

A Unitarian Christmas?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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UCV

Crossing borders and getting oriented in a foreign country can be a daunting task in the best of circumstances. That's one of the reasons why, when we moved to Canada, Diana and I listened to Stuart McLean's *Vinyl Cafe* and especially to McLean's on-going "Dave and Morley Stories." We learned a lot about our new home and native land over the years from Dave and Morley, Stephanie and Sam, and the assorted characters from their world in Toronto.

Now, there's a US equivalent to the *Vinyl Cafe* that many of you may have heard of: it's called *A Prairie Home Companion*—a radio show, created by Garrison Keillor, that's been broadcasting live from St. Paul Minnesota, and other sites on the road in the States, pretty much every week since 1974. Like the *Vinyl Cafe*, *A Prairie Home Companion* showcases radio dramas, comedy skits, and a lot of music. As well, it features a US equivalent to the "Dave and Morley Stories"—it's called "News from Lake Wobegone"—this is Keillor's fictional creation, and well-beloved by his 4 million listeners. Lake Wobegone is a little town in Minnesota that Keillor describes as a place "that time forgot and the decades cannot improve...where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

"News from Lake Wobegone" often features recurring characters and places like the Chatterbox Cafe, the Bunsen and Krebsch families and Pastor Ingvist of the Lake Wobegone Lutheran Church. He affectionately pokes fun of the town's Scandinavian-American residents and their various, earnest, and bumbling ways.

Unitarians show up from time to time in the "News from Lake Wobegone," as well. Sandal wearing, granola crunching, bird watching, and theologically aimless, we're excellent

comic foils to the town's more homespun characters, their matter-of-fact virtues and simple piety. Here's couple of examples from past shows:

"There was a terrible car accident. A woman was lying in the street, covered in blood. Someone in the crowd shouted, "Call a priest!"

The woman opened her eyes and said, "But I'm a Unitarian."

To which the call then went out from the crowd: "Call a math teacher!"

"Jesus took a Unitarian out fishing and the Unitarian accidentally dropped an oar and watched it float away. Jesus stepped out of the boat, walked across the water to the oar, grabbed it, and walked back to the boat. The next day, a friend asked the Unitarian if he had enjoyed fishing with the Lord. "It was okay," said the Unitarian, "But would you believe that guy can't swim?"

And then there's this: a scouting description of the Emersonians: the football team of U.U.U.U.

the Unitarian Universalist United University.

"Well, the Unitarians aren't exactly a football powerhouse, are they? They don't seem to care about football at all. They don't even bother to work up plays. They just stand around arguing in the huddle, and then they go and run off in all directions."

All of this is in good fun, and over the years I've enjoyed this playful humor. It's a good tonic to our own earnestness, I think. But then, a few years back, Garrison Keillor let the comic mask slip; seems he'd just had had enough of us. "I've just returned from Cambridge [Massachusetts] that beehive...of brazen elite foolishness," he wrote in a syndicated newspaper column. And then, Keillor's opinion piece took the following bizarre turn:

"You can blame Ralph Waldo Emerson...He preached here at the First Church of Cambridge, a Unitarian outfit, where I discovered that "Silent Night" has been cleverly rewritten to make it more about silence and night and not so much about God....Unitarians listen to the Inner Voice and so they have no creed that they all stand up and recite in unison, and that's perfectly their right, but it's wrong, wrong, wrong to rewrite "Silent Night." If you don't believe Jesus was God, OK, go write your own damn "Silent Night" and leave ours alone. This is spiritual piracy...and we Christians have stood for it long enough. Christmas is a Christian holiday—if you're not in the club, then buzz off. Celebrate Yule instead or dance around in druid robes for the solstice. Christmas does not need any improvements. It is a common, ordinary experience that resists [your] brilliant innovation[s]."

“Nonbelievers, please leave Christmas alone”—that’s the title of Garrison Keillor’s column. Not-so-funny this around; but then in a weird way, it turns out to be unintentionally humorous. Let me explain.

Four years ago, the Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Steven Protzman of Iowa City, wrote this: “Most of the Christmas holiday as it is now celebrated in [the US, England and Canada] was inspired, created or revived by Unitarians.” What the heck?! Which got me reading up and discovered, over the years, Rev. Phillip Hewett, and other UU ministers, have pointed out that many of the leading lights of the Christian churches had, for centuries, waged open and bitter war against the celebration of Christmas, and so successfully, that by the early 1800s, the celebration of Christmas had all but died out in western culture. That’s the unintentionally funny part in response to Keillor’s anti-Unitarian invective—it’s Christians who were killing Christmas all these years!

The reason’s two-fold, I think: first, it was just too-damn pagan in origin. The festival of Christmas on December 25th was imposed on the Roman Empire in the late 4th century CE by imperial decree and backed by numerous bishops in western Christendom. This date was striking and well-known: it coincided with the pagan festival of *Natalis Invicti*—the birthday of the “Unconquered God,” indentified with the Persian God Mithra, a favourite of the Roman military, whose mystery cult was introduced into Roman culture by imperial edict of Julius Caesar in 46 BCE.

