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***Christmas then and now, and  
The Origin of the Christmas Tree***



Christmas Carol (1858) Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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## Christmas then and Christmas now

First published in: *The Theosophist*, Vol. I, No. 3, December 1879, pp. 58-59.  
Republished in: *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, II pp. 162-67.

**W**E 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 its 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 be decked 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-embroidered 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 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 (*réveillon*) 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 *Śivarâtri* of the followers of the god Śiva, — the great day of gloom and fasting, in the eleventh 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 *réveillons* 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 fourth 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 says, that the celestial sign of the VIRGIN AND CHILD was in existence several thousand years before the birth of Christ” — remarks Higgins in his *Anacalypsis*.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 Merry 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

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<sup>1</sup> [Vol. I, p. 313.]

<sup>2</sup> [This passage is from Godfrey Higgins’ *Anacalypsis*, Vol. I, p. 314, where he ascribes these words to Albertus Magnus and gives as reference “Lib. de Univers.” — Boris de Zirkoff.]



in a cradle, surrounded by the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, by bulls' 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 *Koliadovki*. 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, hot-cockles, fool-plough, snapdragon, jokes, laughter, repartee, 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 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 gut-



ter 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 side-walk 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, your 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 church-yard 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 Upsala, 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>3</sup> [Olaus Magnus, *A Compendious History of the Goths, Swedes and Vandals, and other Northern Nations*. Transl. from the Latin orig., London, 1653. — Boris de Zirkoff.]



## The Origin of the Christmas Tree

Based on an article by Dr. Kaygorodoff in *Novoyé Vremya*.  
First published in *Lucifer*, March 1881.

**T**HE custom of the Christmas tree is a very recent institution. It is of a late date not only in Russia, but also in Germany, where it was first established, and whence it spread everywhere, in the New as well in the Old World. In France, the Christmas tree was adopted only after the Franco-German war, later therefore than 1870. According to Prussian chronicles, the custom of lighting the Christmas tree as we now find it in Germany was established about a hundred years ago. It penetrated throughout the Empire by the richer classes.

It is very difficult to trace the custom historically. Its origin belongs undeniably to the highest antiquity, Fir threes have ever been held in honour by the ancient nations of Europe. As evergreen plants, and symbols of never-dying vegetation, they were sacred to the nature-deities, such as Pan, Isis, and others. According to ancient folklore, the pine was borne from the body of the nymph Pitys,<sup>4</sup> the beloved of the Gods Pan and Boreas. During the vernal festivals in honour of the great goddess of Nature, fir trees were brought into the temples decorated with fragrant violets.

The ancient northern peoples of Europe had a like reverence for the pine and fir trees in general, and made great use of them at their various festivals. Thus, for instance, it is well known that the pagan priests of ancient Germany, when celebrating the first stage of the sun's return toward the vernal equinox, held in their hands highly ornamented pine branches. And this points to the great probability of the now Christian custom of lighting Christmas trees being the echo of the pagan custom of regarding the pine as a symbol of a solar festival, the precursor of the birth of the Sun. It stands to reason that its adoption and establishment in Christian Germany imparted to it a new, and so to speak, Christian form.<sup>5</sup> Thence fresh legends — as is always the case — explaining in their own way the origin of the ancient custom. We know of one such legend, remarkably poetical in its charming simplicity, which purports to give the origin of this now universally prevailing custom of ornamenting Christmas trees with lighted wax tapers.

Near the cave in which was born the Saviour of the world grew three trees — a pine, an olive, and a palm. On that holy eve when the guiding star of Bethlehem appeared in the heavens, that star which announced to the long-suffering world the birth of HIM, who brought to mankind the glad tidings of a blissful hope, all nature rejoiced and is said to have carried to the feet of the Infant-God her best and holiest gifts.

Amongst others the olive tree that grew at the entrance of the cave to Bethlehem brought forth its golden fruits; the palm offered to the Babe its green shadowy vault, as a protection against heat and storm; alone the pine had nought to offer. The poor

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek name for that tree.

<sup>5</sup> As in the case of many other such customs, and even dogmas borrowed and preserved without the least acknowledgement. If the source is now confessed, it is because in the face of research and discovery it can no longer be helped.



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tree stood in dismay and sorrow, vainly trying to think what it could present as a gift to the Child-Christ. Its branches were painfully drooping down, and the intense agony of its grief finally forced from its bark and branches a flood of hot transparent tears, whose large resinous and gummy drops fell thick and fast around it. A silent star, twinkling in the blue canopy of heaven, perceived these tears; and forthwith, confabulating with her companions — lo, a miracle took place. Hosts of shooting stars fell down, like unto a great rain shower, on the pine until they twinkled and shone from every needle, from top to bottom. Then trembling with joyful emotion, the pine proudly raised her drooping branches and appeared for the first time before the eyes of a wondering world, in most dazzling brightness. From that time, the legend tells us, men adopted the habit of ornamenting the pine tree on Christmas Eve with numberless lighted candles.

