

A Unitarian Christmas  
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Meditation

The Unitarian poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem "I hear the bells on Christmas Day" during the American civil war. Longfellow lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and he attended the first Parish Unitarian Church in Cambridge. He taught literature for seventeen years at Harvard University. Longfellow hated the American Civil War. It tore at the very fiber of his being to see the United States of America – a nation which his family had fought to create and help build – divided by the war. His oldest son, 19-year-old Lieutenant Charles Appleton Longfellow, was severely wounded and sent home to recover.

As Longfellow tended his son's injuries, and as he saw other wounded soldiers on Cambridge's streets, he visited with families who lost sons in battle. He probably wrote the poem "I hear the bells on Christmas Day" on Christmas Day in 1863. Longfellow's 19th century Unitarian faith in the power of God and people to join and transcend war, gave birth to this poem, inspired by his hearing the ringing out of the Christmas bells.

Sermon

A cynic once wrote a carol to the tune of "God rescue Merry gentlemen."

God rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay;  
Remember there's no evidence  
There was a Christmas Day;

When Christ was born is just not known,  
No matter what they say,  
O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

Our current Christmas customs come  
From Persia and from Greece,  
From solstice celebrations of the ancient Middle East.

This whole darn Christmas spiel is just  
Another pagan feast,  
O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

There was no star of Bethlehem,  
There was no angels' song;  
There couldn't have been wise men  
For the trip would take too long.

The stories in the Bible are historically wrong,  
O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

Tune: God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen  
Words: Hymns for the Celebration of Strife  
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However, although we do not know the date of the birth of Jesus, most Unitarian Universalists still love to celebrate Christmas. In fact we have made major contributions to the celebration of the holiday.

### **The Christmas Tree and Charles Follen**

For example, I hope when you look at a Christmas tree you will think of a Unitarian named Charles Follen. Charles Follen was not the first German immigrant to set up a Christmas tree in the United States. Nevertheless, Rev. Follen's tree was one of the first. He set up his tree in on New Years eve in 1835.

Charles Follen was a German intellectual and political liberal who fled Germany when the authorities wanted to imprison him for his political activities. He moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts where he formed close ties with the liberal Unitarian establishment that dominated Harvard and Boston. He found Unitarianism very compatible with his own progressive Christian beliefs.

In 1830, five years after his arrival in America, Follen became a Unitarian minister, and a U.S. citizen, and Harvard appointed him to a full-time faculty position. Follen helped organize a Cambridge Anti-Slavery Society based at Harvard.

In November of 1835 a woman named Harriet Martineau came to visit. Born in 1802 Harriet Martineau was a prominent English Unitarian intellectual. She was visiting the United States to write a book about our country. She met and quickly befriended Charles Follen and he invited her to spend New Year's with him and his family.

When Martineau arrived at the Follen's home December 31, 1835, Charles and his wife were just adding the seven dozen little wax candles to the Christmas tree. The Follens had postponed the ritual until New Year's Eve to adapt to Martineau's schedule.

The tree, a top portion of a fir or spruce, had been placed in the front drawing room of the house. A toy hung from every branch. As five-year-old Charley and two older companions approached the house, the adults quickly closed the door to the front drawing room. They moved into an adjacent room, where (as Martineau put it) they sat around "trying to look as if nothing was going to happen." After they served the visitors tea and coffee, they played a round of parlor games. The goal was to distract the children's attention from the front drawing room, where Charley's parents were now busy lighting the candles.

Finally, they threw open the double doors and the children poured in, their voices instantaneously hushed. "Their faces were upturned to the blaze, all eyes wide open, all lips parted, all steps arrested. Nobody spoke, only Charley leaped for joy." After a few moments the children discovered that the tree "bore something eatable," and "the babble began again." The adults told the children to take what they could from the tree without burning themselves on the candles. (Martineau reported that "we tall people kept watch, and helped them with good things from the higher branches.") After the children had eaten their fill of the edibles, the evening continued with dancing and mugs of "steaming mulled wine."

