

The Meaning of Christmas: A Secular Perspective

Let me preface this article by saying that I was raised in a secular household – one free from any religious input. I am not pompous enough to think I am authorized to write an article on the deeper religious meaning behind Christmas, so I won't even go there.

My objective with the article is to lend a little understanding of the Christmas holiday from a secular perspective. A sort of olive branch to Christians, if you will. Of course, if you aren't remotely interested in a heathen, infidel, pagan, Satanic, baby eating, humanist's opinion on anything, then I've just saved you the time of bothering by writing this preamble ramble.

However, I do hope you'll receive the olive branch and keep an empty cup.

No, don't worry. I am not *that* angry "new" atheist who spends hours each day trolling religious forums, letting anyone who listens know that I am an atheist or humanist. Nor do I have some mean-spirited things to say about the history of religion. I want religious people to know that not all non-believers are "that" person. I am genuinely interested in an exchange of words in the belief that with understanding comes greater tolerance. Can that be a bad thing? I don't think so.

In fact, I don't even use the word atheist to describe myself, so as to distance myself from that angry lot of bloggers and trolls. I never even mention my lack of belief unless directly asked or it's part of the topic of discussion. When I do state "what" I am, I do so reluctantly. All labels are not the actual "thing" and people are far more complex than the labels attached to them.



I despise the labels today that package one into a neat list. Typically, I'll say that "I'd rather not say." If people probe further or insist, I'll say I'm a humanist. But I don't have to like it – no term is remotely accurate, but it's as close as one can get.

Being raised in a secular household, Christmas was the holiday where you would be on your best behavior lest you get fewer gifts, or even *gasp* get coal. at least that was the "threat." Santa only brought presents to the well-behaved kids.

Of course, you could misbehave all year, but around December you better start "standing up" straighter. You would get to head to a random parking lot to pick out a tree with the whole family, come home, set it up, then decorate it while everyone laughed and joked and drank Ovaltine or hot chocolate. Stockings would be hung, and there was the tremendous excitement of making a list where you would get most or all of the things you placed on it. Because a fat, white-bearded old guy in a red and white suit climbed down a chimney and

deposited things on that list under the Christmas tree – what a concept, that.

Family and friends you hadn't seen in a while would come in and out during the days leading up to December 25th. Driving through neighborhoods and seeing the decorations was not only really fun but lent itself to a sense of community – people you didn't know were doing the same things as you were.

I'm going somewhere with this. Be patient.

Growing up in a Sicilian household meant that the Christmas Day meal was one of the highlights and would be talked about for days after. My mother would spend the 24-48 hours before Christmas preparing way too much food. Food she was making to feed 5-6 people, but always seemed to be a veritable feast that could feed a small army. This was intentional, for to leave an Italian household not stuffed would be a damn sin and to leave without a container of food would be a greater sin.

I don't want to neglect Christmas Eve which is almost a holiday unto itself – the night where you would make those last few special visits before heading home after dark. Getting into your pajamas, setting out milk and cookies. Watching a Christmas Story or Miracle on 34th Street, before heading to bed.



Butterflies in the stomach, nervous excitement would keep you up all night any other time, but you knew that the long day would ensure that there was enough exhaustion to put you in a coma within 5 minutes of your head hitting the pillow.

The aromas of all sorts of food, the sights of lights in windows and yards, favorite Christmas movies looping on the TV, the sounds of Christmas carols, the excitement of Christmas morning, the day full of playing, laughing, hugging, eating and finding out what your friends got for Christmas.

It was just...*magical*.

There's no other way to describe it. It's as close to real magic as one can get growing up and the holiday has engendered countless fond memories for me and my family. As I get older, see my daughter grow up and enjoy the holiday – there is also the bittersweet aspect of remembering loved ones have passed. My mother passed away the first week of December a few years ago and while there is still a home cooked meal, no one replicates the aromas and grandiosity of her generous cooking and the atmosphere she created. This holiday is attached to

hundreds of great experiences revolving around family, brotherhood, generosity, kindness, love, perspective, community, laughing, and hugs – Christmas spirit.

