

## Secularity

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It would be scarcely surprising for those who have read this far to ask what do atheists and people who consider themselves secular have to do with Christmas? This is quite obviously a fair and reasonable question, since those who find themselves outside of any aspect of mainstream culture constitute a minority whose thoughts and opinions we can choose to investigate and consider, or instead ignore and disregard. The desire to explore this area becomes further hampered by the fact that atheists and the secular seem substantially indifferent to Christmas as a concept. But it is worth remembering that even indifference has a history, and the failure to investigate this phenomenon would leave us with something of an incomplete picture of the Christmas festival. Moreover, it remains interesting to examine the world view of the group of people whose mixture of ideological hostility and indifference to religion has been disseminated (albeit in a highly diluted form) throughout many western populations. These have written over and decentred the strictly religious aspects of the Christmas festival. This therefore becomes a minor, if still intriguing, episode in the history of the world potentially becoming more secular. But digging deeper, in and around a wider history of Christmas, it becomes a history of individuals seeking to ignore, transcend or even remodel an aspect of wider popular culture that scarcely has anything like immediate relevance to them.

It might seem natural, or widely expected, for the atheist and the secular to have a natural opposition and animosity to the Christian festival of Christmas. After all it was an almost compulsory religious celebration that, even in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, still does much to overshadow the secular world for a period of anything up to a fortnight. For the secular it also appears to be an irritating and unnecessary opportunity for organised Christianity to reassert its tenuous hold upon the thoughts and imagination of the populace at large. For those who espouse a secular world view it might seem reasonable to assume they would complain about Christianity's privileged position in taking over the media at a specific time of year. It seems to do this to offer a message that appears increasingly incoherent and (if statistics are to be believed) less and less relevant as time passes. This situation, to the neutral observer, should signal that atheist and secular people would consider this incongruous to say the least!

Yet most observations and analyses discover the secular and atheist response to Christmas tends to be largely one of indifference. Substantially Christmas does not worry, bother or annoy atheists and the secular. Nor does it provoke protest or significant opposition. Christmas as a festival experiences no boycotts, nor does it provoke retaliatory atheist and secular proselytising. Nonetheless in thinking about this we are accidentally reminded of some aspects of the role of Christmas in the Christian religion and, through this, the precise aspects of Christianity that are capable of provoking opposition in the unbeliever. Christmas, whilst central to the Christian religion, is capable of being seen by the outside observer as a significantly inoffensive festival. It celebrates the birthday of Christianity's founder, an individual that atheists have had more time for, than the God of the Old Testament, notably parodied by Python in both *Life of Brian* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. This

preference has been noticeable since at least the time of Strauss if not before, and contains a message about the part of the divine which shared human form – even if the truth of this appears to them as often distorted or spurious. Moreover, Christmas does remain a relatively innocent, or comparatively unproblematic, festival for the atheist. It is certainly not as central to the Christian message as Easter. As such it contains none of the motifs of cruelty (bar Herod's spectacular over reaction) that are prevalent at Easter. There is no suffering, crucifixion, atonement nor resurrection to pour over. All troublesome ideas which provoke a veritable cluster bomb of anti-theological and moral arguments about the behaviour of the supposed creator of the world. In comparison Christmas is simply the birth of an individual the churches choose to consider the son of God and not really much more than this.

For the secular who grew up with forms of Christianity and now reject it these particular attitudes are not an especially large or significant departure anyway! Both Anglicanism (Episcopalianism in the USA) and Catholicism saw the Easter story as central with less attention given to Christmas in the overall religious calendar. It is also overshadowed in these denominations by the sacrament and Christ's eventual passion. For more evangelical groupings Christmas and its nature as a festival were always likely to be manifestly less important than the preaching of the word – a message ideally to be sustained for every day of the year and not reserved for a piece of exceptionalism in the shape of Christmas. So for even the lapsed ex-religious baby boomer, or even the actively apostate one, Christmas had always had much of its message overlaid already by narratives of family as well as the more insidious messages associated with post war consumerism. Thus, it seems that anti-religious hostility to the festival of Christmas, at least in recent decades, has scarcely been in the

forefront of secular and atheist minds. As Elisabeth Cornwell's post on the website of the Richard Dawkins Foundation suggested: 'While we might make a noise when religion attempts to break through the wall of the separation of church and state, we are not in the habit of kicking Santa in the shins.' (Cornwell 2011)

