

Christmas

For other uses, see [Christmas \(disambiguation\)](#).

[“Christmas Day”](#) redirects here. For other uses, see [Christmas Day \(disambiguation\)](#).

Christmas or **Christmas Day** (Old English: *Crīstes-mæsse*, meaning "Christ's Mass") is an annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ,^{[6][7]} observed generally on December 25^{[4][8][9]} as a religious and cultural celebration among billions of people around the world.^{[2][10][11]} A feast central to the Christian liturgical year, it closes the Advent season and initiates the twelve days of Christmastide, which ends after the twelfth night.^[12] Christmas is a public holiday in many of the world's nations,^{[13][14][15]} is celebrated culturally by a large number of former or non-Christian people,^{[1][16][17]} and is an integral part of the Christmas and holiday season.

While the birth year of Jesus is estimated among modern historians to have been between 7 and 2 BC, the exact month and day of his birth are unknown.^{[18][19]} His birth is mentioned in two of the four canonical gospels. By the early-to-mid 4th century, the Western Christian Church had placed Christmas on December 25,^[20] a date later adopted in the East,^{[21][22]} although some churches celebrate on the December 25 of the older Julian calendar, which currently corresponds to January 7 in the modern-day Gregorian calendar. The date of Christmas may have initially been chosen to correspond with the day exactly nine months after early Christians believed Jesus to have been conceived,^[23] or with one or more ancient polytheistic festivals that occurred near southern solstice (i.e., the Roman winter solstice); a further solar connection has been suggested because of a biblical verse^[lower-alpha 1] identifying Jesus as the “Sun of righteousness”.^{[23][24][25][26][27]}

The celebratory customs associated in various countries with Christmas have a mix of pre-Christian, Christian, and secular themes and origins.^[28] Popular modern customs of the holiday include gift giving, Christmas music and caroling, an exchange of Christmas cards, church celebrations, a special meal, and the display of various Christmas decorations, including Christmas trees, Christmas lights, nativity scenes, garlands, wreaths, mistletoe, and holly. In addition, several closely related and often interchangeable figures, known as Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas, and Christkind, are associated with bringing gifts to children during the Christmas season and have their own body of traditions and lore.^[29] Because gift-giving and many other aspects of

the Christmas festival involve heightened economic activity among both Christians and non-Christians, the holiday has become a significant event and a key sales period for retailers and businesses. The economic impact of Christmas is a factor that has grown steadily over the past few centuries in many regions of the world.

1 Etymology

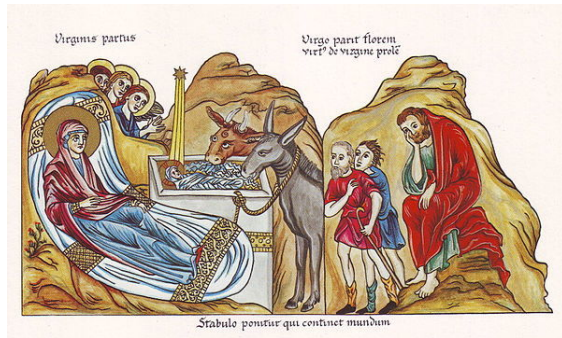
“Christmas” is a compound word originating in the term “Christ's Mass”. It is derived from the Middle English *Cristemas*, which is from Old English *Crīstes-mæsse*, a phrase first recorded in 1038^[7] followed by the word *Cristes-messe* in 1131.^[30] *Crīst* (genitive *Crīstes*) is from Greek *Khrīstos* (Χριστός), a translation of Hebrew *Māšîaḥ* (מָשִׁיחַ), “Messiah”, meaning “anointed”;^{[31][32]} and *mæsse* is from Latin *missa*, the celebration of the Eucharist. The form “Christenmas” was also historically used, but is now considered archaic and dialectal;^[33] it derives from Middle English *Cristenmasse*, literally “Christian mass”.^[34] “Xmas” is an abbreviation of *Christmas* found particularly in print, based on the initial letter chi (X) in Greek *Khrīstos* (Χριστός), “Christ”, though numerous style guides discourage its use;^[35] it has precedent in Middle English *Xq̄es masse* (where “Xq̄” is an abbreviation for Χριστός).^[34]

1.1 Other names

In addition to “Christmas”, the holiday has been known by various other names throughout its history. The Anglo-Saxons referred to the feast as “midwinter”,^{[36][37]} or, more rarely, as *Nātiuiteð* (from Latin *nātīvitās* below).^{[36][38]} “Nativity”, meaning “birth”, is from Latin *nātīvitās*.^[39] In Old English, *Gēola* (“Yule”) referred to the period corresponding to January and December, which was eventually equated with Christian Christmas.^[40] “Noel” (or “Nowell”) entered English in the late 14th century and is from the Old French *noël* or *naël*, itself ultimately from the Latin *nātālis* (*diēs*), “(day) of birth”.^[41]

2 History

The *Chronography of 354 AD* contains early evidence of the celebration on December 25 of a Christian litur-



Nativity of Christ - medieval illustration from the *Hortus deliciarum* of Herrad of Landsberg (12th century)

gical feast of the birth of Jesus. This was in Rome, while in Eastern Christianity the birth of Jesus was already celebrated in connection with the Epiphany on January 6.^{[42][43]} The December 25 celebration was imported into the East later: in Antioch by John Chrysostom towards the end of the 4th century,^[43] probably in 388, and in Alexandria only in the following century.^[44] Even in the West, the January 6 celebration of the nativity of Jesus seems to have continued until after 380.^[45] In 245, Origen of Alexandria, writing about Leviticus 12:1–8, commented that Scripture mentions only sinners as celebrating their birthdays, namely Pharaoh, who then had his chief baker hanged (Genesis 40:20–22), and Herod, who then had John the Baptist beheaded (Mark 6:21–27), and mentions saints as cursing the day of their birth, namely Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14–15) and Job (Job 3:1–16).^[46] In 303, Arnobius ridiculed the idea of celebrating the birthdays of gods, a passage cited as evidence that Arnobius was unaware of any nativity celebration.^[47] Since Christmas does not celebrate Christ's birth "as God" but "as man", this is not evidence against Christmas being a feast at this time.^[7] The fact the Donatists of North Africa celebrated Christmas may indicate that the feast was established by the time that church was created in 311.

