

# Christian Feast Days and Their Relationship to Pagan Holidays

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The Pagan belief system encompassed every part of the follower's daily life. Holidays weren't celebrations of their faith, but instead they were rituals to be performed either to appease the gods and/or to assure success for the community in the upcoming year. Since these rituals were performed to aid the community, they were celebrated at large, with the entire village becoming involved in the event.

When Christianity first started its growth, officials knew that in order to allow followers to continue to celebrate with the rest of the community, it was essential to choose dates similar to those already being celebrated by the village in which the believers lived.

It was also easier for early Christians to understand the new religion if it espoused some of the signs and symbols from the religion that they were accustomed to. In this use of similar dates, signs and symbols, Christian holidays grew out of Pagan roots and developed into the events that we experience today. Many of these holidays still have the flavor of their Pagan roots along with sharing the same or similar dates.

In the early Christian Church, the birth of Christ was not celebrated. During the first three hundred years of the religion the Church in Rome discouraged such a celebration, concerned that it would appear to be more like a Pagan ritual, than a Christian holiday. As church officials attempted to convert Romans to Christianity, many of the residents continued to celebrate a major winter holiday, "Saturnalia", which was a celebration that lasted a week, which celebrated the Birth of the Unconquerable Sun. This celebration consisted of parades, merry-making and gift giving. This celebration culminated on December 25th with a celebration of the winter solstice. Also celebrated in Rome around the winter solstice was Juvenalia, which was a celebration for children.<sup>1</sup> Pope Julius I chose December 25 as the date that the birth of Christ would be celebrated with the hope that the choice of that date would be more easily accepted by the Romans.<sup>2</sup>

Besides the Romans, many other societies held celebrations around the winter solstice. The Norse, from Scandinavia celebrated a holiday they called Yule from December 21st, which is the winter solstice through January. Freya the Norse goddess was known to present gifts to her followers. Their ceremonies were in celebration of the sun and the return of the light. In Egypt, extravagant parties were held to celebrate the rebirth of Horus. Their calendar was one that had twelve months all revolving around Horus. To honor Horus, they held a twelve-day celebration, with ceremonies welcoming the sun and praising the light. When the Babylonians became aware of this celebration, they held one of their own, honoring their own creator/sun god; Marduk. They called this celebration Zagmak and they believed that Marduk was the creator who made the world one of peace, order and beauty.<sup>3</sup> In Germany, people honored the pagan god Oden during the mid-winter holiday. Oden flew through the sky to judge people and many people chose to stay inside to avoid his wrath.

The prevailing theme in all of the celebrations was the welcoming of the sun and the joy in the rebirth of the world. The Pagans viewed these celebrations of the return of the sun, as the fact that good will prevail over evil and the sun will return to the earth, which makes it easy to see how it could be adapted to the Christian beliefs that Jesus was born to save the world. Jesus Christ has been often referred to the "Light of the World" and it only seems fitting that the winter solstice when the sun appeared to return to the waiting world, that His birth was celebrated on that day. There has been quite a bit of controversy on the exact time that Jesus was born. Some believe that it was in March, others in September, but the choice of December 25th demonstrates a desire by early Christians to associate the day with a day honored by many as the day that the light was brought to the world. Since Jesus is often considered, "The Light of the World", this appears to be an appropriate day to choose for the celebration of His birth.

Other traditions also seem fitting including the fact that the date was the same as that chosen by the Babylonians to celebrate their god of creation. Even though Jesus didn't create the world, it is believed that He arrived to bring peace and order to the world, which is very similar to the belief in Marduk. There is even a similarity in the German belief in Oden. "The day will surely come when at God's command Jesus Christ will judge the secret lives of everyone, their inmost thoughts and motives; this is all part of God's great plan, which I proclaim." <sup>4</sup> So whether the coming of light, the return of the sun (perhaps could be interpreted as son?) or the arrival of a god to judge all of the followers, Christmas is a reflection of the celebrations of the light returning to the world and of a sign of hope amid the darkness of the world.

As you progress through the Christian liturgical year, the other significant holiday is Easter, which is the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The forty days prior to this holiday is called Lent. In 519 AD, Lent gained acceptance by the Catholic Church. A writer of that time, John Cassian explains that the church didn't observe Lent. But as believers started to decline from their devotion, priests had called for a period of fasting to recall them to their original fervor.<sup>5</sup> Many other regions, practiced a forty-day periods of fasting. In the Andes and in Mexico pagan followers practiced a solemn fast of forty days to honor the sun.<sup>6</sup> The Egyptians also observed a fast of forty days to honor Adonis or Osiris, the mediatorial god. Among the Pagans, Lent seems to be a fast to prepare for the annual festival in commemoration of the "death and resurrection of Tammuz which was celebrated by alternate weeping and rejoicing...being observed in Palestine and Assyria in June, therefore called the "month of Tammuz"<sup>8</sup> Once again correlations can be found between the Christian Lent and practices of fasting in preparation for a great event or occasion. This event for most of the pagan religions appears to be the preparation for the coming of spring and the "rebirth" of the land. This can be compared to the Christian belief that even though Jesus had died, that He was "reborn" in his resurrection and that the followers need to prepare themselves for the anniversary of this event by the practice of fasting.

