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The Christmastime Effect

There's something about this time of year. What is it?

"Isn't there anyone who can tell me what Christmas is all about?" yelled Charlie Brown in the landmark 1965 TV special that millions strongly identify with the season. Alone on a stage illuminated by a spotlight, Linus answered by cheerily proclaiming the Bible story of angels singing, "peace on earth, good will towards men." Think of it as the Christmastime effect.

U2 frontman Bono also likes the Nativity, writing on the band's website in January 2015: "The Christmas story has a cozy good plot...if there is a force of love and logic behind the universe, then how amazing would it be if that incomprehensible power chose to express itself as a child born in shit and straw poverty."

Bono says the story can "teach us all how vulnerability is the route to strength and, by example, show us how to love and serve."

In contemporary society, Christmas increasingly seems less about Christ's birth and more about revelry, music, and Santa Claus for a great many Americans. Fully 80 percent of non-Christians celebrate Christmas, according to a 2013 Pew Research poll, though most see it as a secular rather than religious holiday. Just last year, a Rasmussen survey found that 85 percent of all Americans are "somewhat likely" to donate to a charitable cause during the holiday period, with 65 percent being "very likely."

It's true that a potent cocktail of dogma, commerce, and entertainment manipulates the emotions starting before Thanksgiving. But even cynics may find that view weak and wanting by itself. There's something much harder to define about this time of year.

What is it about Christmastime that makes so many of us—Christians and otherwise—a little merrier, kinder, more generous, and more tolerant, starting at Thanksgiving and going right through to mid January, when all the credit card bills arrive? How did Christmas and its recognized vibe become engrained in our collective psyche, and why are aspects of it widely observed by people who don't believe in Jesus, or even God?

Universal Values, Down to Earth

First of all, the month of December has an unusually high concentration of holy days for a number of major world religions and belief systems. That list includes, but is not limited to: Bodhi Day, Diwali, Hanukkah, and the Winter Solstice.

Though it is fundamentally a Christian religious commemoration, the ideals widely associated with Christmas itself—peace, joy, gift giving, and generosity—are universal. Quality time with those close to you appeals to deep rooted human desire for affirmation, the comfort in togetherness, showing appreciation and feeling appreciated in turn. Christmas trees are a symbol and focal point, festooned with lights casting a seasonal glow that for many conjure profound feelings of gladness, sorrow, and remembrance.

"Christmas is a powerful day," says Patrick McGlamery, a devout Buddhist who is co-director of the New Haven Shambhala Meditation Center. It's so strong, he says, that it can distract him enough to miss his daily meditation. He and his wife, who is Jewish, have always enjoyed giving gifts to their kids and putting up a tree. "Christmas is about family," he says. While lamenting the attendant materialism that many see as unrestrained, he says, "It's a fun holiday. It's all about giving."

Old Lyme resident, Laura Carpenter—a shoreline publishing professional who

happens to be Jewish—expresses similar sentiments. “I donate generously during the holidays,” she says, “and I think my kids do, too.”

Carpenter gets a tree every year and, even though her three daughters are adults now, still gives them stockings. “We do exchange gifts with immediate family and a few extended family members. Exchanging gifts is a nice way to show your appreciation for your family,” she says. “But it doesn’t have anything to do with the idea that the wise men brought gifts to Jesus, who was born a Jew.”

Circumstantial evidence, sources, and studies abound to quantify the impact of what many call “the Christmas Spirit” on attitudes and actions. Harold Attridge, Sterling Professor of Divinity at Yale Divinity School, says that while he hasn’t seen other faiths celebrate it as a religious festival, “I think many of the values that Christianity articulates, celebrates, and tries to foster are values that are shared with other traditions.”

Those universal values—kindness, forgiveness, and understanding—seem to get magnified during Christmas, he notes, and “always get you to think about how you live your own life, and whether you’re living according to those values.”

Besides ideas like presents, indoor pine trees, and togetherness, Christmas is also quite naturally associated with the birth of Jesus Christ. And whether one sees him as a deity, a historical figure, or just a storybook character, he looms large at this time of year.

He also turns up in the most unexpected places.

For example, Muslim reverence for the birth of Jesus is a concept that still surprises many Americans. According to the website islamawareness.net: “What is less well understood is that Muslims also love and revere Jesus as one of God’s greatest messengers to mankind.”

Mohammed Khaku, the prominent author who wrote that article, said: “Muslims do celebrate Christmas in our own way” and that “Christmas is an awesome time of year.”

Khaku adds that, “There is a positive side of Christmas becoming increasingly secular. If it were not for the Christmas or Thanksgiving holidays, family relationships would be worse than they are. In fact, these are the only times that many families make an attempt to mend broken relationships.” Khaku’s ideas about reconciliations at this time of year may be a matter of opinion, but even if they are, many people seem to share them.

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Bonding with family exerts an undeniably strong pull during this holiday. Ritu Zazzaro, a Sikh who is co-chair of the Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding, says Christmas was always a special time when she was growing up.

“We would always look forward to Christmas because it’s a great time to have family and friends over,” Zazzaro says. “We never did a gift exchange because we did that on our holiday,” the birth of Guru Nanak, Sikhism’s founder, in November. “But we did put up lights because it felt good. It felt like we were honoring our neighbors and their religion.”

Today, her family does a modest December gift exchange and puts up “a live tree and lights and Christmas decor around the house.”