Many popular customs associated with Christmas developed independently of the commemoration of Jesus' birth, with certain elements having origins in pre-Christian festivals that were celebrated around the winter solstice by pagan populations who were later converted to Christianity. These elements, including the Yule log from Yule and gift giving from Saturnalia,^[48] became syncretized into Christmas over the centuries. The prevailing atmosphere of Christmas has also continually evolved since the holiday's inception, ranging from a sometimes raucous, drunken, carnival-like state in the Middle Ages,^[49] to a tamer family-oriented and children-centered theme introduced in a 19th-century reformation.^{[50][51]} Additionally, the celebration of Christmas was banned on more than one occasion within certain Protestant groups, such as the Puritans, due to concerns that it was too pagan or unbiblical.^{[52][53]}



Mosaic of Jesus as Christo Sole (Christ the Sun) in Mausoleum M in the pre-fourth-century necropolis under St Peter's Basilica in Rome.^[54]

2.1 Relation to concurrent celebrations

Prior to and through the early Christian centuries, winter festivals—especially those centered on the winter solstice—were the most popular of the year in many European pagan cultures. Reasons included the fact that less agricultural work needs to be done during the winter, as well as an expectation of better weather as spring approached.^[55] Many modern Christmas customs have been directly influenced by such festivals, including gift-giving and merrymaking from the Roman Saturnalia, greenery, lights, and charity from the Roman New Year, and Yule logs and various foods from Germanic feasts.^[56]

Pagan Scandinavia celebrated a winter festival called Yule, held in the late December to early January period.^[57] As northern Europe was the last part to Christianize, its pagan traditions had a major influence on Christmas there, an example being the *Koleda*,^[58] which was incorporated into the Christmas carol. Scandinavians still call Christmas *Jul*. In English, the word Yule is synonymous with Christmas,^[59] a usage first recorded in 900.

2.1.1 Dies Natalis Solis Invicti

Main article: Sol Invictus

Dies Natalis Solis Invicti means "the birthday of the Unconquered Sun", a festival inaugurated by the Roman emperor Aurelian to celebrate the sun god and celebrated at the winter solstice, 25 December.^{[60][61]} During the reign of the emperor Constantine, Christian writers assimilated this feast as the birthday of Jesus, associating him with the 'sun of righteousness' mentioned in Malachi 4:2 (*Sol*

Iustitiae).^{[60][61]} In his work *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus (c. 130–202) identified the conception of Jesus as March 25 and linked it to the **crucifixion**, with the birth of Jesus nine months after on December 25.^[62] Celebration of the conception of Jesus, known as the **Annunciation**, became associated with the spring equinox, thus led to Christmas coinciding with the winter solstice.^[62] An anonymous work known as *De Pascha Computus* (243) linked the idea that creation began at the spring equinox, on 25 March with the conception or birth (the word *nascor* can mean either) of Jesus on 28 March, the day of the creation of the sun in the Genesis account. One translation reads: “O the splendid and divine providence of the Lord, that on that day, the very day, on which the sun was made, the 28 March, a Wednesday, Christ should be born. For this reason Malachi the prophet, speaking about him to the people, fittingly said, 'Unto you shall the sun of righteousness arise, and healing is in his wings.'”^{[71][63]}

In the fourth century, **John Chrysostom**, who promoted the celebration on 25 December, commented on the connection: “But Our Lord, too, is born in the month of December ... the eight before the calends of January [25 December] ..., But they call it the 'Birthday of the Unconquered'. Who indeed is so unconquered as Our Lord ...? Or, if they say that it is the birthday of the Sun, He is the Sun of Justice.”^[71] With regard to a December religious feast of the sun as a god (Sol), as distinct from a solstice feast of the (re)birth of the astronomical sun, one scholar has commented that, “while the winter solstice on or around December 25 was well established in the Roman imperial calendar, there is no evidence that a religious celebration of Sol on that day antedated the celebration of Christmas”.^[64] “Thomas Talley has shown that, although the Emperor Aurelian’s dedication of a temple to the sun god in the Campus Martius (C.E. 274) probably took place on the 'Birthday of the Invincible Sun' on December 25, the cult of the sun in pagan Rome ironically did not celebrate the winter solstice nor any of the other quarter-tense days, as one might expect.”^[62] The *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* remarks on the uncertainty about the order of precedence between the religious celebrations of the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun and of the birthday of Jesus, stating that the hypothesis that 25 December was chosen for celebrating the birth of Jesus on the basis of the belief that his conception occurred on 25 March “potentially establishes 25 December as a Christian festival before Aurelian’s decree, which, when promulgated, might have provided for the Christian feast both opportunity and challenge”.^[65]

2.2 Feast established

The *Chronography of 354*, an illuminated manuscript compiled in Rome, is an early reference to the date of the nativity as December 25.^[66] In the East, early Christians celebrated the birth of Christ as part of **Epiphany** (January 6), although this festival emphasized celebration of

the baptism of Jesus.^[67]

Christmas was promoted in the Christian East as part of the revival of **Catholicism** following the death of the pro-Arian Emperor **Valens** at the **Battle of Adrianople** in 378. The feast was introduced to **Constantinople** in 379, and to **Antioch** in about 380. The feast disappeared after **Gregory of Nazianzus** resigned as bishop in 381, although it was reintroduced by **John Chrysostom** in about 400.^[71]



The Examination and Trial of *Father Christmas*, (1686), published shortly after Christmas was reinstated as a holy day in England.

2.3 Middle Ages

In the **Early Middle Ages**, Christmas Day was overshadowed by Epiphany, which in **western Christianity** focused on the visit of the **magi**. But the medieval calendar was dominated by Christmas-related holidays. The forty days before Christmas became the “forty days of St. Martin” (which began on November 11, the feast of **St. Martin of Tours**), now known as **Advent**.^[49] In Italy, former **Saturnalian** traditions were attached to Advent.^[49] Around the 12th century, these traditions transferred again to the **Twelve Days of Christmas** (December 25 – January 5); a time that appears in the liturgical calendars as **Christmastide** or **Twelve Holy Days**.^[49]

The prominence of Christmas Day increased gradually after **Charlemagne** was crowned Emperor on Christmas Day in 800. King **Edmund the Martyr** was anointed on Christmas in 855 and King **William I of England** was crowned on Christmas Day 1066.

By the **High Middle Ages**, the holiday had become so prominent that chroniclers routinely noted where various **magnates** celebrated Christmas. King **Richard II** of Eng-

land hosted a Christmas feast in 1377 at which twenty-eight oxen and three hundred sheep were eaten.^[49] The Yule boar was a common feature of medieval Christmas feasts. Caroling also became popular, and was originally a group of dancers who sang. The group was composed of a lead singer and a ring of dancers that provided the chorus. Various writers of the time condemned caroling as lewd, indicating that the unruly traditions of Saturnalia and Yule may have continued in this form.^[49] “Misrule”—drunkenness, promiscuity, gambling—was also an important aspect of the festival. In England, gifts were exchanged on **New Year’s Day**, and there was special Christmas ale.^[49]

Christmas during the Middle Ages was a public festival that incorporated **ivy**, **holly**, and other evergreens.^[68] Christmas gift-giving during the Middle Ages was usually between people with legal relationships, such as tenant and landlord.^[68] The annual indulgence in eating, dancing, singing, sporting, and card playing escalated in England, and by the 17th century the Christmas season featured lavish dinners, elaborate masques, and pageants. In 1607, **King James I** insisted that a play be acted on Christmas night and that the court indulge in games.^[69] It was during the **Reformation** in 16th–17th-century Europe that many Protestants changed the gift bringer to the Christ Child or *Christkindl*, and the date of giving gifts changed from December 6 to Christmas Eve.^[70]