Falling as closely as it did to the winter solstice dovetailed neatly, as well, with the huge and popular festival of Saturnalia—a celebration of the high god Saturn in the pagan Roman world. Up north, Rev. Hewett writes that “the ancient Celtic and Germanic tribes celebrated these days as far back as their histories can be traced”; and “the Angli of Britain celebrated

December 25th as the beginning of the New Year. It was known as ‘Mother’s Night’” and was likely associated with *Cailleach*, otherwise known as the divine hag—a Gaelic creator and weather deity.

The association of December 25th, the feast of Christmas, with that of pagan deities and goings on, repulsed some church leaders. In 245 CE, Origen of Alexandria stated that only bad characters in the Bible (like Pharaoh and Herod) celebrated birthdays; and in 303 CE Arnobius of Sicca ridiculed the idea of celebrating any divine birthdays at all. It took hundreds of years for many churches to accept the festival of Christmas, and to this day the Orthodox world celebrates the feast of Christ on or near January 6th—and focuses on the baptism of Jesus and not his birth. I don’t think they sing “Silent Night” in Armenia.

The second reason for the Christian church and many of its gatekeepers to battle against the festival of Christmas was that people were having just too much fun celebrating it. Here’s a couple of examples: In his *Certain Queries Touching the Rise and Observation of Christmas*, the influential 17th century English Presbyterian minister Joseph Hemming started out his attack on Christmas on the grounds that the date of Christ’s birth was certainly not December 25th, that the feast had no scriptural basis but was a purely human invention, that it was as superstitious relic of popery, and that such customs as Yule games and carols were lamentable pagan rites. Thomas Mockett, rector of Gilston in Hertfordshire plowed into the question full throttle in his *Christmas, the Christians Grand Feast* where he noted that in order to encourage the citizens of ancient Rome to convert, the early Christians came up with their own equivalent of the Saturnalia, thus bringing into “the Church of God

...all the heathenish customs and pagan rites and ceremonies that the idolatrous heathens used, as riotous drinking, gluttony, luxury, wantonness, dancing, dicing, stage-plays, interludes, masks, mummeries, with all their pagan sports and profane practices.”

In December 1642, Thomas Fuller, preacher at the Royal Chapel in London, lamented that “while admitting that the young might be so addicted to their toys and Christmas sports that they will not be weaned from them,” he advised the older generation among his listeners “not to be transported with their follies, but mourn instead while the young are in mirth.” By 1647, Parliament abolished the feasts of Christmas altogether, and in 1652 issued a proclamation on Christmas Eve ordering that shops should be open and the markets kept running on December 25th—business as usual. And here, in the colonies, Rev. Increase Mather, of Salem witch trial fame, found Christmas nothing but “mad mirth and highly dishonorable to the name of Christ.” And so duly, in 1651, the General Court of Massachusetts, declared Christmas illegal:

Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas and the like, either by feasting, forbearing labor, or any other way...every such person so offending shall pay for each offense five shillings as a fine to the country.”

I could go on heaping one example after another of Christian ambivalence and warfare against the celebration of Christmas, but I don’t want to be a Scrooge, and we need to move on—and I think you get the picture. In sum, the historian Janet Wood notes: “by the beginning of the Victorian period...the singing of Christmas carols...had all but disappeared,” and throughout England the “festival of Christmas was everywhere in decline.”

And then, within a few decades everything began to change, with Unitarians playing an outsized role in the reclamation of the celebration of Christmas and in establishing in our culture some of its most significant modern characteristics. Santa Claus?—Unitarians. (sorry?) Well, here’s what Rev. Steven Protzman has to say:

In 1823, Clement Moore, a Unitarian professor of Oriental and Greek literature at Columbia University wrote a poem to give parents a vision of what he believed Christmas should look like. The result was *The Night Before Christmas* (...and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...) Moore wrote the poem...basing his image of St Nicholas in the poem on the fat, jolly old Dutch handyman who worked on his family’s estate when he was

growing up. By chance, the poem was published in a New York paper, and circulated widely in the popular press for many years, spreading the image of a red-coated Santa Claus driving a flying sleigh pulled by eight reindeer. Thomas Nast, a popular cartoonist and Unitarian helped to develop and promote Santa's image, drawing a picture of him for *Harper's Weekly* every year from 1863 to 1886. Nast was the one who showed Santa keeping records of good and bad children, and was the first to locate Santa's workshop at the North Pole, [and in so doing] poked fun at the British, Russian and Scandinavian explorers who all were competing to be the first to reach the North Pole. Locating Santa up there also sent a message that he existed for *all* the children of the world."