However, this has not always been so. Some radical secularists and atheists have taken aim at Christmas, but it remains noteworthy how infrequently this has been attempted. It is also important that the actual success of such attacks has been marginal, or indeed considerably limited. Christmas as a feast day and its religious significance could suffer collateral damage in secular and atheist questioning of the bible and its message. In some instances this could result in blasphemous publications. In 19<sup>th</sup> century England George William Foote's determination to be prosecuted for blasphemy was only satisfied when he turned his own disdain for the bible onto the nativity. After several months of attempting to offend by producing cartoons which ridiculed the logic and questionable morals of Biblical events, by the time Christmas 1883 came around Foote turned his attention to the Christmas story itself as inspiration. In the Christmas number of his waspish and forthright weekly paper *The Freethinker* Foote published an irreverent cartoon comic strip of the life of Christ. This was deliberately provocative and portrayed a range of episodes in Jesus' ministry. The nativity appeared in one such cartoon. This showed the baby Jesus lying in a manger that was surrounded by the stable animals looking into the manger. Underneath this Foote placed the caption 'he is worshipped by the wise ones'. Foote's more obvious assaults on Christianity were reserved for the other cartoons in this life story sequence and centred around the adult activities of the Christ figure. The nativity episode was merely something of a juvenile joke that the *Life Story* swiftly moved away from to areas that were far more

profitable. Ultimately, no lasting offence or assault on doctrine could really be perpetrated by focussing on this episode. Indeed it was other texts and images from this issue which were explicitly cited in the prosecution. (Nash 1999, 107-166: Marsh 1998).

It is also revealing how Monty Python's *Life of Brian* treated its own nativity scene. The film opens with a display of the heavens and the bright star of Bethlehem moving across the screen. Heavenly music follows in what must clearly be a lampoon of the religious film genre. We then see three riders moving towards the horizon, followed by their entrance into the backstreets of Bethlehem. Upon entering an inauspicious stable Terry Jones (dressed as Brian's mother) questions their motives believing them to be drunk but, his (her) attitude softens when they indicate they have brought gold, frankincense and myrrh as gifts. Jones relieves them hurriedly of these gifts and dismisses them, hoping they will return with more riches. The three kings then depart but abruptly reappear to repossess the gifts so that they can take them to the 'real' venue of the nativity further down the street where the Bethlehem star has settled. Again there is little to cause offence, certainly when compared to other scenes in the film as originally shot. But this nativity scene is also one of only two appearances by the figure of Christ in *Life of Brian*, both of which do not actually mock or blaspheme nor do they lampoon his character. At most the nativity story in *Brian* seems to excite gentle, comparatively mild humour when placed alongside the much wider anti-clerical canon of targets elsewhere in the film.

Beyond the festival itself the secular and atheist has been more readily prepared to take issue with the attitudes of the religious who use Christmas as an opportunity for sermonising, or actively to undermine secular world views. Such instances have a long history but leave obvious traces in the press. This became a trope from the moment the

medium entered into its growth spurt in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a period when a truly national press was possible for the first time on both sides of the Atlantic.

We can get a flavour of this by following an example generated by the foremost American atheist of this period, Colonel Robert Ingersoll. In 1891 he had produced a 'sermon' on Christmas for the *Evening Telegram* and, as a result the newspaper came under threat of boycott by its religious constituency. This had been instigated by The Rev. Dr J. M Buckley who was appalled that the newspaper would actively publish such a sermon, an article which he claimed propounded 'Lies that are Mountainous.' Ingersoll replied with the commonplace nineteenth century atheist and secularist's view that Christmas in many respects ought to be taken back from Christianity, instead to be given an identity that was simultaneously both old and new. Ingersoll had regularly argued for the antiquity of Christmas noting that it had been a festival of sun worship that predated all forms of religion including the Abrahamic ones. It stemmed from natural primeval instincts to banish somehow seasonal darkness. (Ingersoll, 1889, 431-433) In sketching this pattern of development a clear purpose was to note the obviously recent nature of religious colonisation of this, thereby noting starkly the potentially transitory nature of Christianity's involvement in the winter holiday or festival :

The good part of Christmas is not always Christian—it is generally Pagan; that is to say, human, natural.

Christianity did not come with tidings of great joy, but with a message of eternal grief. It came with the threat of everlasting torture on its lips. It meant war on earth and perdition hereafter.

