



On this third day of Christmas, the ACTEA Staff wishes you a Merry Christmas and a New Year filled with growth and purpose!

The 25th of December is the traditional date celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus. Today there are many who say that the celebration of Christmas is “pagan” – meaning that the Church simply took a practice of traditional religions (African, Asian, and European) and continued the old non-Christian observations, such as the old Roman *Saturnalia*, under a new name – Christ’s *Maes* (festival) or Christ’s Mass. “Christmas is just syncretism!”, they say.

This, however, is simply not true. First of all, *Saturnalia* took place earlier in December. Are there connections between traditional Northern Hemisphere beliefs about the winter solstice and Jesus coming as the light of the world? Of course! But associating the birth of Jesus with the defeat of winter darkness isn’t “paganism,” it’s good contextual theology. Likewise, the European and North American practice of Christmas trees is not borrowed from an animistic worshipping of trees, but has explicitly Christian origins. In the cold winters of the North, all plant life either dies or seems to die – except for the evergreen trees. These trees thus visually symbolized the hope of life eternal and of resurrection.

More importantly, the date of 25 December was arrived at *theologically* from interpreting the Scripture in the context of the local culture and worldview. Ancient people believed that particularly important persons always died on the same day upon which they had been conceived. And who, ancient Christians asked, was more important than Jesus? They had calculated that the crucifixion had taken place on 25 March and thus assumed that Jesus had been conceived on that date as well. If you add the standard 9 months of pregnancy to 25 March, you get 25 December. So that is why Christmas is celebrated on 25 December.

Traditionally, Christmas is celebrated for twelve days; from 25 December through 5. Then 6 January is Epiphany, which marks both the *epiphany* (or revealing) of Christ to the Gentiles (when the Child Christ was visited by the Magi from the East) and the *epiphany* of Jesus as the Son of God (when Jesus was baptized and the Father’s voice declared “this is my Beloved Son, in Whom I Am well pleased” and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove).

We are free in Christ to follow these old practices from ancient patristic contextual theology and from early modern European contextual theology or to set them aside. We are also free to establish new practices from contemporary African contextual theology. But let us celebrate the Incarnation of Christ every day!

grace and peace,

The ACTEA Staff

The winter Solstice is the shortest day of the year, after which the days begin to grow longer and the darkness of night. December 21st is the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere, and the summer solstice in the Southern Hemisphere.

For over a thousand years, this was the universal practice of all of the churches. Because the Gregorian calendar reforms (introduced in the West by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582) were adopted by some but not by all, some Christian traditions (including the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches) celebrate Christmas on 6 or 7 of January; this is because those churches continue to follow the old Julian calendar.