When she returned to London, Harriet Martineau wrote about Charles Follen's Christmas tree in a widely read book published in 1838. She said in the book that she "was present at the introduction into this new country of the German Christmas tree."

So the next time you look at the Christmas tree remember that a Unitarian displayed one of the first Christmas trees in America.

### **Jingle Bells, James Lord Pierpont**

Helping introduce the Christmas tree to Americans is not our only contribution to Christmas. A Unitarian is also responsible for one of the most popular Christmas carols. James Pierpont was born in 1822, while his father served as the Unitarian pastor of the Hollis Street Church in Boston.

In 1832, at the age of ten, his parents sent James to a boarding school in New Hampshire. An adventurous child, he wrote his mother a letter about riding in a sleigh through the December snow. In 1836, 14-year-old James ran away to sea aboard a ship called "the Shark."

By 1845, James was back on the East Coast, where his father was the minister of a Unitarian congregation in Troy, New York. In 1849 his father accepted a position as minister of the Unitarian church in Medford, Massachusetts. Son James sailed to San Francisco to participate in the California gold rush of 1849. He opened a business in San Francisco but when the store burned down by a fire, James returned to live with his father in Medford, Massachusetts.

In 1853, James' brother, the Rev. John Pierpont, Jr. accepted a post with the Savannah, Georgia, Unitarian congregation. James followed, taking a post as the organist and music director of the church. Both the Unitarian church in Medford, Massachusetts and the Unitarian church in Savannah Georgia claim that they are the location where James wrote what was to become the most popular Christmas Carol in America.

The Medford, Massachusetts Unitarians say that one day in 1851, James Pierpont went to the home of Mrs. Otis Waterman. She let him play a piano belonging to William Webber, a Medford music teacher. Mrs. Waterman owned a boardinghouse, which became better known later as the Simpson Tavern. Hence the origin of the story that James wrote the song in a tavern.

After he played the piece for her, Mrs. Waterman replied was that it was a very merry little jingle, and he should have much success with it. Pierpont then wrote lyrics about the one-horse

open sleighs that young men raced on the one mile route from Medford to Malden Squares. The Unitarians in Savannah, Georgia, however, believe that he wrote the Christmas carol in Savannah. They believe that James composed the song because he was homesick for snow and nostalgic about his youthful days in New England.

Both the Unitarians in Massachusetts and the Unitarians in Georgia say that James played the carol for the first time at a Thanksgiving church service in the 1850s. According to the story the children liked the carol so much that they asked for James to repeat it at the Christmas service. However, others argue that the references in the carol to courting and racing would not have been acceptable in a church service. So it was probably just song about fast sleighs and pretty girls.

Today in both Medford, Massachusetts, and Savannah Georgia historical markers commemorate the birthplace of the carol. Wherever James originally wrote it, we do know that he was a Unitarian. Also, we know he copyrighted it in 1857 with the memorable title “One Horse Open Sleigh.” So the next time you hear:

Dashing through the snow, in a one-horse open sleigh,  
Over the fields we go, laughing all the way.  
Bells on bob-tails ring, making spirits bright,  
What fun it is to ride and sing a sleighing song tonight.

. . . remember, a Unitarian Director of Music wrote it.

### **Charles Dickens as a Unitarian**

Helping introduce the Christmas tree to Americans and writing “Jingle Bells” are not the only Unitarian contributions to Christmas. A third example, is a story written by the Englishman Charles Dickens.