It taught some good things—the beauty of love and kindness in man. But as a torch-bearer, as a bringer of joy, it has been a failure. It has given infinite consequences to the acts of finite beings, crushing the soul with a responsibility too great for mortals to bear. It has filled the future with fear and flame, and made God the keeper of an eternal penitentiary, destined to be the home of nearly all the sons of men. Not satisfied with that, it has deprived God of the pardoning power. (Ingersoll, 1891, 263)

Thus, this tends to suggest that atheists would only muse upon what Christmas had supposedly given the world when provoked. However, it is worth observing how this instance also opened the door for Ingersoll to note the inequalities in the contemporary world which religion's message served to neglect. Christmas, he suggested, only really helped such people by accident:

It is popular because it is a holiday. Overworked people are glad of days that bring rest and recreation and allow them to meet their families and their friends. They are glad of days when they give and receive gifts – evidences of friendship, of remembrance and love. It is popular because it is really human, and because it is interwoven with our customs, habits, literature, and thought. For my

part I am willing to have two or three a year – the more holidays the better. Many people have an idea that I am opposed to Sunday. I am perfectly willing to have two a week. All I insist on is that these days shall be for the benefit of the people, and that they shall be kept not in a way to make folks miserable or sad or hungry, but in a way to make people happy, and to add a little to the joy of life. (Ingersoll 1889)

Taken together many of these attitudes suggest that atheists and secularists have both a residual fondness for Christmas and a fondness for what it has become. On the one hand its status as a benign celebration of aspects of Christianity reaches back into memories of family and childhood. On the other it perhaps sneakily comforts the atheist as a small snippet of what secularisation and the evolution of human attitudes can wreak upon religion and the sacred, if given long enough. A religious festival which had colonised earlier religious festivals could be seen to have lost its central message, or perhaps more correctly discerning populations had sifted through what it had to offer in search of ideas and experiences that pleased them alone. These were increasingly divorced from the doctrinally prescribed religious experience. Thus Christmas had become a holiday which had a range of residual messages attached to it. Many were cut down remnants from deeper and more complex ideas, many were created by the canon of classic seasonal literature (increasingly overlaid by more modern works, often cinematic, straining to attain similar classic status). These were all smothered in the deeply significant cultural wrapping paper of the past. In



its way this was an embodiment of one of the religious lightbulb jokes pertaining to Anglicanism (Episcopalianism). The recipient of the joke learns that it takes many Anglican/Episcopalians to change a light bulb because one changes the bulb and an inordinate number in attendance reminisce about 'how good the old one had been'.

Interestingly, if Christmas for this reason genuinely pleases the atheist and secularist then this shows a future that will be different to that contemplated by more organised secular movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first years of the 20<sup>th</sup>. In fighting against religion that had a greater cultural and psychological foothold upon the consciousness of the population, secularists and atheists were conditioned to believe they were perpetually engaged in forms of struggle. In such circumstances the urge for the secularist and atheist minority to achieve the rights of citizenship was paramount to their cause. But in describing and evaluating the apparent 'damage' they believed religion perpetrated upon society they came to believe in one of two stances. These were described as Eliminationist (seeking to completely eradicate religion from human culture) and substitutionist (which sought to 'replace' religion with a better alternative). What emerges from how the eventual history played out is that seeking rights alongside seeking the end time of Christianity were incompatible.

What striving for rights produced was not a mainstream secularist and atheist opponent culture to Christianity, but one that avowedly espoused the powerful principle of free choice and the ability to exercise this. The situation has a reasonably close analogy. From a belief that atheists and secularists could produce a culture of death and dying that would eventually snuff out the Christian versions the reality turned out somewhat differently. This nonetheless provided opportunities for the imagining and eventual realisation of a slightly different secular culture of choice. From a defence of rational death at the start of the

twentieth century the end of this same century witnessed secular and Humanist burial services that offered the ultimate in choice for populations at large. This very important element of choice became central in these services as representing what Humanist and secular services could offer to those who were now detached from the mainstream religious culture. This could appeal to atheists and sceptics but also could appeal to the growing generations of 'nones' who had not known the original message of Christianity. In this atheism, secularism and Humanism had found a natural and lucrative niche within a wider 'marketplace of comfort'. (Nash 2018) Such a niche followed demand and provided not so much a secular experience of death and burial but a personalised one.

The atheist approach to Christmas has conceivably developed in the same way. There has not been anything like an orthodox atheist and secularist doctrinal 'line' on Christmas and how to regard it. Instead it is possible to see small strands of atheists and rational thinking influencing personal approaches to the feast of Christmas. Interestingly, they can sometimes seem diametrically opposed to one another, but further destabilising the idea of there being one atheist and secular mind set concerning how to engage with Christmas.

