

## Reality Check: 'Tis the Season - The Celebrations of December

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If you listen to some folks this time of year, you might think that only "Jesus is the reason" for the December holiday season. Recent whining by right-wing radio talkers like Milwaukee's Mark Belling notwithstanding, December has always been filled with diverse festivals throughout many religious traditions, bringing light and color to the darkest month of the year in the northern hemisphere. Secular events also now dot the month-long season of celebration worldwide. Here's an overview of the many celebrations occurring this month.

December 1 marked the 15th annual observance of the United Nations World Health Organization AIDS Task Force's "AIDS Awareness Day" more commonly referred to as World AIDS Day. Over a dozen different events were held around Wisconsin in the weeks surrounding the actual observation. The international Artists Against AIDS also conducted their Day Without Art at numerous museums worldwide..

December 1 also marked the beginning of the four-week Advent season in Christianity. Advent annually celebrates the Christian anticipation of the coming of the infant Jesus later in the month.

As the first slip of the new moon was sighted on December 5 and 6, 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide began the Eid-ul-Fitr (the Festival of Fast Breaking). The Eid-ul-Fitr falls on the first day of Shawwaal, the tenth month of the Muslim year, following the month of Ramadan in which the Qur'aan was revealed and which is the month of fasting. During the Eid-ul-Fitr lavish feasts are held, donations are given to the less fortunate and gifts are exchanged among loved ones.

Some may recall that in 2001 Ramadan was almost concurrent with the Christian Christmas. The reason that the Eid-ul-Fitr and Ramadan fall at different times of the modern calendar each year is because Islam follows a lunar calendar.

Following a similar lunar calendar resulted in Judaism's Chanukah starting in late November in 2002. Chanukah is the eight day Jewish Festival of Light that celebrates the victory of a small band of Jewish fighters who in 165 BC successfully recaptured Jerusalem from the powerful Greco-Syrian empire and re-consecrated the Holy City. Judas Maccabeus led his people in re-lighting the temple flame on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev. The one day's worth of lamp oil they had actually burned for eight straight days without fail. Since it is a very early fight of a minority for religious freedom, Chanukah is a natural choice for people who greatly value that in modern times. This year the holiday ran through December 7.

December 6 saw Christians celebrate the feast day of St. Nicholas. The historical Nicholas lived in the 4th century in Asia Minor near the modern Turkish city of Finike. St. Nicholas, also called Nicholas of Bari and Nicholas of Myra, is the source of the Santa Claus myth. Tradition holds that sweets and presents are left by St. Nicholas to good children on this day, and in many parts of the world this feast day supplants Christmas Eve and Christmas Day gift exchanges.

While on December 8 Roman Catholics honor the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Sikhs formally remember the martyrdom of Guru Tehg Bahadur Ji. The guru's death on November 11, 1675 led to a national Kashmiri revolt against the ruling Mughals, who had beheaded the guru and boiled and burned alive his leading followers after they refused to embrace Islam.

December 8 also marks the observance of Bodhi Day in Buddhism. On this day Buddhists celebrate Siddhartha Gautama's realization and presentation to his fellow seekers of the Four Noble Truths of universal suffering caused by ignorance, especially of oneself and the eight-fold path to enlightenment through "right" views, thinking, conduct, livelihood, etc.

Swedes celebrate St. Lucia Day on December 13. The date marks the saint's martyrdom at age twenty. Lucia was an early Christian who would neither refute her faith nor agree to go into forced prostitution. Saint Lucia symbolizes the promise of Spring light during the longest nights of the Scandinavian year. There are parades and dances. During the frivolity, a Swedish elf named Tomte gives out small presents.

On December 15 this year the world's 4 million Jains will celebrate Maunajiyaras, another holiday determined by the lunar calendar. Maunajiyaras celebrates 5 of the 105 key occasions in the lives of the 24 holy teachers of the principles of Jainism.

The Hispanic celebration of Las Posadas runs from December sixteenth to Christmas Eve. For nine days, family and friends act out the story of Joseph and Mary being turned away from shelter over and over again. The manger outside the inn stable is left empty until the ninth day. On the last night there is a party that includes the breaking open of piñatas.

Between December 21 and 25 pagans, Wiccans, followers of Shamanism and other New Age disciplines celebrate the beginning of what they consider the "real 12 days of Christmas" with the beginning of the Yule or Winter Solstice. Yule begins on the shortest day and the longest night of the year. Yule spans twelve days ending "Yule Night" around December 31. The dates vary because of the different solar and lunar calendars used by the various traditions. This year Yule "officially" runs from December 25 to January 5.

Yule is the first of the solar festivals and the first Sabbat of the new year. For Wiccans, it is a time for each witch to put to rest the old lessons, battles and issues that need to be released. To let go of those things that hold one back and move on into the new year with a fresh view and perspective. It is a continuation of the introspection which began during Samhain. It is a time of renewal and movement.

In Japan, the Solstice is recalled during Tohji-Taisai, the Shinto rite honoring Sun Goddess Amaterasu. According to legend, the storm god Susano-o angered her, and she withdrew into a cave until enticed out with music and dance. Taoists honor Wang-Mu, the Empress Mother of Compassion and Wisdom, and manifestation of the Tao (or Cosmic Power of Creation and Destruction) on this date as well.

Needless to say, the world's two billion Christians' celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25 now overshadows most of the other religious celebrations that come during December. Historians have documented that first and second century Christians initially celebrated the Nazarene teacher's September birth to mask their then-persecuted religious beliefs during December's Roman festivals, when enthusiasm for the season was nearly compulsory.

Yet the Christian adoption for Jesus' birthday is a borrowing on the grandest scale, thanks in large part to the Roman Emperor Constantine, who converted to Christianity in 312. The sun god Mithra's festival was already held on December 25. Changing the focus of the same festival likely cut through lots of religious red tape quickly. However, December 25th did not show up as Christmas on the calendar until the year 350. The story of the Magi doesn't appear until about 500 CE.

Two other key aspects of the Christmas story also are appropriated from another religious tradition. Jesus' alleged virgin birth celebrated by choirs of angels mimics exactly the birth of the Buddha a half millennium earlier.

The red and green colors of Christmas are also a legacy from the ancient Romans. They admired the strength of holly and ivy to survive winter, and brought those plants into their homes as decorations.

One of the newest celebrations on the calendar begins on December 26. The African American celebration of Kwanzaa arose out of the rioting of the 1960s. A graduate student, (now Dr.)

Maulana Karenga, shaped this holiday to nurture culture-building. Kwanzaa spans seven days with each day representing an important principle, among which are unity, self-determination and responsibility. The Caribbean holiday of Junkanoo runs at the same time as Kwanzaa.

On December 31 followers of Zoroastrianism celebrate the Gahambar of Maidyarem. The communal festival is one of seven celebrated annually by the ancient religion's 150,000 current adherents, most of whom live in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The four day festival's dates are determined by the lunar calendar and this year come just six days after Zoroastrians' observation of the death of their leading prophet Zarathustra on December 25. December 31 also marks the Day of Goodwill in South Africa and worldwide celebrations ushering in the New Year.

Though this list may seem thorough it is not complete, as it does not take into account other secular holidays such as Canadian Thanksgiving or Boxing Day in England. Most importantly, recognizing the diversity of December holidays enhances rather than diminishes any particular tradition.

In a New York Times opinion piece on the diversity of the holiday season Rabbi Judah Nadich noted that holidays are only as important as what individual celebrants bring to the events: "With Christmas and Chanukah and other festivals, celebrants endow them with a new meaning that gives purpose to their own lives and lifts their spirits in exultation."