidays.

*Whatever you believe and however you celebrate,
we wish you a very Merry Christmas and a
Happy New Year to come!*

In our next newsletter, we will be doing a summation of the events that took place in 2022 and try to help you evaluate and prepare for upcoming events.

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Volume 122022