2.4 Reformation to the 18th century

Following the **Protestant Reformation**, many of the new denominations, including the **Anglican Church** and **Lutheran Church**, continued to celebrate Christmas.^[71] In 1629, the Anglican poet **John Milton** penned *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, a poem that has since been read by many during Christmastide.^{[72][73]} Donald Heinz, a professor at **California State University**, states that **Martin Luther** “inaugurated a period in which Germany would produce a unique culture of Christmas, much copied in North America.”^[74] Among the congregations of the **Dutch Reformed Church**, Christmas was celebrated as one of the principal **evangelical feasts**.^[75]

However, in 17th century England, some groups such as the **Puritans**, strongly condemned the celebration of Christmas, considering it a Catholic invention and the “trappings of popery” or the “rags of the **Beast**”.^[52] In contrast, the established **Anglican Church** “pressed for a more elaborate observance of feasts, penitential seasons, and saints’ days. The calendar reform became a major point of tension between the Anglican party and the Puritan party.”^[76] The **Catholic Church** also responded, promoting the festival in a more religiously oriented form. **King Charles I of England** directed his noblemen and gentry to return to their landed estates in midwinter to keep up their old-style Christmas generosity.^[69] Following the **Parliamentarian** victory over Charles I during the **English Civil War**, England’s **Puritan** rulers banned Christmas in



Ebenezer Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present. From Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, 1843.

1647.^[52]

Protests followed as pro-Christmas rioting broke out in several cities and for weeks **Canterbury** was controlled by the rioters, who decorated doorways with **holly** and shouted **royalist** slogans.^[52] The book, *The Vindication of Christmas* (London, 1652), argued against the Puritans, and makes note of Old English Christmas traditions, dinner, roast apples on the fire, card playing, dances with “plow-boys” and “maidservants”, and carol singing.

The **Restoration** of **King Charles II** in 1660 ended the ban, but many Calvinist clergymen still disapproved of Christmas celebration. As such, in **Scotland**, the **Presbyterian Church of Scotland** discouraged the observance of Christmas, and though **James VI** commanded its celebration in 1618, attendance at church was scant.^[77] The **Parliament of Scotland** officially abolished the observance of Christmas in 1640, claiming that the church had been “purged of all superstitious observation of days”.^[78] It was not until 1958 that Christmas again became a Scottish public holiday.^[79]

Despite the disapproval of many people in Britain, others continued to celebrate the Christmas season. Following the Restoration, *Poor Robins Almanack* contained the lines:

Now thanks to God for Charles return
Whose absence made old Christmas mourn

For then we scarcely did it know
Whether it Christmas were or no^[80]

The diary of James Woodforde, from the latter half of the 18th century, details the observance of Christmas and celebrations associated with the season over a number of years.^[81]

In Colonial America, the Puritans of New England shared radical Protestant disapproval of Christmas. Celebration was outlawed in Boston from 1659 to 1681. The ban by the Pilgrims was revoked in 1681 by English governor Sir Edmund Andros, however it was not until the mid-19th century that celebrating Christmas became fashionable in the Boston region.^[53]

At the same time, Christian residents of Virginia and New York observed the holiday freely. Pennsylvania German Settlers, pre-eminently the Moravian settlers of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Lititz in Pennsylvania and the Wachovia Settlements in North Carolina, were enthusiastic celebrators of Christmas. The Moravians in Bethlehem had the first Christmas trees in America as well as the first Nativity Scenes.^[82] Christmas fell out of favor in the United States after the American Revolution, when it was considered an English custom.^[83] George Washington attacked Hessian (German) mercenaries on the day after Christmas during the Battle of Trenton on December 26, 1776, Christmas being much more popular in Germany than in America at this time.

2.5 19th century

In the early 19th century, writers imagined Tudor Christmas as a time of heartfelt celebration. In 1843, Charles Dickens wrote the novel *A Christmas Carol* that helped revive the “spirit” of Christmas and seasonal merriment.^{[50][51]} Its instant popularity played a major role in portraying Christmas as a holiday emphasizing family, goodwill, and compassion.^[84]

Dickens sought to construct Christmas as a family-centered festival of generosity, in contrast to the community-based and church-centered observations, the observance of which had dwindled during the late 18th century and early 19th century.^[85] Superimposing his humanitarian vision of the holiday, in what has been termed “Carol Philosophy”,^[86] Dickens influenced many aspects of Christmas that are celebrated today in Western culture, such as family gatherings, seasonal food and drink, dancing, games, and a festive generosity of spirit.^[87] A prominent phrase from the tale, “Merry Christmas”, was popularized following the appearance of the story.^[88] This coincided with the appearance of the Oxford Movement and the growth of Anglo-Catholicism, which led a revival in traditional rituals and religious observances.^[89]

The term Scrooge became a synonym for miser, with “Bah! Humbug!” dismissive of the festive spirit.^[90] In



The Queen's Christmas tree at Windsor Castle, published in the Illustrated London News, 1848, and republished in Godey's Lady's Book, Philadelphia, December 1850

1843, the first commercial Christmas card was produced by Sir Henry Cole.^[91] The revival of the Christmas Carol began with William Sandys “Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern” (1833), with the first appearance in print of “The First Noel”, “I Saw Three Ships”, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” and “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”, popularized in Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol”.

In Britain, the Christmas tree was introduced in the early 19th century following the personal union with the Kingdom of Hanover by Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, wife of King George III. In 1832, the future Queen Victoria wrote about her delight at having a Christmas tree, hung with lights, ornaments, and presents placed round it.^[92] After her marriage to her German cousin Prince Albert, by 1841 the custom became more widespread throughout Britain.^[93]

An image of the British royal family with their Christmas tree at Windsor Castle created a sensation when it was published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1848. A modified version of this image was published in the United States in 1850.^{[94][95]} By the 1870s, putting up a Christmas tree had become common in America.^[94]

In America, interest in Christmas had been revived in the 1820s by several short stories by Washington Irving which appear in his *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*,



A Norwegian Christmas, 1846 painting by Adolph Tidemand

Gent. and “Old Christmas”. Irving’s stories depicted harmonious warm-hearted English Christmas festivities he experienced while staying in *Aston Hall*, Birmingham, England, that had largely been abandoned,^[96] and he used the tract *Vindication of Christmas* (1652) of Old English Christmas traditions, that he had transcribed into his journal as a format for his stories.^[69]

In 1822, *Clement Clarke Moore* wrote the poem *A Visit From St. Nicholas* (popularly known by its first line: *Twas the Night Before Christmas*).^[97] The poem helped popularize the tradition of exchanging gifts, and seasonal Christmas shopping began to assume economic importance.^[98] This also started the cultural conflict between the holiday’s spiritual significance and its associated *commercialism* that some see as corrupting the holiday. In her 1850 book *The First Christmas in New England*, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* includes a character who complains that the *true meaning of Christmas* was lost in a shopping spree.^[99]

While the celebration of Christmas was not yet customary in some regions in the U.S., *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* detected “a transition state about Christmas here in New England” in 1856. “The old puritan feeling prevents it from being a cheerful, hearty holiday; though every year makes it more so.”^[100] In *Reading, Pennsylvania*, a newspaper remarked in 1861, “Even our presbyterian friends who have hitherto steadfastly ignored Christmas—threw open their church doors and assembled in force to celebrate the anniversary of the Savior’s birth.”^[100]