One atheist might well decide that they wish to turn their back upon the consumerist levels of indulgence that so frequently characterise the Christmas period. They may deliberately decide to have a notably more austere Christmas than friends and relatives around them. They may eschew gift giving in favour of donating such funds they would have used purchasing these gifts to charity. This attitude may equally persuade them that Christmas is a holiday at which they should devote their time to helping humankind less fortunate than themselves. This might lead them to fund raise over the Christmas period, or perhaps to volunteer to visit or work with people in hospital, or to spend time with those alone during

the Festive season, or with the homeless in similar circumstances. This species of activism remains a legacy of past times when atheists were chided for having no moral impulses to engage in charitable work or giving. Such ideas claimed that Christianity was essential to instil the charitable impulse. But within austere approaches to the Festive season are some inherent criticisms of modern cultures of consumption. At least some of these attitudes seemed to be evident in the mind of the Huffpost blogger Arthur Peirce who noted that Secular Christmas could enable many of America's poorest to avoid the crippling levels of personal debt that the commercialisation of Christmas had led many into:

This consumerism which is sold to children first and foremost has become accepted. This can be said to be an insidious mutation of the beautiful tradition of gift-giving designed to wholly benefit corporations, more than those receiving the gifts. (Peirce 2016)

The attitude of the individual just described can be contrasted with a different atheist more obviously interested in the sensual pleasures of consumption. For this individual there is no puritanical sense of guilt preventing the enjoyment of giving and receiving lavish presents. Nor does there seem to be any need to somehow 'answer' potential Christian detractors who might label this a form of vapid consumerism. A hybrid of the atheist sensualist approach described above is to note atheism and secularism do have a philosophical and psychological link to epicureanism. This saw (and sees) considerable validity in the simple enjoyment of sensual pleasures within this life, as one of our few human certainties. Such pleasures, in the contemporary world, have come to be, for many, centred upon sensual consumption. This may legitimately be seen by this atheist as signalling a holiday period when time for rest can be augmented by the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of seasonal food, or particularly luxurious versions of everyday fare. The same might also be said for the

consumption of alcohol which may increase in volume or quality as the festive season arrives.

Whilst these are deliberate stances which reach back to atheism and secularism's philosophical past, there are other attempts to create a very personal blend of responses to Christmas. Many approaches consider the importance of the family and how an individual's atheism might collide, or conflict, with the beliefs and wishes of others. In his article *What do Atheists do During Christmas?* Austin Cline indicated the multifaceted pressures that potentially loomed for the atheist in the association of family with Christmas and many associated religious traditions:

Holidays can serve to form a connection to the past and can form and reinforce connections with the friends and family with whom you celebrate. As it is during most religious holidays, at Christmas it's customary to attend church services. Often, people attend services as a family as part of a long-running tradition, and even those who rarely attend religious services are moved to attend during the Christmas season. (Cline 2019) This was also evident in Elisabeth Cornwell's discourse upon Christmas, posted on the webpage of the Richard Dawkins Foundation, when she suggested 'I feel no sense of hypocrisy because I enjoy the many threads of my familial past.' (Cornwell 2011) Cline also asked if it were appropriate for an atheist to go to church or chapel with their family during the Christmas period. Noting how the element of free choice had clearly entered the equation in the contemporary world:

'That's a matter of personal choice, but many prefer not to, to avoid misrepresenting themselves and their beliefs. Some may choose to attend in order to continue a family

tradition, especially if it's one which the atheist may have participated in when they were younger and still a believer.' (Cline 2019)

This indicates also that Christmas and its momentary re-association with religion might serve as a meeting point between family and ritual. It had also been noted that overall church attendance in Britain continues to be in a considerable state of decline, whilst attendance at religious services during the Christmas period is actually increasing. (*New Statesman* 2017) This had already been noted by one sociologist in another context when she argued that one manifestation of forms of secularisation might be to have turned religion into a practice which evoked and manifested a 'Chain of Memory'. This meant residual references to religion in people's lives were motivated by tradition and the personal history of cultural practices. (Hervieu-Léger 2001) Others have gone further to suggest that Christmas may be an essential site where religion gets to inhabit the secular. Here it becomes a repository of the sacred, indeed it may even have gone beyond its religious origins to somehow become a religion in itself. This is a conclusion which is capable of dealing a potentially crushing blow to cruder elements of the secularisation thesis. (Deacy 2016)

Some other atheists may seek to keep a 'Chain of Memory' alive in other ways. One website advertised *An Atheist Christmas Album* which offered to give 'kids' and other listeners a 'Christmas without the Christ'. This offered many of the traditional carols, but altered their titles and internal lyrics or sometimes both, in order to move beyond religious messages at Christmas. 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen' became 'Oh Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen' and internal changes were made to 'Silent Night'. There was a concession to non-Christian customs in the inclusion of 'Here we come A –wassailing' and the seasonal if not religious

