



“’Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...”

Clement Clarke Moore, Columbia University Classics Professor (1822)

Professor Clement Clarke Moore went home after teaching class at Columbia University in New York City in 1822 and penned “’Twas The Night Before Christmas” for his young family. ‘Columbia,’ (a name used poetically & symbolically during the 1800’s to refer to The New World discovered by Christopher Columbus / ‘America’) University was founded and overseen by Trinity Church in lower Manhattan, and thereby steeped culturally in reverence for both Christianity and America. The poem thus resonated with Christians all over America, and eventually Christian’s all over the world. Since then, families from New York to Paris, Moscow to Dallas, and South Africa to LA read the famous poem on Christmas Eve, stockings by the fire, cookies & milk set out for St. Nicholas, preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, God’s son, born to the Virgin Mary on Christmas day some 2000 years ago.

Christmas, derived from the Old English “Cristes Maesse” (meaning “Christ’s Mass”) has been a magical time since the day Mary lay Christ’s newborn head down in the manger at Bethlehem, as described in the Gospels of Matthew & Luke, beneath the miraculous Christmas star God hung in the sky, later known as The Star of Bethlehem. That star attracted 3 kings of Orient, as described in Psalms 72:10-11, with their gifts of Gold, frankincense & Myrr, representing kingship on earth, divinity, and sacrifice, as well as The Little Drummer Boy, who played for baby Jesus. Christmas was then and will be forevermore a time to celebrate Christianity, family, forgiveness, and the joy of giving.

In 280 Anno Domini (“the year of our Lord”)(AD) a bishop, known for his generosity, and further known for giving gifts to children, was born in Patara, a city in modern-day Turkey. He eventually grew into legend for his acts of piety, charity, and for miracles witnessed by many, and bore the name St. Nicholas.

According to “The Golden Legend” by Jacobus de Voragine, there was a poor man living near the river Myros in one of the more important Roman regions who had three daughters, and no money for their dowries. In those times, dowries were essential for marriage; without one, daughters were unlikely to marry and thud likely to end up in prostitution or slavery. Hearing of the family’s plight, St. Nicholas threw a bag of gold down their chimney. It landed in a stocking or shoe that was left to dry by the fire, thus beginning the tradition of gifts in stockings or shoes. The next night, Nicholas repeated the act, providing another bag of gold, again maintaining his anonymity. The family was overjoyed, with the second daughter now having a dowry. On the third night, the father, curious about their benefactor, lay in wait. When Nicholas came to throw the third bag of gold, the father caught him in the act. Nicholas, embarrassed at being discovered, asked the father to keep his good deed a secret, emphasizing that the act of charity was for God’s glory, not his own.

His legend survived, and influenced a legendary & magical Dutch gift-giver named Sinterklaas, who'd was immortalized in Jan Schenkman's 1850 story: "Sint Nicolaas en zijn Knecht" ("Saint Nicholas and His Servant"), which notably included a black helper named Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), marking the inclusion of Africans in the loving & caring story of Christ. Today there are over 700 million Christians in Africa - nearly half the entire population and growing. The Pew Institute predicts Christians will grow to \$1.4 billion in number in Africa by 2050, bringing the number of Christians on earth to over \$4 billion.

Legends of the Christmas Tree are numerous and evocative....but it was most likely St. Boniface that brought us the Christmas Tree...Born 675 AD in Wessex, England, Boniface, a missionary known as "The Apostle of the Germans," was commissioned by Pope Gregory II to spread Christianity among the pagan tribes of Germany in the early 8th century. According to legend, while traveling through what is now Hesse, Germany, around The Year of Our Lord 724, Boniface encountered a group of Northmen gathered around a large oak tree known as the "Thunder Oak," and dedicated to Thor, the Norse god. This tree was central to their winter solstice celebrations, which included, unfortunately, human sacrifices, often of children. Boniface arrived at the site on Christmas Eve, where he found the Northmen preparing a sacrifice. He struck the oak with his staff, proclaiming it would fall to demonstrate the power of Christ over Thor, at which point a miraculous gust of wind felled the tree, astonishing the onlookers. After the oak fell, Boniface pointed to a small evergreen standing nearby, untouched by the destruction, and declared that tree a symbol of Christianity. He explained that the evergreen nature of the fir symbolized eternal life through Christ, its upward-pointing branches represented prayers ascending to heaven, and its triangular shape symbolized the Holy Trinity. He said, "This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the wood of peace. It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points upward to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness," and The Christmas Tree was born. The Northmen were so moved by the event that they converted to Christianity, used wood from the fallen oak to build a chapel, and the first Christmas tree was erected right there in that chapel in Hesse.

As Christianity spread through the centuries, Vikings and Germanic tribes added feasting, the burning of the Yule log, and other rituals to celebrate the birth of Christ. They combined the celebration of God's son with their ancient celebrations of the return of the sun.

In 1809, American author Washington Irving wrote "A History of New York," where he described Saint Nicholas as a jolly Dutchman flying over treetops in a wagon or sleigh, dropping gifts down chimneys. This description appeared inspired to many, and later, cartoonist Thomas Nast, who also appeared inspired, illustrated Santa Claus, casting him in a red suit with white fur, sitting in his North Pole workshop, reading letters from children, and making toys with his elves.

Christ was killed by Romans in 33 AD, of course, and still today, in places like China, Christians are persecuted as they were persecuted in Ancient Rome, but just as Christ rose & triumphed on Easter Sunday, faith, love, and the Christmas Miracle have triumphed in most of the developed world: Europe, Russia, and North America are overwhelmingly Christian, Africa is on it's way, and belief in Christ through the ages by men & women of all races and creeds has resulted in an upward surge of mankind most would call nothing short of miraculous.

Merry Christmas to all, and may America, Europe, and all of Christendom be blessed by God and his angels this Christmas and forevermore!

Warmest,

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