The First Congregational Church of Rockford, *Illinois*,

“although of genuine Puritan stock”, was ‘preparing for a grand Christmas jubilee’, a news correspondent reported in 1864.^[100] By 1860, fourteen states including several from *New England* had adopted Christmas as a legal holiday.^[101] In 1875, *Louis Prang* introduced the *Christmas card* to Americans. He has been called the “father of the American Christmas card”.^[102] In 1885, Christmas was formally declared a *United States federal holiday*.^[103]

2.6 20th century

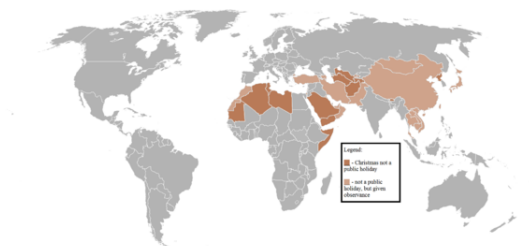
Up to the 1950s, in the UK, many Christmas customs were restricted to the upper classes and better-off families. The mass of the population had not adopted many of the Christmas rituals that later became general. The *Christmas tree* was rare. Christmas dinner might be beef — certainly not turkey. In their stockings children might get an apple, orange and sweets. Full celebration of a family Christmas with all the trimmings only became widespread with increased prosperity from the 1950s.^[104] National papers were published on Christmas Day until 1912. Post was still delivered on Christmas Day until 1961. League football matches continued in Scotland until the 1970s while in England they ceased at the end of the 1950s.^{[105][106]}

Under the *state atheism* of the Soviet Union, after its foundation in 1917, Christmas celebrations—along with other Christian holidays—were prohibited.^[107] The *League of Militant Atheists* encouraged school pupils to campaign against Christmas traditions, such as the Christmas tree, as well as other Christian holidays, including Easter; the League established an antireligious holiday to be the 31st of each month as a replacement.^[108] Furthermore, on Christmas Day, children in Moscow were encouraged to spit on *crucifixes* as protest against this holiday.^[109] It was not until the *dissolution of the Soviet Union* in 1991 that the *persecution* ended and Christmas was celebrated for the first time in Russia after seven decades.^[110]

3 Traditions

Main article: *Christmas traditions*

Christmas Day is celebrated as a major festival and *public holiday* in countries around the world, including many whose populations are mostly non-Christian. In some non-Christian countries, periods of former colonial rule introduced the celebration (e.g. *Hong Kong*); in others, Christian minorities or foreign cultural influences have led populations to observe the holiday. Countries such as Japan, where Christmas is popular despite there being only a small number of Christians, have adopted many of the secular aspects of Christmas, such as gift-giving, decorations, and Christmas trees.



Map of countries where Christmas is not a formal public holiday either on December 24/25 or January 6/7.

Countries in which Christmas is not a formal public holiday include Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bhutan, Cambodia, China (excepting Hong Kong and Macao), Comoros, Iran, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Laos, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Mongolia, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Yemen. Christmas celebrations around the world can vary markedly in form, reflecting differing cultural and national traditions.

Among countries with a strong Christian tradition, a variety of Christmas celebrations have developed that incorporate regional and local cultures. For Christians, participating in a religious service plays an important part in the recognition of the season. Christmas, along with Easter, is the period of highest annual church attendance. In Catholic countries, people hold religious processions or parades in the days preceding Christmas. In other countries, secular processions or parades featuring Santa Claus and other seasonal figures are often held. Family reunions and the exchange of gifts are a widespread feature of the season. Gift giving takes place on Christmas Day in most countries. Others practice gift giving on December 6, Saint Nicholas Day, and January 6, Epiphany.

3.1 Commemorating Jesus' birth

Main articles: [Annunciation](#), [Nativity of Jesus](#) and [Child Jesus](#)

Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary as a fulfillment of the Old Testament's Messianic prophecy.^[111] The Bible contains two accounts which describe the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Depending on one's perspective, these accounts either differ from each other or tell two versions of the same story.^{[112][113]} These biblical accounts are found in the Gospel of Matthew, namely Matthew 1:18, and the Gospel of Luke, specifically Luke 1:26 and 2:40. According to these accounts, Jesus was born to Mary, assisted by her husband Joseph, in the city of Bethlehem.

According to popular tradition, the birth took place in a stable, surrounded by farm animals. A manger (that is, a feeding trough) is mentioned in Luke 2:7, where it states



Adoration of the Shepherds by Gerard van Honthorst depicts the nativity of Jesus



Eastern Orthodox icon of the birth of Christ by St. Andrei Rublev, 15th century

Mary “wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (KJV); and “She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them” (NIV). Shepherds from the fields surrounding Bethlehem were told of the birth by an angel, and were the first to see the child.^[114] Popular tradition also holds that three kings or wise men (named Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar) visited the infant Jesus in the manger, though this does not strictly follow the biblical account. The Gospel of Matthew instead describes a visit by an unspecified number of magi, or astrologers, sometime af-

ter Jesus was born while the family was living in a house (Matthew 2:11), who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the young child Jesus. The visitors were said to be following a mysterious star, commonly known as the **Star of Bethlehem**, believing it to announce the birth of a king of the Jews.^[115] The commemoration of this visit, the **Feast of Epiphany** celebrated on January 6, is the formal end of the Christmas season in some churches.

Christians celebrate Christmas in various ways. In addition to this day being one of the most important and popular for the attendance of church services, there are other devotions and popular traditions. In some **Christian denominations**, children re-enact the events of the Nativity with animals to portray the event with more realism or sing **carols** that reference the event. A long artistic tradition has grown of producing painted depictions of the **nativity in art**. Nativity scenes are traditionally set in a stable with livestock and include Mary, Joseph, the infant Jesus in the manger, the three wise men, the shepherds and their sheep, the angels, and the Star of Bethlehem.^[116] Some Christians also display a small re-creation of the Nativity, known as a **Nativity scene** or *crèche*, in their homes, using figurines to portray the key characters of the event. Prior to Christmas Day, the **Eastern Orthodox Church** practices the 40-day **Nativity Fast** in anticipation of the birth of Jesus, while much of **Western Christianity** celebrates four weeks of **Advent**. The final preparations for Christmas are made on **Christmas Eve**, and many families' major observation of Christmas actually falls in the evening of this day.

3.2 Decorations

Main article: **Christmas decoration**

The practice of putting up special decorations at Christ-



A typical Neapolitan presepe/presepio, or Nativity scene. Local crèches are renowned for their ornate decorations and symbolic figurines, often mirroring daily life.

mas has a long history. In the 15th century, it was recorded that in London it was the custom at Christmas for every house and all the parish churches to be “decked with holm, ivy, bays, and whatsoever the season of the year afforded to be green”.^[117] The heart-shaped leaves of ivy were said to symbolize the coming to earth of Jesus, while holly was seen as protection against pagans and witches, its thorns and red berries held to represent the

Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus at the crucifixion and the blood he shed.^{[118][119]}



Clifton Mill in Clifton, Ohio is the site of this Christmas display with over 3.5 million lights.

