



Insight on the Esotericism of Christmas

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Introduction

In 354 A.D., Pope Libere instituted the celebration of Christmas on December 25. Rather than corresponding to historical fact, this date was chosen in the 4th century to correspond with important pagan feasts, in effort toward mass conversion by the young Christian church. The celebration of the Roman *Sol Invictus* (the invincible sun) and the birth of the Roman god Mithra, as well as other pagan deities, were indeed celebrated on what is today known as our Christmas¹. This time of year also corresponds to a very important cosmic event: winter solstice². Winter solstice is the “lowest” point in the sun’s annual cycle³, when day is shortest and night is longest. Symbolically, winter solstice may be interpreted as the *end* of darkness’s victory over light, as it is the fulcrum when night decreases and day increase; therefore, it appears the sun is resurrecting. From a religious perspective, there could not be a better time of year to celebrate the birth of Christ than to assimilate it to the rebirth of the sun⁴. We are going to show that based on the divine nature of Christ, this date is indeed a symbol and a reality in itself.

¹ At that same time of the year, the Romans celebrated *Saturnalia*, in honor of the deity *Saturn*. These festivities had a very carnivalesque atmosphere, where masters and slaves exchanged roles. The Middle-Ages had their own blasphemous *Feast of Fools* or *Feast of Asses* at the same period. On this subject, see *Hexentanz The Sinister Masquerade of the Kaliyuga*, by Nigel Jackson in *Oriens*, Winter 2012.

² On a technical and “quantitative” point of view, the winter solstice happens on December 21st, a few days short of Christmas day. As we are going to see in the rest of this article, the symbolism associated to Christmas has mainly a solstitial meaning. It is important to remember that scientific accuracy is particular to our modern world and does not correspond to the way traditional cultures approach the world. In ancient times Christmas was considered to be the winter solstice. So in the rest of this article, we will not differentiate Christmas and the winter solstice. The “margin of error” of a few days in between these two dates in the calendar is insignificant from the “qualitative” point of view particular to traditional symbolism and does not make Christmas day any less meaningful whatsoever.

³ Also called the sun’s *nadir*.

⁴ This date is often associated to *John* 8, 12: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness...” and to the prophecy of *Malachi* 4:2: “the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays”.

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Non-Manifestation and Cosmic Cycles

The celebration of Christmas occurs during one of the longest nights of the year. Night being synonymous of darkness, it carries a superior meaning along with every symbol when considered from the metaphysical perspective and does indeed particularly symbolize the principle state of non-manifestation⁵. From a metaphysical perspective, God, the Supreme Principle, is Infinity. As such it cannot be limited by anything. If one considers our manifestation as simply *the determination of a possibility* within an *infinite* array of non-manifested, undetermined possibilities, then Non-Manifestation is characterized by the exclusion of *limitations*, as well as a lack of attributes and lack of action. Also referred to as Non-Being in Eastern tradition, it is most accurately *indescribable* with human expression or thought, and is often better approached through the use of non-characteristics such as Silence, Void, or Darkness⁶. This understanding directly correlates to the many tradition's stories of the destruction of our world, because these stories are in fact expressing the cyclic dissolution of manifestation returning to non-manifestation, followed by manifestation again. One could reference the biblical flood, the destruction of Atlantis, the Hindi *Purânas*, and the Christian *Apocalypse*, among many other symbolic "world ending" events, following the rise of new civilization⁷.

Interestingly, one may correlate the cosmic cycles of life and death from several perspectives, which provide further example of manifestation's dissolution into non-manifestation. For example, the four seasons of the year begin with *spring* which symbolizes birth, followed by *summer* which symbolizes growth, followed by *fall* which symbolizes death, and ends with *winter* which particularly symbolizes lack of action. Life activity in winter traditionally slows to a more dormant condition, and this lack of action and presence is particularly associated to non-manifestation. Similarly, the four cardinal points may also be associated to comparable significations: *East* symbolizing the sun's rise or birth, *South* symbolizing the sun's most exposed position in terms of light and heat, *West* symbolizing the sun's fall, and *North* symbolizing the sun's voidance, which associates to non-manifestation.

One is also able to see a similar parallelism given the different periods of the day: the sun rises from darkness in the morning, reaches its zenith at noon when all shadows retreat, followed by increased shadowing until the sun disappears again in the evening. At midnight, the sun is invisible from our perspective, and is therefore symbolically non-existent⁸.