Values that have become associated with Christmas can also appeal to non-believers. The United Coalition of Reason, an umbrella group representing millions of skeptics, humanists, and atheists, acknowledges this. “I think that the general message behind what most Christians believe is proclaimed through Christmas speaks to non-theists,” its executive director, Jason Heap, told *Coastal Connecticut* magazine.

“Perhaps there are more areas for people to express altruism and charitable work at this time of year than at others,” Heap says. But he emphasizes that the UCR engages extensively in charitable causes year-round.

“I know many of our coalitions that are already making plans,” to participate in “charitable collections such as Toys for Tots, soup kitchens, etc.,” he says.

Banned, Then Reborn

Prior to the mid-1800s, Christmas partying and revelry was heavily frowned upon by an overwhelming Puritan influence. There was even a period in 17th century Massachusetts when celebrating Christmas was banned—a backlash against popular habits carried over from England and dating to Roman times, when pre-Christian Christmas was a time of Bacchanalian drunkenness, singing, dancing and games.

To the Puritans who colonized America, such behavior was an insult to Jesus’ birth, tantamount to blasphemy. Cotton Mather, one of New England’s most prominent colonial religious leaders, complained in 1712 that, “the feast of Christ’s nativity is spent in reveling, dicing, carding, masking, and in all licentious liberty...by mad mirth, by long eating, by hard drinking, by lewd

gaming, by rude reveling!"

While that may resemble some portion of modern American culture, strict attitudes continued to dampen the holiday until the mid-1800s. Then came the enormous popularity of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Published in 1843 (and briefly outselling the Bible) the story not only affected a huge rise in charity, but it became a catalyst for the celebration and merriment now synonymous with Christmas.

There is irony in the belief that miserly Ebenezer Scrooge exerts an influence on our holiday economy and personalities. Rampant spending during the Christmas season all but sustains many businesses today. Yet Scrooge himself infamously rejected Christmas as "humbug" exclaiming, "Christmas has a habit of keeping men from doing business."

His transformation from stingy misanthrope to jovial humanitarian happened after a ghost-filled, time-traveling night of witnessing how his selfish behavior hurt family, friends, and associates. But for many generations of people, it was the utterances of Scrooge's spectral partner, Jacob Marley, which clarified the broader meaning of Christmas.

Draped in chains he howls at the unrepentant Scrooge, "Business! Mankind was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The deals of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

Scrooge's salvation struck a deep chord in the public, becoming a compelling narrative not only to be kind and generous but also to celebrate joyfully. It gained an unstoppable momentum. A few decades later, in 1870, Christmas became a government holiday.

The Christmas Music Divide

Long after the Dickens novella became synonymous with the holiday, its impact was greatly amplified by numerous film adaptations. Mass media has played a pivotal role in the phenomenon of Christmas, with music being one of Santa's greatest helpers.

Millions are euphoric from the first hearing of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* to the last. Millions of others become apoplectic at the inescapable drone of Christmas music. This fact is lampooned in the popular film *About a Boy*, in which one protagonist dreads the onset of the holiday, when malls and stores ring with a campy novelty hit called *Santa's Super Sleigh* penned by his late father

This sub-genre of music virtually permeates western culture from Thanksgiving to New Year and, clearly, it has a major affect on people's emotions.

Jessica Suarez, director of content for the popular music streaming site Songza, told [usnews.com](#) in 2013, "Christmas music just seems to make people happier, even when you realize that a lot of Christmas songs are some of the most depressing songs that you hear over the year." Even the sad ones have taken on a powerful ability to amplify feelings, and even help people achieve some kind of catharsis.

An added irony is that nearly half of the 25 top-selling Christmas songs were written by Jewish composers. Among those are the most nostalgic: *I'll Be Home for Christmas*, *Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire (The Christmas Song)*, and *White Christmas*.

The Anti-Gifting Society

The magnetic allure of Christmas induces 86 percent of all Americans to give gifts, per the Pew Research Center's findings. But is the act sincere? Is generosity and gift giving optional at Christmastime? If you declare, "I'm not doing gifts," you might be labeled a Scrooge.

For some, it is almost a guilt reflex—a sort of forced obligation driven by the power of popular culture rather than thoughtful appreciation. Opposition to this aspect of the holiday goes back at least a century.

In early 20th century New York, an organization actually existed to try to enforce yuletide sincerity. The Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving (SPUG), according to the *New York Times* of November 3, 1913, was "formed as a vigorous protest against the growing custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas without sentiment, the custom of making Christmas gifts for the sake of expediency, or under any other form of compulsion." SPUG issued a "call to do battle again this year against the useless Christmas present." Might there be a segment who finds their Christmas joy in resurrecting SPUG today?

What *Is* The Meaning, Linus?

There is no mistaking the societal craze that erupts on Black Friday, and the larger Christmas vibe may be even harder to retreat from than ads for huge TVs: 90 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas, and three-quarters of Americans have told Pew that they believe in Jesus' birth. In other words, more than 215 million of America's 319 million people see a "reason for the season"

based in Judeo-Christian myth and tradition.

Even so, for a great many Americans, the finest expression of holiday meaning may have been passed down by President John F. Kennedy, and not by any ancient writings.

In his 1962 Christmas message, JFK observed that, "Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, as well as Christians, pause from their labors on the twenty-fifth of December to celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace. There could be no more striking proof that Christmas is truly the universal holiday of all men... when all of us dedicate our thoughts to others, when all are reminded that mercy and compassion are enduring virtues...when we remind ourselves that man can live in peace with his neighbors."

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