Nativity scenes are known from 10th-century Rome. They were popularised by Saint **Francis of Assisi** from 1223, quickly spreading across Europe.^[120] Different types of decorations developed across the Christian world, dependent on local tradition and available resources, and can vary from simple representations of the crib to far more elaborate sets - renowned manger scene traditions include the colourful *Kraków szopka* in Poland,^[121] which imitate Kraków's historical buildings as settings, the elaborate **Italian presepi** (Neapolitan, Genoese and Bolognese),^{[122][123][124][125]} or the **Provençal crèches** in southern France, using hand-painted terracotta figurines called *santons*.^[126] In certain parts of the world, notably Sicily, living nativity scenes following the tradition of Saint Francis are a popular alternative to static crèches.^{[127][128][129]} The first commercially produced decorations appeared in Germany in the 1860s, inspired by paper chains made by children.^[130] In countries where a representation of the **Nativity scene** is very popular, people are encouraged to compete and create the most original or realistic ones. Within some families, the pieces used to make the representation are considered a valuable family **heirloom**.

The traditional colors of Christmas decorations are red, green, and gold. Red symbolizes the blood of Jesus, which was shed in his **crucifixion**, while green symbolizes eternal life, and in particular the evergreen tree, which does not lose its leaves in the winter, and gold is the first color associated with Christmas, as one of the three gifts of the **Magi**, symbolizing royalty.^[119]

The **Christmas tree** is considered by some as **Christianisation** of **pagan** tradition and ritual surrounding the Winter Solstice, which included the use of evergreen boughs, and an adaptation of pagan tree worship;^[131] according to eighth-century biographer **Æddi Stephanus**, Saint **Boniface** (634–709), who was a missionary in Germany, took an axe to an oak tree dedicated to Thor and pointed out a fir tree, which he stated



On Christmas Day, the Christ Candle in the center of the Advent wreath is traditionally lit in many church services.



The famous Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree in New York City

was a more fitting object of reverence because it pointed to heaven and it had a triangular shape, which he said was symbolic of the Trinity.^[132] The English language phrase “Christmas tree” is first recorded in 1835^[133] and represents an importation from the German language. The modern Christmas tree tradition is believed to have begun in Germany in the 18th century^[131] though many argue that Martin Luther began the tradition in the 16th century.^{[134][135]}

From Germany the custom was introduced to Britain, first via Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, and then more successfully by Prince Albert during the reign of Queen Victoria. By 1841 the Christmas tree had become even more widespread throughout Britain.^[93] By the 1870s, people in the United States had adopted the custom of putting up a Christmas tree.^[94] Christmas trees may be decorated with lights and ornaments.

Since the 19th century, the poinsettia, a native plant from Mexico, has been associated with Christmas. Other popular holiday plants include holly, mistletoe, red amaryllis, and Christmas cactus. Along with a Christmas tree, the interior of a home may be decorated with these plants, along with garlands and evergreen foliage. The display of Christmas villages has also become a tradition in many homes during this season. The outside of houses may be decorated with lights and sometimes with illuminated sleighs, snowmen, and other Christmas figures.

Other traditional decorations include bells, candles, candy canes, stockings, wreaths, and angels. Both the

displaying of wreaths and candles in each window are a more traditional Christmas display. The concentric assortment of leaves, usually from an evergreen, make up Christmas wreaths and are designed to prepare Christians for the Advent season. Candles in each window are meant to demonstrate the fact that Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the ultimate light of the world.^[136]

Christmas lights and banners may be hung along streets, music played from speakers, and Christmas trees placed in prominent places.^[137] It is common in many parts of the world for town squares and consumer shopping areas to sponsor and display decorations. Rolls of brightly colored paper with secular or religious Christmas motifs are manufactured for the purpose of wrapping gifts. In some countries, Christmas decorations are traditionally taken down on Twelfth Night, the evening of January 5.

3.3 Music and carols

Main article: Christmas music

The earliest extant specifically Christmas hymns appear in 4th-century Rome. Latin hymns such as “Veni redemptor gentium”, written by Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan, were austere statements of the theological doctrine of the Incarnation in opposition to Arianism. “Corde natus ex Parentis” (“Of the Father’s love begotten”) by the Spanish poet Prudentius (d. 413) is still sung in some churches today.^[138]

In the 9th and 10th centuries, the Christmas “Sequence”



Christmas carolers in Jersey

or “Prose” was introduced in North European monasteries, developing under **Bernard of Clairvaux** into a sequence of rhymed *stanzas*. In the 12th century the Parisian monk Adam of St. Victor began to derive music from popular songs, introducing something closer to the traditional **Christmas carol**.

By the 13th century, in France, Germany, and particularly, Italy, under the influence of **Francis of Asissi**, a strong tradition of popular Christmas songs in the native language developed.^[139] Christmas carols in English first appear in a 1426 work of **John Awdlay**, a **Shropshire** chaplain, who lists twenty-five “caroles of Cristemas”, probably sung by groups of **wassailers**, who went from house to house.^[140]

The songs we know specifically as carols were originally communal folk songs sung during celebrations such as “harvest tide” as well as Christmas. It was only later that carols began to be sung in church. Traditionally, carols have often been based on **medieval** chord patterns, and it is this that gives them their uniquely characteristic musical sound. Some carols like “**Personent hodie**”, “**Good King Wenceslas**”, and “**The Holly and the Ivy**” can be traced directly back to the **Middle Ages**. They are among the oldest musical compositions still regularly sung. “**Adeste Fideles**” (O Come all ye faithful) appears in its current form in the mid-18th century, although the words may have originated in the 13th century.

Singing of carols initially suffered a decline in popularity after the **Protestant Reformation** in northern Europe, although some Reformers, like **Martin Luther**, wrote carols and encouraged their use in worship. Carols largely survived in rural communities until the revival of interest in popular songs in the 19th century. The 18th-century English reformer **Charles Wesley** understood the importance of music to worship. In addition to setting many psalms to melodies, which were influential in the **Great Awakening** in the United States, he wrote texts for at least three Christmas carols. The best known was originally entitled “Hark! How All the Welkin Rings”, later renamed “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”.^[141]

Felix Mendelssohn wrote a melody adapted to fit Wesley’s



Child singers in Bucharest, 1841

words. In Austria in 1818 **Mohr and Gruber** made a major addition to the genre when they composed “**Silent Night**” for the St. Nicholas Church, Oberndorf. **William Sandys’ Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern** (1833) contained the first appearance in print of many now-classic English carols, and contributed to the mid-Victorian revival of the festival.^[142]

Completely secular Christmas seasonal songs emerged in the late 18th century. “**Deck The Halls**” dates from 1784, and the American “**Jingle Bells**” was copyrighted in 1857. In the 19th and 20th century, African American spirituals and songs about Christmas, based in their tradition of spirituals, became more widely known. An increasing number of seasonal holidays songs were commercially produced in the 20th century, including jazz and blues variations. In addition, there was a revival of interest in early music, from groups singing folk music, such as **The Revels**, to performers of early medieval and classical music.