⁵ Changing perspective from secular to metaphysical results in an inversion of symbolic meanings. In this particular case, *darkness* from the metaphysical perspective represents a superior meaning: the principle state of non-manifestation. We typically find from the secular point of view, darkness represents the absence or privation of light and carries negative connotation. When trying to understand the superior meaning of darkness, one may use the analogy of a candle: when illuminated, there is no light at the base where the flame originates. The source of light cannot be light itself, therefore it can be characterized by non-light, symbolized by *superior darkness*.

⁶ This is the *apophatic* theology, often considered a fundamental method to approach this subject, which poses great challenge to communicate accurately.

⁷ The *Feast of Fools*, mentioned in a previous note, also symbolizes the end of a world.

⁸ Traditionally, the superior meaning of midnight is associated to the *spiritual sun*.

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In addition, the North, when considered as the location of the Earth's pole, is represented as the Aristotelian, "Unmoved Mover", symbolized by the Northern star. The north celestial pole is defined as a point in the sky aligned with Earth's rotational axis, around which the stars appear to rotate. This is because from Earth's perspective, the universe seems to rotate about the Northern star.

There is even a similar cosmic cycle with the moon⁹: beginning with the first quarter, reaching full moon when it is reflecting the sun at its brightest, followed by increased shadowing during the last quarter, and finally becoming the *new moon*. The new moon corresponds to the time when it is completely dark and invisible from our perspective, and therefore also symbolically non-existent.

These cycles are based on a quaternary pattern, all of which express a similar fourth quarter symbolized by Absence, Void, Non-Existence, Non-Action, and Darkness, which represent the principle state of non-manifestation¹⁰.

The Manifestation of Spiritual Influences

The manifestation of spiritual influences is traditionally symbolized by light, rain or dew, and blood. Light and rain descend from above and fall below, bringing life to the world. This is also symbolized by drops of blood dripping off the tip of the spear¹¹, as found in the Grail legends¹². The drops of blood transform into roses when they touch the ground, which completes the beneficial signification seen with light and rain. The spear itself symbolizes the *Axis Mundi*, or axis of the world¹³, which traditionally describes the bridge or connection between Heaven and Earth.

From a metaphysical perspective, spiritual influences are considered to be gifts from Heaven characterized by incommunicable knowledge¹⁴ which is



⁹ The moon is indirectly related to the sun as it reflects the sun's light.

¹⁰ One may use these cyclic observations to understand the meaning of the invisible fourth pillar in Masonic lodges... which symbolizes non-manifestation. There are other cycles, such as the biological cycle of wake, dreams, and deep sleep. The deep sleep is symbolically similar to the identification to the non-manifested condition for man because it is characterized by a total absence of consciousness, similar to a non-existence.

¹¹ During the crucifixion, the Roman soldier Longinus used his spear to verify the death of Jesus (*John* 19:31-37). The spear entered Christ's side and opened his heart, "bringing a sudden flow of blood and water".

¹² The *Holy Grail* was the cup used during the last supper in the New Testament. The legend of King Arthur, which first appeared in the Middle Ages, explains this cup was used to gather the blood of Jesus during the crucifixion. It was often sought as a miraculous cup with healing powers and is described to have been kept in an undisclosed location known as the Castle of the Grail. Few knights were able to find it during their Quest of the Holy Grail. The Grail symbolism is in fact very similar to the one of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (see articles by René Guénon in *Regnabit*).

¹³ *Le Roi du Monde*, René Guénon, ch. V.

¹⁴ Also known as *intellectual intuitions*.

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frequently noticeable or experienced during a spiritual quest. These experiences are also said to cause resurrections¹⁵.

The *Janua Cœli*

With reference to the zodiac, the winter solstice falls in the sign of Capricorn and corresponds to the longest night of the year. This is in opposition to the summer solstice which occurs in June. The summer solstice falls in the sign of Cancer and corresponds to the longest day of the year. The solstices correspond to two Saint-Johns in the Catholic calendar: Saint-John the Evangelist celebrated on December 27 and Saint-John the Baptist on June 24, also called *Saint-John of the winter* and *Saint-John of the summer*.

The two names correspond phonetically, but also symbolically to the ancient Roman god *Janus*. *Janus*'s head is depicted with two opposed faces, one facing the past and the other the future. He is typically shown holding two keys, as he is the *god of doors* (*janua* in Latin), and his name is preserved today in the month that opens the year: *January*. Now from a metaphysical perspective, what one does not see is his third face which is synonymous of the present; invisible because the present is furtive and cannot be measured¹⁶. The third, invisible face therefore is symbolic of non-manifestation.