Evergreen Christmas trees decked out with lights and ornaments?—Unitarians. Rev. Charles Follen, an immigrant from Germany, Harvard professor, abolitionist and Unitarian minister in Lexington, Massachusetts, invited colleagues and guests to his home where he had put up a tree lit with candles and covered with ornaments. The effect was absolutely dazzling—they'd never seen anything like it. One of those guests was the English Unitarian author and scholar Harriet Martineau, whose brother was the most prominent Unitarian minister in Great Britain. Martineau famously wrote about her experience with Follen's Christmas tree during her visit to the States, and in a short-time, decorated and candle lit Christmas trees became the rage on both sides of the Atlantic.

Several well-beloved modern Christmas carols and songs?—Unitarians. James Pierpont, the organist and choir director of the Unitarian Church of Savannah Georgia, wrote "Jingle Bells" in 1857 for the congregation's children to sing in their Christmas service, and to the delight of everyone. "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" and "Do You Hear What I Hear?" were added to the growing list of carols by the Unitarian poets Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Noel Regney. And in 1849, Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears wrote the words to "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." With the US having just warred against Mexico and popular revolutions being suppressed in Europe weighing on his mind, Rev. Sears wrote a carol urging us to hear the "angels sing of peace and goodwill to all"—that peace on earth isn't just a private

personal matter, rather, it's a movement to understand peace on earth as a social and public undertaking. These lyrics raised objections from a number of conservative Christian commentators of the time who, with contempt, dismissed "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" as just the sort of hymn you would expect from a Unitarian.

And finally, there's the case of Charles Dickens and his story of the haunting of Ebenezer Scrooge. Dickens, like Martineau, had also traveled to the US. In 1842, he met the famous Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, and discovered in this august and good man "a religion which has sympathy for people of every creed...and who would do something for human improvement...and would always have us practice charity and toleration." On his return to England, Dickens became a Unitarian, and promptly shelved a planned treatise entitled "An Appeal on Behalf of the Poor Man's Child" because he realized the best way for him to reach the widest possible audience with his concerns about poverty and injustice in England was to write a deeply felt Christmas narrative, rather than a political tract.

And so, in late Autumn 1843, over a six week stretch, Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, and published it on December 17th to instant and widespread acclaim. No single work of literature did more than the story of Scrooge, Marley's ghost, the three spirits of Christmas and Tiny Tim to effect wide-spread change—change in popular attitudes and practices toward the celebration of Christmas in the English speaking world. Hereafter, any so-called Christian who'd disapprove of the festive spirit and deeper meaning of Christmas was written off as a cantankerous, out-of-touch scold.

"All of Dickens novels," writes Michael Timko, went on to "reflect the central ideas of 19th century Unitarianism: "the belief that Jesus was a human being who exemplified a truly religious life...the rejection of a God of stern judgment; a disdain of theological controversy; the

rejection of dogma; an inclusive rather than exclusive religion; and an emphasis on doing good works. In *A Christmas Carol*...with Scrooge's transformative change of heart, Dickens illustrates that his readers, too, can be converted from a harsh...and selfish worldview to one of love, hope and charity, and, like Scrooge, can again become part of the human community. For Dickens, that was the true meaning of Christmas.”

I have long marveled at the mysterious power of religion to call forth imaginative myth-making, reverence, compassion, justice, fellowship and benevolence—the very hallmarks, I think, of the spirit and meaning of Christmas; that's why Unitarians still get into it and have little inclination to heed Mr Keillor's plea to us “unbelievers...to leave Christmas alone.” I have been struck, as well, by the power of religion to make us stupid, arrogant, dismissive, tribal, and heartlessly wounding. But I'm not going to go there today.

Instead, filled with seasonal cheer and good will, I'm seconding the invitation of the Rev. Fred Small of First Parish Cambridge Massachusetts—the very congregation that had welcomed Mr Keillor, who repaid their hospitality with his back hand. Rev. Small invited Mr Keillor to return for their Christmas Eve Candlelight Service; to their Tuesday Meals Program that feeds the hungry and homeless; to the ringing of their church bells 350 times to sound the alarm on global warming; and to stand vigil with the good people of First Parish to protect immigrant families from raids that split them apart. In so doing, may he and we—embarking now into this hallowed season, find the Scrooge within melting away, and, thus, make generous room for the joys and blessings of this holiday. *And so mote it be; aye, and amen!*

(sources for this sermon: Phillip Hewett, “What Christmas Means to Unitarians,” undated essay; Keillor, “Nonbelievers, please leave Christmas alone,” http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2009-12-16/news/bal-op.keillor16dec16_1_silent-night-unitarian-christmas; Steven A. Protzman, “A Unitarian Christmas,” a sermon delivered December 8, 2013; Valerie Tarico, “Christianity's own war on Christmas,” <http://www.rawstory.com/2016/11/christianitys-own-war-on-christmas/>; Chris Durston, “The Puritan War on Christmas,” *History Today*, v35, issue 12, December 1985; Rev. Fred Small, “Merry Christmas, Garrison Keillor!”, <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/merry-christmas-garrison-keillor>)