3.4 Traditional cuisine

A special **Christmas family meal** is traditionally an important part of the holiday’s celebration, and the food that is served varies greatly from country to country. Some regions, such as **Sicily**, have special meals for Christmas Eve, when 12 kinds of fish are served. In the United Kingdom and countries influenced by its traditions, a standard Christmas meal includes turkey or goose, meat, gravy, potatoes, vegetables, sometimes bread and cider. Special desserts are also prepared, such as **Christmas pudding**, **mince pies**, and **fruit cake**.^{[143][144]}

In Poland and other parts of eastern Europe and Scandinavia, fish often is used for the traditional main course, but richer meat such as lamb is increasingly served. In Germany, France, and Austria, goose and pork are favored. Beef, ham, and chicken in various recipes are popular throughout the world. The **Maltese** traditionally serve **Imbuljuta tal-Qastan**,^[145] a chocolate and chestnuts beverage, after **Midnight Mass** and throughout the



Christmas pudding cooked on Stir-up Sunday, the Sunday before the beginning of the Advent season

Christmas season. Slovaks prepare the traditional Christmas bread *potica*, *bûche de Noël* in France, *panettone* in Italy, and elaborate tarts and cakes. The eating of sweets and chocolates has become popular worldwide, and sweeter Christmas delicacies include the German *stollen*, *marzipan* cake or candy, and Jamaican rum fruit cake. As one of the few fruits traditionally available to northern countries in winter, oranges have been long associated with special Christmas foods. *Eggnog* is a sweetened dairy-based beverage traditionally made with milk and/or cream, sugar, and whipped eggs (which gives it a frothy texture). *Spirits* such as brandy, rum or bourbon are often added. The finished serving is often garnished with a sprinkling of ground cinnamon or nutmeg.

3.5 Cards

Main article: [Christmas card](#)

Christmas cards are illustrated messages of greeting exchanged between friends and family members during the weeks preceding Christmas Day. The traditional greeting reads “wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year”, much like that of the first commercial [Christmas card](#), produced by Sir Henry Cole in London in 1843.^[146] The custom of sending them has become popular among a wide cross-section of people with the emergence of the modern trend towards exchanging [E-cards](#).

Christmas cards are purchased in considerable quantities, and feature artwork, commercially designed and relevant to the season. The content of the design might relate directly to the Christmas narrative with depictions of the Nativity of Jesus, or Christian symbols such as the Star of Bethlehem, or a white dove which can represent both the Holy Spirit and Peace on Earth. Other Christmas cards are more secular and can depict Christmas traditions, mythical figures such as [Santa Claus](#), objects di-

rectly associated with Christmas such as candles, holly and baubles, or a variety of images associated with the season, such as Christmastide activities, snow scenes and the wildlife of the northern winter. There are even humorous cards and genres depicting nostalgic scenes of the past such as [crinolined](#) shoppers in idealized 19th century streetscapes.

Some prefer cards with a poem, prayer, or [Biblical verse](#); while others distance themselves from religion with an all-inclusive “Season’s greetings”.

3.6 Commemorative stamps

Main article: [Christmas stamp](#)

A number of nations have issued [commemorative stamps](#) at Christmastide. Postal customers will often use these stamps to mail [Christmas cards](#), and they are popular with [philatelists](#). These stamps are regular [postage stamps](#), unlike [Christmas seals](#), and are valid for postage year-round. They usually go on sale some time between early October and early December, and are printed in considerable quantities.

In 1898 a Canadian stamp was issued to mark the inauguration of the Imperial Penny Postage rate. The stamp features a map of the globe and bears an inscription “XMAS 1898” at the bottom. In 1937, Austria issued two “Christmas greeting stamps” featuring a [rose](#) and the signs of the [zodiac](#). In 1939, Brazil issued four semi-postal stamps with designs featuring the [three kings](#) and a [star of Bethlehem](#), an [angel](#) and child, the [Southern Cross](#) and a child, and a mother and child.

Both the [US Postal Service](#) and the [Royal Mail](#) regularly issue Christmas-themed stamps each year.

3.7 Gift giving

The exchanging of [gifts](#) is one of the core aspects of the modern Christmas celebration, making it the most profitable time of year for [retailers](#) and businesses throughout the world. Gift giving was common in the [Roman](#) celebration of [Saturnalia](#), an ancient festival which took place in late December and may have influenced Christmas customs.^[48] On Christmas, people exchange gifts based on the tradition associated with [St. Nicholas](#),^[147] and the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh which were given to the baby Jesus by the [Magi](#).^{[148][149]}

3.7.1 Gift-bearing figures

Main articles: [Santa Claus](#) and [Father Christmas](#)

A number of figures are associated with Christmas and the seasonal giving of gifts. Among these are [Father Christmas](#), also known as [Santa Claus](#) (derived



Sinterklaas or Saint Nicholas, considered by many to be the original Santa Claus

from the Dutch for Saint Nicholas), Père Noël, and the Weihnachtsmann; Saint Nicholas or Sinterklaas; the Christkind; Kris Kringle; Joulupukki; Babbo Natale; Saint Basil; and Father Frost.

The best known of these figures today is red-dressed Santa Claus, of diverse origins. The name Santa Claus can be traced back to the Dutch *Sinterklaas*, which means simply Saint Nicholas. Nicholas was Bishop of Myra, in modern-day Turkey, during the 4th century. Among other saintly attributes, he was noted for the care of children, generosity, and the giving of gifts. His feast on December 6 came to be celebrated in many countries with the giving of gifts.^[70]

Saint Nicholas traditionally appeared in bishop's attire, accompanied by helpers, inquiring about the behaviour of children during the past year before deciding whether they deserved a gift or not. By the 13th century, Saint Nicholas was well known in the Netherlands, and the practice of gift-giving in his name spread to other parts of central and southern Europe. At the Reformation in 16th–17th-century Europe, many Protestants changed the gift bringer to the Christ Child or *Christkindl*, corrupted in English to Kris Kringle, and the date of giving gifts changed from December 6 to Christmas Eve.^[70]

The modern popular image of Santa Claus, however, was created in the United States, and in particular in New York. The transformation was accomplished with the

aid of notable contributors including Washington Irving and the German-American cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840–1902). Following the American Revolutionary War, some of the inhabitants of New York City sought out symbols of the city's non-English past. New York had originally been established as the Dutch colonial town of New Amsterdam and the Dutch Sinterklaas tradition was reinvented as Saint Nicholas.^[150]

In 1809, the New-York Historical Society convened and retroactively named *Sancte Claus* the patron saint of Nieuw Amsterdam, the Dutch name for New York City.^[151] At his first American appearance in 1810, Santa Claus was drawn in bishops' robes. However as new artists took over, Santa Claus developed more secular attire.^[152] Nast drew a new image of "Santa Claus" annually, beginning in 1863. By the 1880s, Nast's Santa had evolved into the modern vision of the figure, perhaps based on the English figure of Father Christmas. The image was standardized by advertisers in the 1920s^[153] and continues through the present day.^{[154][155]}

Father Christmas, a jolly, well nourished, bearded man who typified the spirit of good cheer at Christmas, predates the Santa Claus character. He is first recorded in early 17th century England, but was associated with holiday merrymaking and drunkenness rather than the bringing of gifts.^[133] In Victorian Britain, his image was remade to match that of Santa. The French Père Noël evolved along similar lines, eventually adopting the Santa image. In Italy, Babbo Natale acts as Santa Claus, while La Befana is the bringer of gifts and arrives on the eve of the Epiphany. It is said that La Befana set out to bring the baby Jesus gifts, but got lost along the way. Now, she brings gifts to all children. In some cultures Santa Claus is accompanied by Knecht Ruprecht, or Black Peter. In other versions, elves make the toys. His wife is referred to as Mrs. Claus.



