

Christmas Carols for Unitarian Universalists

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Some of my favorite holiday memories are singing Christmas carols. When I was a boy we would spend the majority of Christmas Day at my Grandmother's house. Our traditions were probably nothing unusual. We would open presents, eat a Christmas feast, and then try to figure out what else to do with ourselves. Perhaps the hardest time of the whole holiday season is Christmas afternoon. Everything you have been looking forward to, for at least a month if not more, has or has not come to pass. After all the anticipation, the Christmas potential has now become actualized. Even if you did find that thing you hoped to see under the tree, it is a little sad that the whole experience is over for another year. It would be at just this point in the day, when my aunt would sit down to the piano, and we would gather around her in my Grandmother's living room and spilling into the dining room, and sing Christmas Carols. For some reason, "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" always reminds me of those Christmas afternoons so many years ago. Although perhaps not Chris Raible's version of that song.

Similarly in college I would get together with some of my Methodist friends for a Christmas party which would invariably end with us gathering around the piano and once again singing carols. I remember being challenged by the high notes in “O Holy Night,” but ever since that carol too has held warm memories for me, as if I were right there in that room singing that song with my old college friends once again.

Christmas carols invoke these much beloved memories, and therefore the carols themselves can be very precious to us. During last year’s Christmas season, the First Unitarian Parish in Cambridge Massachusetts had a very special visitor attend Sunday morning worship: Garrison Kiellor. I don’t recall exactly why the famous storyteller and radio personality was in attendance that day. He was visiting friends or something. Perhaps he was looking for more material for which to make fun of us, I don’t know. But based on the article he wrote about the experience, he was none too impressed with our worship that morning. Specifically he did not like our version of the Christmas carols. “Silent Night” seemed to offend him. He wrote a scathing article denouncing Unitarian Universalists for changing the words to Christmas songs, essentially saying what right do we have to them anyway, and for good measure he denounced Jewish composers like Irving Berlin for writing “White Christmas.” It was a tone much different from his usual genteel fare.

I am a fan of Kiellor's despite his objection. I am sure some of you have noticed that he is right—our hymnal does change the words to Christmas songs. The hymnal we currently use, "Singing the Living Tradition," has a very interesting history. Published in the early 90s, it reflects Unitarian Universalist desires for both diversity and what most people would probably call "political correctness." All of the songs in that hymnal, not just the Christmas ones, have been edited with some intentional principles in mind. For example God is not referred to in solely masculine terms. Obviously references to some theological doctrines, such as original sin and the trinity, are removed. Interestingly, metaphors or similes that associate light or white with goodness and black or darkness with evil were also changed.

With these criteria in mind, now think of some of our classic Christmas Carols. Take "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" for instance. "God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay. Remember Christ the savior was born on Christmas day to save us all from Satan's power when we had gone astray." How many of those rules I mentioned does that song break just in the first three lines? It isn't even included in "Singing the Living Tradition."

One can perhaps see why Chris Raible chose that hymn to parody. Of course he is parodying us Unitarian Universalists too. But UU ministers, particularly ones that come from a family of UU ministers as Raible did, have a certain amount of leeway for such things. Teasing

within the family is one thing. But behind Raible's song is not only some gentle chiding of the Unitarian Universalist religion which he loved and served. I think Raible also puts his finger on a raw nerve many of us have right around Christmas time. We want to join in the fun of Christmas, we want to be bathed in the joy of the season, and yet somehow the theology of it, the insistence that Jesus is the "reason for the season" as my Mom always reminds me, gets in the way when you happen to believe something very different about Jesus than the songs seem to declare. While Raible's version of "God Rest Ye Unitarians" may be theologically correct for some Unitarian Universalists, it goes a bit far in the other direction and is not really keeping with the spirit of the season.

When we were growing up, my younger brother Chris became a pretty outspoken atheist. Ironically, his full name is "Christian." Now my Mom is a liberal Christian. She is not a fundamentalist by any stretch, but church and religion were and are important to her. So one year when she left to go to Christmas Eve service, my brother took all of the ceramic figurines from the nativity scene on the mantle and replaced them all with his Star Wars action figures. It was quite amusing to see Princess Leia and Han Solo there in the stable. And they were looking adoringly into the manger where little Yoda fit perfectly. Believe it or not, my Mom thought this was hilarious and she took many pictures of my brother Chris' very creative reinvention of the nativity scene.

I think this is a good metaphor for a Unitarian Universalist Christmas. If Mary and Joseph don't do it for you, then try Han Solo and Princess Leia. There is a dissonance for many of us between the story told in our Ancient Readings this evening and the actual tug of our hearts at the holiday season. Perhaps others don't feel it, but many more do. So how do you make Christmas fit in that case? Well one way we try is by tweaking the words to Christmas carols. To people like Kiellor who feels no such dissonance, no tension, between the biblical story and all it entails, with the emotional spirit of Christmas, the desire to reconcile the two may come as peculiar or perhaps even offensive. But I bet it is more common than we think.