'Auld Lang Syne', itself inadvertently carrying a secular message about fellowship . As the advert stated 'At Atheist Christmas, we believe in raising children in an environment that supports rational thinking and reason. As an atheist living in a Christian culture, this can be challenging all year long, but it can be especially tricky during Christmas.' (AtheistChristmas 2019) This compromise seemed appropriate because *The Atheist Christmas Album* represented '... a desire to pass on the best traditional music with new, family-orientated lyrics'. (AtheistChristmas 2019)

Drawing on Christmas' long standing association with family have led some to consider that Christmas might be the appropriate time to openly declare their atheism. However this clearly required careful consideration. Austin Cline noted the potential ambivalence of the situation:

'If you think your family would appreciate knowing so they don't unintentionally make you feel uncomfortable, it may be a good idea to "come out" as an atheist. But weigh your personal needs with the potential disruption to family harmony, because there's likely to be confusion and hurt feelings at first.' (Cline 2019)

Again, invoking the 'Chain of Memory', Cline also discussed the issue of atheists attending church with their families by noting that Christmas brings people together. But it also allows them to dust off long lapsed religious habits meaning togetherness at this time, even if it resulted in a visit to church was by no means necessarily a bad thing: 'holidays can serve to form a connection to the past and can form and reinforce connections with the friends and family with whom you celebrate.' (Cline 2019) Balancing personal needs with family harmony was considered extremely important by Cline, who scarcely wanted atheists to

become killjoys, selfish individuals responsible for the end of long standing and cherished family traditions. This seemed calculated to ensure atheism moved away, at least in the minds of its opponents, from a spirit of dogmatic austerity and joylessness.

Alongside this Austin Cline noted that Atheists might well have a need to tell themselves why they might be prepared to celebrate the festive season alongside Christians or Jews celebrating Hanukkah. These included noting its proximity to the Winter solstice which has been celebrated by many cultures, a point also made in the Vox article *In Defense of Secular Christmas*. (Vox 2015) However, he did recognise that many atheists would shy away from aligning themselves with pagan beliefs which could be construed as theist. (Cline 2019) An alternative route might be for an atheist to appreciate the psychological function of such rituals, therefore bypassing their apparent theological importance. As Cline suggests:

If you can't find meaning in the usual traditions and rituals, and especially religious or holiday traditions, then make your own traditions where you can. Even small ones have value and while they may not seem like much at first, you'll come to appreciate them eventually. Traditions and rituals serve important roles in binding us together socially, psychologically, and emotionally. (Cline 2019)

Elisabeth Cornwell also suggested Christmas was a time to focus the atheist mind upon memories. (Cornwell 2011) Celebrating departed loved ones and their Christmas traditions remained a way of invoking them. This added a new way repurpose Christmas and perhaps ultimately stretch the 'Chain of Memory' away from religious practices altogether.

In the end Christmas essentially sparks the individualism in most atheists and secularists into life. This does not substantially push them into protesting or opposing the religious festival

of Christmas but, as with other rites of passage, it does persuade of the need to find ingenious ways to repurpose and rebrand it. It is, most of the time, not enough to simply try and ignore it, since western civilisation is so deeply coloured by its existence. Instead new ways of thinking have produced myriad ways of relating to this festival and contributing still further to its evolution. All of this is perhaps best summed up by the parting shot of Elisabeth Cornwell who emphasises most clearly how the atheist and secularist has adapted and processed Christmas, enabling them to come out the other side totally unscathed:

Christmas belongs to anyone who wants it, and just because I gave up believing in a god doesn't mean I gave up believing in the love and joy of family. I did not give up the joy of celebration with my abandonment of the absurd. So to my religious and non-religious friends, I wish them all a Merry Christmas or a Happy Hanukkah from the heart and I hope they take it with the true spirit with which I give it – that of the spirit of humanity – something we can all celebrate. (Cornwell 2011).

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## Abstract

This chapter notes that secularist and atheist objections to the Christmas Festival have been remarkably sparse since the nineteenth century. This is because Christmas itself does not substantially contain the messages of sacrifice, sin and atonement that characterise other aspects of the Christian calendar. Whilst atheists and secularists have to co-exist with Christmas this chapter notes how they acquired the impetus and ideas to rebrand this holiday for themselves. This involved a greater effort to note that Christianity's grip on the winter festival may be fleeting and transitory, giving secularist and atheists a glance into their secularised future. This, it is argued, may not be fully secular but instead may entail

offering many alternative choices, a stance that has characterised atheist and secular approaches to other rites of passage.

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