Santa Claus reacts to a toy request (Jonathan Meath as Santa)

There has been some opposition to the narrative of the American evolution of Saint Nicholas into the modern Santa. It has been claimed that the Saint Nicholas So-

ciety was not founded until 1835, almost half a century after the end of the American War of Independence.^[156] Moreover, a study of the “children’s books, periodicals and journals” of New Amsterdam by Charles Jones revealed no references to Saint Nicholas or Sinterklaas.^[157] However, not all scholars agree with Jones’s findings, which he reiterated in a book-length study in 1978.^[158] Howard G. Hageman, of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, maintains that the tradition of celebrating Sinterklaas in New York was alive and well from the early settlement of the Hudson Valley on.^[159]

Current tradition in several Latin American countries (such as Venezuela and Colombia) holds that while Santa makes the toys, he then gives them to the Baby Jesus, who is the one who actually delivers them to the children’s homes, a reconciliation between traditional religious beliefs and the iconography of Santa Claus imported from the United States.

In South Tyrol (Italy), Austria, Czech Republic, Southern Germany, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Slovakia, and Switzerland, the Christkind (Ježíšek in Czech, Jézuska in Hungarian and Ježiško in Slovak) brings the presents. Greek children get their presents from Saint Basil on New Year’s Eve, the eve of that saint’s liturgical feast.^[160] The German St. Nikolaus is not identical with the Weihnachtsmann (who is the German version of Santa Claus / Father Christmas). St. Nikolaus wears a bishop’s dress and still brings small gifts (usually candies, nuts, and fruits) on December 6 and is accompanied by Knecht Ruprecht. Although many parents around the world routinely teach their children about Santa Claus and other gift bringers, some have come to reject this practice, considering it deceptive.^[161]

4 Date

Irenaeus (c. 130–202) viewed Christ’s conception as March 25 in association with the Passion, with the nativity nine months after on December 25.^[162] Hippolytus of Rome (170–235) may also have identified December 25 for the birth of Jesus and March 25 for the conception.^{[7][162]} Sextus Julius Africanus (c. 160–c. 240) identified December 25, later to become the most widely accepted date of celebration, as the date Jesus’ birth in 221.^[163] The precise origin of assigning December 25 to the birth of Jesus is unclear.^[163] Various dates were speculated: May 20, April 18 or 19, March 25, January 2, November 17 or 20.^{[7][164]} When celebration on a particular date began, January 6 prevailed at least in the East,^[165] but, except among Armenians (the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Catholic Church), who continue to celebrate the birth on January 6, December 25 eventually won acceptance everywhere.^[164]

The New Testament Gospel of Luke may indirectly give the date as December for the birth of Jesus, with the

sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John the Baptist cited by John Chrysostom (c. 386) as a date for the Annunciation.^{[7][123][166][167]} Tertullian (d. 220) did not mention Christmas as a major feast day in the Church of Roman Africa.^[7] In *Chronographai*, a reference work published in 221, Sextus Julius Africanus suggested that Jesus was conceived on the spring equinox.^{[168][169]} The equinox was March 25 on the Roman calendar, so this implied a birth in December.^[170]

The birth of Jesus was announced in Luke 2:11, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” Moreover, the belief that God came into the world in the form of man to atone for the sins of humanity, rather than the exact birth date, is considered to be the primary purpose in celebrating Christmas.^{[171][172][173]}

In the early 4th century, the church calendar in Rome contained Christmas on December 25 and other holidays placed on solar dates. According to Hijmans^[174] “It is cosmic symbolism ... which inspired the Church leadership in Rome to elect the southern solstice, December 25, as the birthday of Christ, and the northern solstice as that of John the Baptist, supplemented by the equinoxes as their respective dates of conception.” Usener^[175] and others^[30] proposed that the Christians chose this day because it was the Roman feast celebrating the birthday of Sol Invictus. Modern scholar S. E. Hijmans, however, states that “While they were aware that pagans called this day the 'birthday' of Sol Invictus, this did not concern them and it did not play any role in their choice of date for Christmas.”^[174]

Around the year 386 John Chrysostom delivered a sermon in Antioch in favour of adopting the 25 December celebration also in the East, since, he said, the conception of Jesus (Luke 1:26) had been announced during the sixth month of Elisabeth’s pregnancy with John the Baptist (Luke 1:10-13), which he dated from the duties Zacharias performed on the Day of Atonement during the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar Ethanim or Tishri (Leviticus 16:29, 1 Kings 8:2) which falls from late September to early October.^[7] That shepherds watched the flocks by night in the fields in the winter time is supported by the phrase “frost by night” in Genesis 31:38-40. A special group known as the shepherds of Migdal Eder (Genesis 35:19-21, Micah 4:8) watched the flocks by night year round pastured for Temple Sacrifice near Bethlehem.^{[166][176]}

In the early 18th century, some scholars proposed alternative explanations. Isaac Newton argued that the date of Christmas, celebrating the birth of him whom Christians consider to be the “Sun of righteousness” prophesied in Malachi 4:2,^[24] was selected to correspond with the southern solstice, which the Romans called *bruma*, celebrated on December 25.^[177] In 1743, German Protestant Paul Ernst Jablonski argued Christmas was placed on December 25 to correspond with the Roman solar holi-

day *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* and was therefore a “paganization” that debased the true church.^[27] It has been argued that, on the contrary, the Emperor *Aurelian*, who in 274 instituted the holiday of the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, did so partly as an attempt to give a pagan significance to a date already important for Christians in Rome.^[178] In 1889, *Louis Duchesne* proposed that the date of Christmas was calculated as nine months after the *Annunciation*, the traditional date of the conception of Jesus.^{[179][23]}

4.1 Using the Julian calendar

Some Eastern Orthodox national churches, including those of Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and the Greek Patriarchate of Jerusalem mark feasts using the older Julian calendar. December 25 on the Julian calendar currently corresponds to January 7 on the internationally used Gregorian calendar. However, other Orthodox Christians, such as the churches of Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Antioch, Alexandria, Albania, Finland, and the Orthodox Church in America, among others, began using the Revised Julian calendar in the early 20th century, which at present corresponds exactly to the Gregorian calendar.^[9]

The original date of the celebration in Eastern Christianity was January 6, in connection with Epiphany, and that is still the date of the celebration for the Armenian Apostolic Church and in Armenia, where it is a public holiday. As of 2014, there is a difference of 13 days between the modern Gregorian calendar and the older Julian calendar. Those who continue to use the Julian calendar or its equivalents thus celebrate December 25 and January 6, which on the Gregorian calendar translate as January 7 and January 19. For this reason, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia, Montenegro, the Republic of Macedonia, and the Republic of Moldova celebrate Christmas on what in the Gregorian calendar is January 7. Eastern Orthodox Churches in Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Antioch, Alexandria, Albania, Finland, and the Orthodox Church in America celebrate Christmas on December 25 in the revised Julian calendar, corresponding to December 25 also in the Gregorian calendar.