One of the Christmas carols in our hymnal that is arguably the most altered is "Joy to the World." The version we will sing in a few moments takes out a lot of the "power-over" theology and the implication that all of creation is fallen and therefore needs Jesus' saving death and resurrection. The version in our hymnal is more theologically correct from a Unitarian and even a Universalist stand point. It doesn't go to the extreme of a Chris Raible parody, but it is somewhat in that tradition. It is also a terribly ugly song after the politically correct UU editors get done with it. "Joy to the World the Word has come?" Here again is the dissonance that Christmas offers us Unitarian Universalists: adjust Christmas to make it more palatable, and it winds up getting ruined. You will notice in your order of service that tonight we will be

singing this particular Carol twice: the first time will be the “Unitarian” version out of the hymnal, and then we will close with traditional lyrics in your insert following the candle lighting ceremony. I wanted to have us live in that dissonance in a very tangible way tonight.

For you see Christmas is not merely the difference between what we believe, and how we feel at this time during the season. I think Garrison Kiellor fell into a common error about Christmas Carols. He thought he was defending their purity against the forces of secularism and anti-Christianism. The same people who insist on saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” But I submit to you that that was not really what his fear is about. He was defending the original versions of Christmas Carols because they are like Pavlovian bells that invoke in us warm memories of the holidays. Because we sing these same songs at the same time every year, they have all sorts of psychological associations for us. I think what he was really defending were his memories of joy that Christmas carols represent and help bring about every year. If you change the words, then they would lose their ability to remind us of our grandmother’s dining room or our college friends singing “O Holy Night” slightly flat. But as is so often the case in life and especially with religion, we confuse the symbol for the thing it is meant to represent. Christmas carols are just songs. But the thing they represent, the joy of the holidays that we feel when we hear the original versions, is a precious and even sacred thing.

You see Christmas is primarily about joy. Both the Unitarian and the traditional version of “Joy to the World” agree on at least that much. Exchanging presents, eating your favorites foods, hearing your favorite songs, being with your beloved family and friends, these are all things that are meant to be about joy. That is not to say that they do all of the time or every year. Obviously not every Christmas is as perfect as the cards and carols would have us believe. But I think one of the reasons why we experience that dissonance between Christmas as it is and Christmas as it should be is because we fall into the same trap that got Kiellor. We confuse the symbol for the thing it represents.

So you give a loved one a present because you know that when they will open it up on Christmas morning, it will give them joy. You in turn will feel joy by seeing their face light up, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you made their Christmas. Same thing when you see your parents or your grandchildren whom you have not laid eyes on for six months or a year. They haven’t done anything other than just be there. That gives us joy. Or when someone bites into the ham you worked on all day, or their favorite cookie that you make only during Christmas time. That experience gives them joy, and it gives you joy for bringing it about. Christmas is primarily about joy coming quite literally into the world.

Ironically these experiences of joy are usually held up as ideals that are possible only if you buy the right present, or order the special

smoked ham, or bake cookies like a mad person, or hang a million lights on your house. We become obsessed with the present, the cookie, the ham, the lights, and forget that these are only the outward trappings, the symbols of joy, if you will. They are not in and of themselves joy. They may help bring it about, or you might experience joy some other way. But at the end of the day, Christmas is about joy.

Feeling real joy, deep heart-felt, soul-stirring joy, is a good sign that you are in the presence of the Holy. You can symbolize that experience of the Holy any way you wish. It could be that the Holy this time of year is a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. Or it could be Yoda in that manger—for some of us he could represent the Holy too. But you will know it when you feel it, not when some advertiser, or a NPR storyteller, or even the Bible tells you that you should feel joy. You will feel it when you, yourself, the Grinch are in the presence of the Holy. So when you have that feeling of joy, and I hope and pray that all of you have it here in the next twenty-four hours, ask yourself this: What is helping me feel joyful right now? The answer will give you a clue as to that which is truly sacred in your life.

As for those Christmas carols, well they too can be an avenue toward the Holy if they bring about joy during your holiday. But if they don't, don't worry about it. They are just the symbols, not the thing itself. Unitarians are capable of enjoying Christmas and finding the Holy there. The song we sang earlier, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"

was written by Edmund Sears, minister of the Unitarian church in Wayland Massachusetts. He wrote the original, not an edited version, at a time when the country was gearing up for the Civil War, the bloodiest and most divisive war in our history. He felt that people needed to be reminded of a very basic message that the angels gave the shepherds, “Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all.”

Compare that to another song written by a non-Unitarian minister. “Jingle Bells” was written by James Pierpont for the children in his Sunday School classes. If you get the chance, read the second and third verses. They are about racing horse drawn sleighs and flirting with cute girls. What was the occasion for him writing the song? Why Thanksgiving of course! Seriously, it was originally a Thanksgiving song, but people loved it so much they just kept singing it into Christmas. It has absolutely nothing to do with Christmas other than implying that it is winter outside. But you know why I think it got incorporated into Christmas? It gave people joy when they sang it. They liked that feeling they had when someone would strike up that tune. It put them in a joy-filled frame of mind. And that mood felt more like Christmas than it did Thanksgiving. It serves us well to be flexible with these things, and move as the spirit urges us to move. I am sure, had Garrison Kiellor been there, he would have denounced singing a Thanksgiving song at Christmas time along with the other purists and fundamentalists of the holiday season. But let us not forget that is all

about joy. If you want to sing the Star Spangled Banner, or Happy Birthday to the baby Jesus and blow out candles on a birthday cake—I know people who have grown up doing that on Christmas day—then go ahead and do it. The feeling of joy is what Christmas is meant to bring about. May it be true for you this year, and every year. Amen, Blessed Be, and Merry Christmas.

Now let us welcome in the joy of the holiday season with the Unitarian version of Joy to the World in your hymnals. Sing those weird lyrics loud and proud.