Janus is the *janitor* who opens and closes the annual cycle and the two keys he holds are the keys to the Solstitial gates. Indeed, winter solstice is known in the Hindu tradition and Pythagorean symbolism as *heaven's gate*¹⁷ or the *gate of the gods*, because symbolically it is through it that the manifestation is dissolved and returned to a non-manifested state (symbolized by the heavens). The summer solstice on the other hand is known as the *gate of the ancestors* or the *old man's gate*, and carries a negative connotation because it corresponds to a period when the sun's exposure begins to weaken and the shadows begin to strengthen. If *heaven's gate* is symbolically open during the winter solstice, it is definitely closed during the summer solstice. Each solstice represents a cycle of cosmic proportion portraying the succession of death and resurrection.



¹⁵ The “celestial dew” from the “Tree of Life” in the Hebrew tradition is said to resurrect the dead, amongst various examples.

¹⁶ Eternity is the non-existence of time and therefore cannot be measured. Obtaining the “sense of eternity” is another way of describing the restitution of the “primordial state” for man, or “virtual immortality”. See *Le Roi du Monde*, René Guénon, ch. VII. Eternity is antonymous of perpetuity; perpetuity being an indefinite length of time, the total opposite of eternity.

¹⁷ In Latin *Janua Cœli*.

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The Eye of the Dome

René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy have correlated in several articles how domes, supported by buildings such as the ones seen on particular Christian churches and on the Indian *Stupas*, symbolize the Heavens because of their circular shape, while the building itself represents the Earth¹⁸. Because of its central location, the opening found at the center, or the eye of the dome, symbolizes the access through which spiritual influences descend and ascend. As such, the vertical alignment that links the eye of the dome to the ground is yet another symbolic *Axis of the World*. We find similar architectures worldwide. In habitations with an opening at the center, such as in the North American huts, it is common to have a fire positioned directly below the central opening, allowing the smoke to exit vertically. This smoke-pillar is another example which represents the *Axis of the World* and is typically understood to symbolize the manifestation of “divine presence”. We find a correlation to *Exodus*, 14, with reference to the manifestation of the angels of God in the shape of a “pillar of clouds”. This symbol of the *Axis of the World*, from which spiritual influences descend, takes many symbolic perspectives: mountains, pillars, columns, trees, ladders, etc.



Another well-known biblical example is found in Jacob’s dream. Jacob has a vision of angels moving up and down a ladder, linking the Heaven to the Earth: “And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!” (*Genesis* 28:10-19)

Today, most homes do not have a dome for a roof nor an eye at the center of the habitation from where the smoke of a fire can escape. However, this symbolic link may still be recognized today through the development of the fireplace, as many modern correlations may easily be symbolized.

The Christmas Tree, Tree of Life

The tree plays a particularly involved role symbolizing the *Axis of the World*, in the sense that it is connected to the earth (the manifestation) at its roots, and to the sky at its top (symbolizing the non-manifestation). As such, it is a mediator between earth and heaven. Evergreen trees particularly symbolize immortality, as they stand outside the cycle of death and rebirth which is typically associated to other trees. Pine trees, such as the ones used traditionally as Christmas trees, have a naturally definitive triangular shape starting with a large base and ending with a point at the top. The pine tree has therefore the shape of an upward triangle Δ , which is also traditionally used to symbolize mountains, both examples of an *Axis of the World*. Heaven is said to be traditionally located at the top of

¹⁸ Traditionally, the circle is a symbol of the sky while the square is a symbol of the earth.

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the highest mountain, and it is no surprise that a single large star is often placed at the top of Christmas trees¹⁹. It is also important to correlate that Jesus' death occurred on a cross erected at the top of *Mount Golgotha* or *Mount of the Calvary*. It is interesting to note that some legends claim that the cross of the Calvary was made from wood of the Tree of Life.

Trees have typically symbolized an important role in traditions worldwide. References may be made to: the biblical Tree of Life centered within the garden of Eden²⁰ providing twelve fruits of everlasting life²¹, the lone tree within the garden of Hesperides producing golden apples (sought after by Heracles in Greek mythology²²), and the Norse ash tree Yggdrasil providing the spring water of knowledge. When the fruit falls to the ground, we then have a symbol similar to the light or rain we have seen previously, i.e. the celestial influences descending²³, particularly when associating fruits with the seeds they contain. It is also significant to note that the choice of a pine or fir as a Christmas tree, beyond the fact that they retain their foliage during winter, is their uniqueness in that they “bleed” when their trunk or branches are wounded. The resin of conifers, also known as *amber* when fossilized, is of golden tone and does not corrupt nor decompose. This type of resin is traditionally used in lamps as burning-oil for light; illuminating darkness. The resin from Christmas trees symbolize purity and immortality that is therefore identified to the blood of Jesus. Trees in general and the Christmas tree in particular therefore symbolize Jesus himself, the subject of Christmas celebration²⁴.