Traditional religion disgusted Charles Dickens. He watched clergy engage in intellectual debates about the Bible as children were dying of disease and malnutrition in the slums. Dickens said: “I cannot sit under a clergyman who addresses his congregation as though he had taken a return ticket to heaven and back . . .” He detested the practice of teaching poor children to memorize parts of the Bible by rote, and he was delighted with the story of a child who came out with “Our Savior was the only forgotten son of the father . . . ,”

In 1842 Dickens traveled to America. He returned to home full of enthusiasm for New England Unitarians. After he returned to London, he first attended Unitarian services at Essex Street chapel, and later took a pew at the Little Portland Street chapel. He liked the chapel’s minister and they remained friends until the minister’s death sixteen years later. Dickens said “I have carried into effect an old idea of mine and joined the Unitarians, who would do something for human improvement if they could; and practice charity and toleration.” Dickens, defined Unitarianism as “that religion which has sympathy for men of every creed and ventures to pass judgment on none.”

In early October 1843, while he was most active at Portland Street chapel, Dickens created the first and greatest of his Christmas books, *A Christmas Carol*. The tale has become one of the most popular and enduring Christmas stories of all time. The story's popularity played a critical role in redefining the importance of Christmas and the major sentiments associated with the holiday.

So the next time you watch a play, or see a movie, or hear a reading based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, remember that Dickens was attending a Unitarian church in London the little Portland Street Chapel when he was writing the story.

**“IT CAME UPON THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR”**  
**Edmund Hamilton Sears number 244**

But, helping introduce the Christmas tree to Americans, writing “Jingle Bells” and writing the story *a Christmas Carol* are not the only Unitarian contributions to Christmas. My last example is a carol written by Edmund Hamilton Sears. After briefly studying law, Sears changed career plans and entered Harvard Divinity School, graduating in 1837. He was ordained to the Unitarian ministry and held four pastorates during his lifetime. He had no ambition to pastor large or influential city churches but was content to serve small congregations in farming communities.

Today we remember Sears for his carol “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.” Some say the carol was first performed by parishioners gathered in his home on Christmas Eve in the 1840s. Another account says he wrote the carol for the Sunday school of the Unitarian church in Quincy, Massachusetts. In those days, people did not sing carols in church. They thought the new carols were inappropriately childish or secular, not serious like the old hymns such as “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” and people had not written many carols. “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” first appearing in print in 1849 in the Unitarian magazine the *Christian Register*. The *Christian Register's* editor, a fellow clergyman, wrote sometime later, “I always feel that, however poor my Christmas sermon may be, the reading and singing of this hymn are enough to make up for all deficiencies.”

Sears' song focuses not on Bethlehem, but on his own time, and the issue of war and peace. Historians have assumed that it was Sears' response to the just ended Mexican-American War. Sears' pacifism would take second place to his commitment to abolishing slavery in the Civil War, but his carol remains, repeated all over the world every year. It says that the call to peace and goodwill to all is as loud on any other day as it was on that midnight of old, if we would but listen “in solemn stillness.”

The carol shows the author's skillful use of poetry and, imagery, as in “harps of gold,” “the world in solemn stillness I lay,” and a reference to God as “heaven's all-gracious King.”

The second stanza is highly descriptive of the angelic choir, while the third and fifth stanzas take on an almost political tone, with descriptions and intimations of a future golden age of peace. Those who suffer injustice are encouraged to “hear the angels sing.” The carol never mentions Jesus.

One hundred and fifty nine years later we still sing and admire this carol by a Unitarian minister. A scholar has written:

No Christmas is perfect without the singing of this hymn. It is one of the finest ever written, not only because of its melodious rendering of the biblical story of angels and shepherds, but because it is one of the first to emphasize the social significance of the angels' message.

Let us join in singing carol number 244, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear."

Christmas Eve in Sarasota:

The first known publication of the lyrics to "Away in a Manger" was in May 1884 by the Universalist Publishing House in Boston. The author is anonymous.

The original lyrics for "O Holy Night" were written in French in 1847 by wine merchant Placide Capeau, at the request of his parish priest. Capeau asked his Jewish friend, Adolphe Adam, to set the lyrics to music. Capeau eventually joined a socialist movement and stopped attending church altogether. In response, his song was banned in France for two decades. Across the Atlantic, the song gained momentum through a translation made in 1855 by the Unitarian minister and abolitionist, John Sullivan Dwight.