4.1.1 Listing

5 Economy

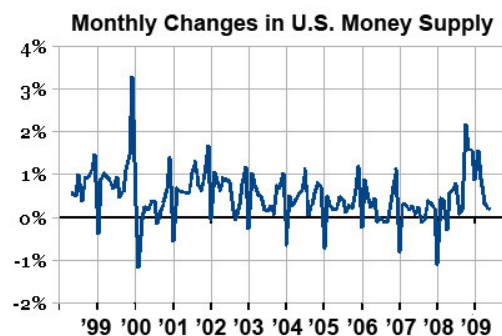
Main article: Economics of Christmas

Christmas is typically a peak selling season for retailers in many nations around the world. Sales increase dramatically as people purchase gifts, decorations, and supplies to celebrate. In the U.S., the “Christmas shopping season” starts as early as October.^{[181][182]} In Canada, merchants begin advertising campaigns just before Halloween (October 31), and step up their market-



Christmas market in Jena, Germany

ing following Remembrance Day on November 11. In the UK and Ireland, the Christmas shopping season starts from mid November, around the time when high street Christmas lights are turned on.^{[183][184]} In the United States, it has been calculated that a quarter of all personal spending takes place during the Christmas/holiday shopping season.^[185] Figures from the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that expenditure in department stores nationwide rose from \$20.8 billion in November 2004 to \$31.9 billion in December 2004, an increase of 54 percent. In other sectors, the pre-Christmas increase in spending was even greater, there being a November–December buying surge of 100 percent in bookstores and 170 percent in jewelry stores. In the same year employment in American retail stores rose from 1.6 million to 1.8 million in the two months leading up to Christmas.^[186] Industries completely dependent on Christmas include Christmas cards, of which 1.9 billion are sent in the United States each year, and live Christmas Trees, of which 20.8 million were cut in the U.S. in 2002.^[187] In the UK in 2010, up to £8 billion was expected to be spent online at Christmas, approximately a quarter of total retail festive sales.^[184]



Each year (most notably 2000) money supply in US banks is increased for Christmas shopping.

In most Western nations, Christmas Day is the least active day of the year for business and commerce; almost all retail, commercial and institutional businesses are closed, and almost all industries cease activity (more than any other day of the year), whether laws require such or not.

In England and Wales, the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004 prevents all large shops from trading on Christmas Day. Scotland is currently planning similar legislation. Film studios release many high-budget movies during the holiday season, including Christmas films, fantasy movies or high-tone dramas with high production values to hopes of maximizing the chance of nominations for the Academy Awards.

One economist's analysis calculates that, despite increased overall spending, Christmas is a deadweight loss under orthodox microeconomic theory, because of the effect of gift-giving. This loss is calculated as the difference between what the gift giver spent on the item and what the gift receiver would have paid for the item. It is estimated that in 2001, Christmas resulted in a \$4 billion deadweight loss in the U.S. alone.^{[188][189]} Because of complicating factors, this analysis is sometimes used to discuss possible flaws in current microeconomic theory. Other deadweight losses include the effects of Christmas on the environment and the fact that material gifts are often perceived as white elephants, imposing cost for upkeep and storage and contributing to clutter.^[190]

6 Controversies

See also: Christmas controversy

Christmas has at times been the subject of controversy and attacks from various sources. A Puritan-led controversy began during the English Interregnum (1649–1660), when England was ruled by a Puritan Parliament.^[191] Puritans sought to remove the remaining pagan elements of Christmas. During this brief period, the Puritan-led English Parliament banned the celebration of Christmas entirely, considering it “a popish festival with no biblical justification”, and a time of wasteful and immoral behavior.^[192] In Colonial America, the Puritans outlawed celebration of Christmas in 1659.^[193]

Some Christians and organizations such as Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice cite alleged attacks on Christmas (dubbed a “war on Christmas”).^{[194][195][196]} One controversy is the occurrence of Christmas trees being renamed Holiday trees.^[195] In the United States there has been a tendency, in some contexts, to replace the greeting *Merry Christmas* with *Happy Holidays*.^[197] Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union have initiated court cases to bar the display of images and other material referring to Christmas from public property, including schools.^[198] Such groups argue that government-funded displays of Christmas imagery and traditions violate the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prohibits the establishment by Congress of a national religion.^[199] In 1984, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Lynch vs. Donnelly* that a Christmas display (which included a Nativ-

ity scene) owned and displayed by the city of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, did not violate the First Amendment.^[200]



Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet (Black Peter), a character which has become controversial.

In November 2009, the Federal appeals court in Philadelphia endorsed a school district's ban on the singing of Christmas carols.^[201] The US Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal.^[202] In the private sphere also, it has been alleged that any specific mention of the term “Christmas” or its religious aspects was being increasingly censored, avoided, or discouraged by a number of advertisers and retailers. In response, the American Family Association and other groups have organized boycotts of individual retailers.^[203]

In the United Kingdom there have been some minor controversies, one of the most famous being Birmingham City Council's temporary promotion of a Christmas-period festival, not Christmas itself, as “Winterval” in 1998.^[204] Critics attacked the use of the word “Winterval” as political correctness gone mad, accusing council officials of trying to take the Christ out of Christmas.^[204] The council responded to the criticism by stating that Christmas-related words and symbols were prominent in its publicity material.^[204] There were also protests in November 2009 when the city council of Dundee promoted its celebrations as the “Winter Night Light festival”, initially with no specific Christmas references.^[205]

Zwarte Piet (English: Black Peter) is the companion of Saint Nicholas (Dutch: *Sinterklaas*, Luxembourgish: *Kleeschen*) in the folklore of the Low Countries. Tra-

ditionally Zwarte Piet is said to be **black** because he is a **Moor** from Spain.^[206] Actors portraying Zwarte Piet typically put on **blackface** make-up and colourful Renaissance attire, in addition to curly wigs, red lipstick and earrings. In recent years, the character has become the subject of controversy, especially in the Netherlands.^{[207][208]}

7 See also

- Christmas in July
- Christmas Sunday
- Little Christmas
- Nochebuena

8 Notes

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- [171] *The Liturgical Year*. Thomas Nelson. Retrieved 2009-04-02. Christmas is not really about the celebration of a birth date at all. It is about the celebration of a birth. The fact of the date and the fact of the birth are two different things. The calendrical verification of the feast itself is not really that important ... What is important to the understanding of a life-changing moment is that it happened, not necessarily where or when it happened. The message is clear: Christmas is not about marking the actual birth date of Jesus. It is about the Incarnation of the One who became like us in all things but sin (Heb. 4:15) and who humbled Himself "to the point of death-even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). Christmas is a pinnacle feast, yes, but it is not the beginning of the liturgical year. It is a memorial, a remembrance, of the birth of Jesus, not really a celebration of the day itself. We remember that because the Jesus of history was born, the Resurrection of the Christ of faith could happen.
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11 External links

- Christmas at DMOZ
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