¹⁹ This star is, according to the Gospel of Matthew, the one that guided three *Wise Men coming from the East* (the rising sun) to the location of the birthplace of Jesus in the town of Bethlehem to worship the newborn Christ. The Wise Men, the only who could see the star, brought gifts to the baby Jesus (*gold, frankincense and myrrh*) and they are part of the Christmas tradition. Obviously, Santa Claus is another expression of what the three *magi* represent.

²⁰ *Genesis* 2: “In the middle of the garden of Eden were the *tree of life* and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

²¹ *Revelation* 2,7: “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” *Revelation* 22, 2: “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.”

²² Interestingly, according to the legend, Heracles did not know what to do with the three golden apples he was able to get, and he returned them later on to the garden of the Hesperides. If the golden apples symbolize incommunicable superior knowledge, this story indicates that this type of knowledge is not accessible for those who are not prepared for it.

²³ This can be summarized with the well known symbol of the star with 6 wings. The upward triangle is the tree of life and the *Axis of the World*, the downward triangle represents the celestial influences.

²⁴ It is significant to note that *frankincense* and *myrrh*, two of the gifts brought to Jesus by the three *Wise Men*, are two types of resin and as such they symbolize immortality.

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Finally, it is customary to display the Christmas tree covered with garlands of lights. The presence of light on the tree is not surprising when one considers that the *Axis of the World* is traditionally represented as luminous. Plato for example describes it as a “luminous axis made of diamond”. Another reference is the “burning bush” of the Bible, from which God manifested Himself to Moses at the top of Mount Sinai²⁵. The burning bush is evidently a representation of the Tree of Life. The *Zohar* directly assimilates the Tree of Life with the Tree of Light, and the *Qur'an* mentions as well a “blessed olive tree”²⁶ whose glowing oil sustains *Allah's* light within a lamp. In all these cases, René Guénon has explained that the light of the Tree of Light represents the “light hidden in the nature of the tree”²⁷, which is the Non-Being (the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God).



The True Nature of Santa Claus

The legend of Father Christmas, also known as Santa Claus in English, describes him as a chubby and plump immortal man with a long white beard, dressed in red and white, who lives in the North Pole. On the night of Christmas Eve, he departs the North Pole to magically distribute gifts to all the children bringing joy to hearts worldwide. The name Santa Claus is derived from Saint Nicholas, who in the Catholic tradition was known for giving gifts to the poor. The association of Saint Nicholas to a more ancient and universal pagan concept, in effort toward Christianization is very likely. In France for example, Father Christmas is known as *Père Noël*²⁸, without any reference to either Saint Nicholas or Christianity. The association of Santa Claus to the North Pole, winter solstice, and the hour of midnight symbolize a superior meaning of *Darkness* and non-manifestation.

According to the legend, Father Christmas enters the children's homes through a chimney symbolizing an *Axis of the World*. Similar reference may be made to the biblical Jacob's ladder, along which angels would travel up and down linking heaven to the earth. The fireplace being a source of heat is also therefore a source of life and symbolizes the *heart* of a home and the opening access to celestial influences. Santa Claus leaves the North Pole at midnight²⁹, dressed in red and white (symbolizing the colors of life and purity), and descends down the *Axis of the World* bringing “gifts” to the hearts of many. The

²⁵ Note once again the presence of a sacred tree at the top of a mountain, which symbolically indicated the location of the Center of the World.

²⁶ *Surat An-Nur*, 24, 35.

²⁷ *Symboles de la Science sacrée*, René Guénon, Ed. Gallimard, 1962, ch. LI, p. 308, note 4.

²⁸ Noël means *nativity*, but it is also read as Nouveau El (New God), or Neo Helios (New Sun).

²⁹ References to the *spiritual sun* we have seen above, or the manifestation of a celestial influence, the non-manifested sun.

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“gifts” are placed under a Christmas Tree, with a star at its top, covered with lights and Christmas orbs. The orbs, like the “gifts”, represent the fruits of the Tree of Life. These “gifts” from a metaphysical perspective, are intuitive knowledge of the Incommunicable, revealing itself in the hearts of human beings who have reached the *Center of the World*, on their inner quest for a sense of eternity.

One may now see the significance of Jesus’s birth occurring on winter solstice, when *heaven’s gate* is symbolically open and linked to earth through various *Axial* connections, providing gifts as symbolized within various cultures worldwide during the time of Christmas.



Representation of Jesus crucified on the Tree of Life. Blood is coming out his side as he is wounded by the spear of Longinus that pierced his Sacred Heart. The blood is collected in a cup known as the Holy Grail. Note that we may see here how the blood of Jesus may also be identified to the resin of the Tree of Life.