This is why Christmas is a very special occasion for this humanist and many like me. It is also why it stings when I see someone comment or overhear someone say “Why do you celebrate a **Christian** holiday?” In essence, it is implying that I have no right to all those positive things growing up and that I should either convert or abandon the holiday since it’s not “mine.” How dare I.

Each year I read these sorts of comments and on occasion, someone will question me directly. A few times it has been in not so nice of a way. How do I convey to people who are already peeved and not interested in my explanation the reason why I celebrate it? Early on, I would try to explain, but within 10 seconds their eyes would glaze over or roll up in the head. No explanation was going to suffice because standing before them was a heathen, infidel, or ignorant non-believer.

It wasn’t until I was about 18-19 years old that I began to delve into Christianity and the real reasons for Christmas. Being curious about all religions, philosophies, and ways of life I read the Pagan reasons for Christmas, the connection between the Pagan and Christian history behind the day.

I understood what the day that pagans and/or Wiccan/Witches call Yule, Saturnalia or Winter Solstice meant, particularly since I actually have a number of friends who are pagan and/or Wiccan. Since most of my friends are Christians, I got dozens of explanations about the meaning behind the holiday. The literature on all of that further embellished my understanding. I respect all of their reasons for the holiday and each group’s right to celebrate it in their own way.



I just ask that Christians understand and sympathize with atheists, humanists, or non-believers when it comes to celebrating Christmas. The real meaning of the holiday is a human one of experiences, tolerance, kindness, and love. Is there anyone who would disagree with these qualities? Is there room for one group to celebrate the changing of the seasons, another to celebrate their messiah's birth, and another to celebrate family and a sense of community? I think there is. We have more important issues to deal with than others celebrate a holiday. How do you know you are a first-worlder and lost perspective? You pour your cereal, realize you have no milk and get upset...or care how others celebrate.

The common ground of all three aforementioned groups is that it is the day whereby we gather with loved ones, we are generous either materially and/or spiritually, we sit around a meal and enjoy each other's company, we remind ourselves of the important people in our lives whether they are sitting at the table or have been lost.

You can do all those things regardless of the reason or purpose for doing them. Whether you are celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, the arrival of the Winter Solstice, the

arrival of Santa Claus or simply because it's a celebration of life and how brief it is – Christmas Day is a special one for the majority of Americans. In that sense, we should all remember that is a celebration and that we are **all** Americans.

All groups that celebrate this special day do it because it has a deeper meaning for them, even if that meaning differs. Christmas is a very important holiday for me. It's my favorite holiday. I relish the opportunity to say "Merry Christmas." Yes, I am a non-believer who not only appreciates when it is said to me but I say "Merry Christmas" in return...and I genuinely mean it.

So whether someone says "Happy Yule!", "Happy Chanukah", "Happy Holidays", "Happy Kwanzaa" or any variation, does it matter? They are offering kindness, tolerance, compassion, humanity, joy. They mean well and wish well upon you. Accept it, give it back – the details are irrelevant.

If you get upset or are irked that when someone says Merry Christmas but you are an atheist, or someone says Happy Holidays, but you are a Christian and prefer "Merry Christmas", then you have lost your perspective and are a true-blue resident of the first-world. Each hour hundreds of children throughout the world die of starvation, so getting upset about that borders on the ridiculous.

The fact that a well-wishing irks you illustrates your first-world status and loss of perspective. The good thing is that we can remind ourselves that we lost that perspective on what's important and regain it.

No matter what your belief system, I hope the holidays are a time of happiness, health, and success for you and your family. I hope you are surrounded by good people, great food, and a festive atmosphere. I hope you get some time off, get to relax, and just enjoy yourself.

All of that is hard to spit out, so how about just a "Merry

Christmas"? You're a smart bunch, you can figure it out.