

Christmas Lessons: Prophet's Birthday

"Say: "O People of the Book! Exceed not in your religion the bounds (of what is proper), trespassing beyond the truth, nor follow the vain desires of people who went wrong in times gone by, who misled many, and strayed (themselves) from the even Way." [Al-Maa'idah (5):77]

Both Muslims and serious Christians can learn a lot from Christmas, the annual celebration of the victory of paganism over the religion of Prophet Isa (Jesus Christ), (alayhis- salam).

No one disputes that the event and all its symbols came from pagan religions; it has nothing to do with the birth or teachings of Jesus Christ. For one thing, no one knows with certainty the date of birth of Jesus Christ. "In fact, dates in almost every month in the year were suggested by reputable scholars at one time or another," notes The American Book of Days. For another, the celebration of birthdays is itself a pagan idea, never promoted by any Prophet or Book of God, including the Bible. Early Church leaders opposed it strongly. As late as 245 CE African Church father and philosopher Origen wrote that it was sinful even to contemplate observing Jesus's birthday `as though he were a King Pharaoh." **(The American Book of Days).**

But the pagan world did have prayers and celebrations during the winter season. Those who worshipped the sun god because of its apparent power, used to become concerned about the fate of their god, in a world of many gods, as days became shorter and air very cold. It looked like the sun was being defeated by the god of snow that brought death and misery with it. "... in Rome, the sun in its winter solstice was at its weakest on December 25 and had to be born anew with the help of bonfires, lights, processions and prayer." **(Reader's Digest Book of Christmas).** The Roman pagan celebration was called Saturnalia. The Persians also had similar celebrations for Mithras, their sun god.

The evergreens, holly, ivy, and mistletoe plants, which remained green even during this wintertime, were similarly considered by the pagans to have magical powers. The Druids, whose Stonehenge temples can be seen in England, regarded mistletoe with reverence and used to burn it in sacrifice during the solstitial festivities. They also used to hang it in their houses. When you don't know the One True God, even leaves and plants can become god. They thought it brought good luck, fertility, and protection from witchcraft, and was an antidote to poison. Mistletoe is used even today, although the U.N. might consider banning it if the fertility claim proves true!

In 1822 a Dr. Clement Moore, professor of divinity, wrote a poem titled "The visit of St. Nicholas." The poem became popular and Santa Claus was born. The reason for popularity? "... the time was ripe. A myth was needed, and the recreation of `old Christmas' was well in the wind." **(William Sanson, A Book of Christmas).** Some decades later The New York Sun answered an 8 year old's question: Is there a Santa Claus? The answer has become classic and is worth noting. "Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see." So Santa Claus is divine, and judging from the Christmas celebrations, certainly more important than Jesus Christ himself.

Early church leaders wanted to Christianize the pagan festivities, but their operating principle became: When you can't beat them, join them. For as Pope

Gregory declared in 601 CE, "... from obdurate minds it is impossible to cut off everything at once." It was a license for another pearl of "wisdom": When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

And so they did. First slowly and then rapidly. The "Son of God" replaced the sun god. Saturnalia was replaced by the ceremony for Christ or Christ Mass, which later became Christmas. For several centuries it was solely a church anniversary, observed by religious services. "At Christmas, men and women were not, repeat not, to dress up or mime; there were not to be auguries, such as superstitions about fire; houses were not to be decorated, no presents given, no well-laden tables, and a strict watch was to be kept on drink." But false religion drives out true religion. Consider Christmas gifts, a carryover from the Roman practice of giving dolls as gift in lieu of their earlier barbaric custom of offering human sacrifices. "The early Church frowned on gift giving as a pagan custom. But the people enjoyed it too much to abandon it, and so finally the Church accepted the idea and sanctioned it." (**Barbara Rinkoff, The Family Christmas Book**). Evergreens? "The early church forbade the use of them, but here again the custom was too deeply rooted and the ban was ignored. Finally the church accepted the use of evergreens for decoration." And on and on. Now consider this portrait of Saturnalia and contrast it with the original don'ts mentioned above: "... a fortnight of near riot, of drunkenness, noise and games, naked slaves singing, men dressing up as animals and behaving with less dignity, sex, often with perversion." (**Reader's Digest Book of Christmas**). Anyone can see which picture represents today's Christmas more closely.

With the advent of Capitalism, the old pagans got a new supporter in the form of the adman. George Bernard Shaw observed: "Christmas is forced on a reluctant ... nation by...shopkeepers and the press." This is how they can serve God, and make money at the same time. This in itself is a pagan idea and it is alive and well today.

This defeat of Christianity at the hands of paganism must be contrasted with Islam's resounding victory over it. Before Islam, Arabia was a pagan country--big time. But none of the pagan customs survived after Islam. None whatsoever. There was no such thing as 'the people wanted it very much so the church allowed it.' Islam completely eradicated not only the beliefs but also the practices and the symbols of paganism. This in itself is a miracle that serious students of comparative religions must reflect upon. Here is a living proof of the authenticity of the last Messenger, Salla-Allahu alayhi wa sallam.

The success continued throughout the centuries. The secret of this great success lies in what Stuart Brown (The Nearest in Affection), deplores as Muslim "antipathy to innovation." The first Khalifah, Abu Bakr, Radi-Allahu anhu, had declared in his first address as the new ruler, that he was a follower not an innovator, thereby setting the tone for all successors.

Throughout Islamic history there have been attempts to introduce bid'ah (innovation) as innocent good practices, but unlike Christianity, there have always been rightly guided ulema who fought them strongly. The struggle continues today. Yes, Muslims can learn from Christmas. Those of us who may be wondering what is wrong with Milad Nabi celebrations may do well to realize that Christmas also started as Milad for Jesus Christ.