

The Origin of Christmas By Dr Swami Gitananda (From the Yoga Life Archives)

Where did it all start? Who is to be blamed? Blame it all on the Hindus. It's time we took the blame rather than all the credit.

It just so happens that the Hindus have been around for a long time. They're rather an old member on the family tree. So intent were they on study and realization of spiritual and material things that the Upanishads report their conclusion that "there is nothing new under the sun." To listen to the average Hindu, one would believe that he had created the world instead of The Divine. But in fact, the customs and rituals associated with most of the world's religions and holidays did originate in India, and then went through various changes in the societies which adopted them. As an instance, the story of gift-giving at this Christmastide and the originator of such gifts are both of Hindu origin.

In the Kathopanishad, we have the story of the Brahmin Vajasravasa who fathered a son called Nachiketas, which is Sanskrit for Nicholas. The boy dies and goes to the abode of Yama, Lord of Death where he lingers for three days. Death is away "on holiday," and when he returns, he is embarrassed to discover that he was kept a Brahmin waiting. He grants the boy three boons or favours, and the boy returns to life again bearing gifts for his father and family. This story of the Amrita Manthan is often depicted in ancient Hindu stories. Sant Nachiketas (Saint Nicholas) is depicted driving a chariot-like sledge loaded with the boons and gifts for the good of mankind. He is driving Vaanaprasi, reindeer, who are able to fly through the air, Sant Nachiketas distributes all of the Ratnas or celestial gifts to mankind, including the knowledge of life after death.

The western story of St. Nicholas grew up many millennia later around the life of a father of the early Christian Church in Asia Minor who gifted a dowry for three ugly daughters of a poor parishioner. Later, St. Nick was a "good guy" who went around blessing little children on December 6th each year. "Bad" little ones were soundly caned by a blackamoor who accompanied the old saint. The American super-tale was created by the Reverend Samuel Clement Moore when he wrote "Twas The Night Before Christmas."

This is the winter solstice and is the season when mankind dreads the loss of heat and light; when ancient man lit his fire, he also lit it for the gods in hope that they would return the warmth and the day-light. The Yule fire was an ancient offering to the sun. First candles, and then electric lights replaced the fire. Modern electric lights like their earlier counterparts, also represented the planets in our solar system, and for the mystic

Yogi, represented the Chakras of the inner cosmos. The fir tree represents the spine and the cranial nerves upon which the Chakric lights resplendently appear. Many other "pagan" customs were passed to the West where "modern pagans" were happy to take up only the materialistic practices rather than the spiritual values.

At this time of year, Hindus are celebrating the Festival of Lights, Muslims and Jews their own period of Id and Chanukah, and elsewhere the "season of light" is acknowledged.

Let us all strive for that Light that illumines all worlds.