

Common Origins – Shared Traditions

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Presented to *The Editor of The Architect* on December 22nd, 2005.

*To everything there is a season,
and a time for every purpose under the heaven:
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance!*

From time out of mind, human beings have marked the sacred times in the yearly cycle of life by *holy days* for religious devotion and boisterous holidays for feasting and frolicking. In ancient days, time was marked by the changing seasons of the solar year. As the life-giving Sun sank lower in the sky with each passing day, the shadows lengthened and the night came early, our earliest forefathers naturally feared that it might disappear completely, leaving them shivering with cold to perish in utter darkness. In the northern hemisphere, the first day of Winter (21st December in our calendar), had the shortest light-of-day and the longest night. This pivotal point, the *Winter Solstice* is when the Sun was at its lowest and weakest. Within a few days (25th December), it appeared that the Sun was in the ascendant and regaining strength once more. The mighty battle between Darkness and Light had been waged; Darkness triumphed; but only briefly. Hope was renewed and Faith was restored as the darkness waned and the Sun waxed. From the dark womb of the night, the Light was born. From the birth of civilization, the elements of birth, death, and rebirth became associated with the Winter Solstice.

*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*³

From time immemorial the beginning of the solar year has been a time of joyous celebration. When the Sun was worshipped as a god, the people saw this day as the one on which the sun-god returned from the south. In Mesopotamia, the ancient Mother of Civilization (once Babylonia, now Iraq), a festival called "*the Day of the Child in his Cradle*" marked the New Year. The Egyptians celebrated the birth of the sun-god born to Isis, Horus, revered as "*the Light of the World.*" The Phoenicians worshipped the sun-god Baal, whose temples formed the archetype for the design of the first Temple built by Solomon at Jerusalem. The Persians celebrated *Sacaea* on December 25th as the birthday of the sun-god Mithra, "*the god of Light.*" During the eight days of the Jewish *Hannukah*, the Feast of Dedication and Festival of Lights, beginning three days before the new moon closest to the Winter Solstice, eight candles re-lit as part of the ritual as a symbol of growing light. The Advent wreath, with its four candles - one for each Sunday preceding Christmas - is derived from this Jewish custom. Thus, the Christmas candle, Yule log, and the bright lights that bedeck our trees and homes are all symbols inherited from the old pagan agricultural and solar thanksgiving festivities observed at midwinter.

*Old customs! O I love the sound,
However simple they may be;
What ere with time has sanction found
Is welcome and is dear to me.*
John Clare (1793-1864)

Sir Roger de Coverley, Addison's archetypal eighteenth-century country gentleman, observed: "*I have often thought it happens very well that Christmas should fall out in the Middle of Winter.*"⁴ Historians agree that the early Church of Rome incorporated the rituals, beliefs and customs of the ancient pagan religions in general and assimilated various remnants of the ancient midwinter festivals in particular. Like the evergreen

tree that, for many of us, is the traditional symbol of Christmas, its roots are nurtured by the underground streams of the most ancient mysteries. Perhaps the early ecclesiastical authorities (Cyprian in the 3rd Century, Julius I in the 4th Century) realized the essential truth express by Emerson, that *"The religions we call false were once true."*⁵ In the Christian context, Christ is the Sun, the great Light of the world, who brings Light to the people that walked in darkness. All of this resonates in the *'spirit of universal tolerance that distinguishes our institution.'*

*Heap on more wood! - The wind is chill;
But let it whistle as it will,
We'll keep our Christmas merry still.
Each age has deemed the new-born year
The fittest time for festal cheer.*

In England, Ireland, and Scotland, where modern Freemasonry emerged and was shaped in the 18th Century, the first Grand Lodges originated, and from which it spread to the New World, some lodges were (and still are) named for Christian Saints. The two Saints John - *John the Baptist and John the Evangelist* - were adopted at *'the eminent patrons of Masonry'* the traditional Patron Saints of the operative Craft. *"To the pious memories of the two Saints John, those two great parallels in Masonry; May we follow their Precepts and profit by their Example."*⁶ Significantly and coincidentally, their Holy Days fall close to the annual solstitial periods: St. John the Baptist in summer on June 24th and St. John the Evangelist in winter on December 27th.

The premier Grand Lodge of England was formed when four old lodges met on St. John's Day in summer in 1717. In the early days, Installations were always held on one or other of these festival days. The Saints John are often referred to as *'the two grand Parallels in Masonry'* depicted on some old tracing boards as two perpendicular parallel lines on the sides of *'the point-within-a-circle.'* Our ancient operative brethren, gathered around the festive board, sang this carol:

*In honour of St. John, we thus
Do keep good Christmas cheer,
And he that comes to dine with us
I think he need not spare.*

The blessing of Light, in every aspect - material, intellectual, spiritual, or eternal - is the constant quest of every man. Enlightenment is the chief object of Freemasonry. As Masons we are obligated to bring light into the world around us. *'Let your light so shine'* to make the world *'brighter.'* This season of festivity is the most *'democratic'* holiday in the calendar, incorporating many different religious practices and cultural traditions, all absorbed in the complex and colourful mosaic of our Canadian Christmas. It is a time when we are motivated to *'soothe the afflictions and relieve the necessities'* of the poor and hungry, the needy and less fortunate. With Dickens we yearn with all our hearts: *"Would that Christmas lasted the whole year through (as it ought) and that the prejudices and passions which deform our better nature were never called into action among those to whom they should ever be strangers."*⁷

According to Luke, a chorus of angels sang, *"Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, goodwill toward men."*⁸ Freemasonry celebrates the *'Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.'* The *"good tidings of great joy,"* Luke states, were to *"be to all people"* - universal and all-inclusive, neither sectarian nor the exclusive domain of any one faith, denomination, party, or faction. As Masons, *"We love all which tends to call men from the solitary and chilling pursuit of his own separate and selfish views, into the warmth of common sympathy, and into the bands of a common brotherhood."*⁹

So now is come our joyful'st feast;
Let every man be jolly.
Each room with ivy-leaves is dressed,
And every post with holly.
Though some churls¹⁰ at our mirth *repine¹⁰
Round your foreheads garlands twine.
Drown your sorrow in a cup of wine,
And let us all be merry.
George Wither (1588-1667)

¹ The editor of *The Architect* has deemed it within his prerogative to accept submissions, written by Brethren of the A.M.D. of Canada, which he considers worthy of dissemination throughout the A.M.D., notwithstanding that they have not been represented or read in an open Council.

² *Ecclesiastes* 3: 1-4, King James Version.

³ Phillips Brooks (1835-1893).

⁴ Joseph Addison (1673-1719).

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).

⁶ Home, Alex. *The Symbolism of the Saints Johns*. A Q C 75: 99.

⁷ Charles Dickens (1812-1870) - *Sketches by Boz*.

⁸ *Luke* 2: 14, King James Version.

⁹ Thomas K. Hervey (1799-1859).

¹⁰ *churls* — peasant farmers; *repine* — return a person to a position previously held, restore

References

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