This period of Lent for Christians culminates in the celebration of Easter. For Christians it is the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the very name of this holiday shows pagan origin. The term "Easter" has been said to be derived from Estre or Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring and dawn. The festival for Eostre was celebrated on the day of the Vernal Equinox, the first day of spring. This was a celebration of the renewal of life in spring from the death of winter. In Europe and Asia spring festivals were also held to re-enact regeneration myths and to celebrate the awakening of the earth. In Babylonia, there was belief in the death and

resurrection of their gods as well. In Easter It's Story and Meaning the story of Tammuz is told. Upon the death of Tammuz his wife and beloved Inanna or Ishtar, was so stricken with grief that she followed him to the underworld. Since she was the goddess of spring rains that bring forth the fruit of life, the land was barren and desolate without her presence. Ea, their god of water and wisdom was moved to send a messenger to rescue Ishtar. Eresh-Kigl allowed the messenger to sprinkle the water of life on Ishtar and Tammuz, which gave them the power to return to the world for six months of the year. The remaining part of the year, Tammuz must return to the underworld, forcing Ishtar to follow him and also forcing Ea to give the water of life. This explained to their culture the miracle of resurrection and spring that occurred every year. Over the centuries the story and the yearly rites connected with Tammuz, moved westward to Phoenicia and Syria. Here Tammuz's name was changed to Adon or Adonia and the name of Inanna/Ishtar to Astarte. The belief traveled further to Greece where the names were changed to Adonis and Aphrodite.<sup>9</sup> Even though the mythos and names changed as it moved from region to region the theme was the same, the resurrection of the god or goddess as a symbol of the coming of spring and the return of fertility to the land. This is very close to the Christian belief that Jesus Christ died for the sins of humankind and then was resurrected. Even some of the Christian ceremonies are very closely related with sunrise celebrations similar to those held by Pagan followers.

Easter and Christmas are two of the most important holidays on the liturgical calendar. There are other holidays that are celebrated throughout the year by Roman Catholics, including All Souls Days and the Annunciation.

All Souls Day is an official holiday of the Catholic Church, which occurs on November 2nd, following All Saints Day that occurs on November 1st. The day was a holiday to honor all of the faithful departed and there are Requiem Masses said by clergy to assist the souls from Purgatory to Heaven. This holiday is traditionally attributed to Saint Odilo, the fifth abbot of cluny. He had felt that it was important to offer special prayers and singing from the office of the dead on the day following All Saints Day.<sup>10</sup> The Aztecs celebrated a similar holiday known as the "Day of the Dead". This holiday lasted over two months, but during the tenth month they held a great feast for dead adults. Even though the actual mention of honoring the deceased differed, with the Catholic Church holding masses and the Aztec's holding of a feast, they are similar in the fact that both events were to help the fallen loved ones travel to a better place. For Catholics, prayers for the deceased helped them travel from Purgatory to Heaven. For the Aztecs, who believed that there are nine levels that a soul traveled through before finding its final destination, the feast was to assist the deceased in this journey. But both religions stressed the importance of the assistance of the living to those that had died.

The Annunciation is observed on March 25th. It is believed and celebrated to be the day that the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to give birth to Jesus;<sup>11</sup> but if December may not have been the actual birth date of Jesus, this would make the choice of this date a random one. It doesn't appear to be as random, when compared to the fact that it is the day that the Babylonians held a festival to honor Cybele, the mother of the Messiah. It would only appear fitting that the celebration of the conception of Jesus would be celebrated on the day previously held aside for the honoring of another great mother. This may simply be a coincidence, but it does appear that if an exact date wasn't known for the birth of Jesus, that a day similar to "Mother's Day" was chosen to honor His conception.

There are other Pagan holidays that appear to have been be "Christianized" by the Catholic Church. Saint George's day, in April, occurs on the same day as the ancient festival of the Parilia. The Feast of Saint John the Baptist, in June, is held very close to the date of a heathen festival of water, which celebrated the purifying of followers with water of the earth - in essence a type of baptism. The holiday of the Assumption of Mary, in August, is similar to the festival of the goddess Diana. The vigil of Saint Walpurga replaced the eve of May Day, which was the Celtic festival of Beltane, a fest of rebirth and renewal.<sup>12</sup>

Of course it could be said that the events and practices of any date can be said to be the origin of an event. For example, because you celebrate your birthday on March 13th and in 451 CE another great person celebrated their birthday that day, you can't necessarily say that your birthday is a reenactment of that celebration. Therefore, just the fact that many Christian holidays occur on the same date as Pagan observances does not prove that the holidays derive from Pagan origin. But when you combine the facts that the dates that were chosen for Christian holidays closely follow the symbolism and the type of celebrations that occurred on those particular dates, you can start to see a correlation. A correlation can also be found in the desire for Jesus to represent the light of the world and to have come to earth to save it from darkness. In my opinion, having chosen days that already had significance of their own to many other religions strengthened the Christian message and made it easier for converts to follow the liturgical calendar. Perhaps this choice is the secret behind the successful spread of the Christian faith throughout Europe!

#### **Endnotes:**

1. Matthews, John The Winter Solstice: The Sacred Traditions of Christmas pg 7
2. The History of the Holidays <http://www.historychannel.com/cgi-bin/frameit.cgi?p=http%3A//www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/main.html>
3. Morrison, Dorothy, Yule: A Celebration of Light and Warmth pg 11
4. Romans 2:16
5. John Cassian, Antiquities of the Christian Church book 21 chapter 1.
6. Homboldt Mexican Researches Volume 1 page 404.
7. Hislop, Alexander. The Two Babylons pp. 104, 105
8. Alan W. Watts Easter, its Story and Meaning p. 58
9. Watts p. 101
10. Anocna, George, The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead p. 47-51
11. Luke 1:26-38.
12. Hunt, David, A Woman Rides the Beast p 360, 377.