

Christmas is a holiday held on December 25 to commemorate the birth of Jesus, the central figure of Christianity. The date is not known to be the actual birth date of Jesus, and may have initially been chosen to correspond with either the day exactly nine months after some early Christians believed Jesus had been conceived, the date of the winter solstice on the ancient Roman calendar, or one of various ancient winter festivals. Christmas is central to the Christmas and holiday season, and in Christianity marks the beginning of the larger season of Christmastide, which lasts twelve days.

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Although nominally a Christian holiday, Christmas is also widely celebrated by many non-Christians, and some of its popular celebratory customs have pre-Christian or secular themes and origins. Popular modern customs of the holiday include gift-giving, music, an exchange of greeting cards, church celebrations, a special meal, and the display of various decorations; including Christmas trees, lights, garlands, mistletoe, nativity scenes, and holly. In addition, Father Christmas (known as Santa Claus in some areas, including North America, Australia and Ireland) is a popular folklore figure in many countries, associated with the bringing of gifts for children.

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Etymology

The word Christmas originated as a compound meaning "Christ's Mass". It is derived from the Middle English Christemasse and Old English Cristes mæsse, a phrase first recorded in 1038. "Cristes" is from Greek Christos and "mæsse" is from Latin missa (the holy mass). In Greek, the letter X (chi), is the first letter of Christ, and it, or the similar Roman letter X, has been used as an abbreviation for Christ since the mid-16th century. Hence, Xmas is sometimes used as an abbreviation for Christmas.

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Date of celebration

For many centuries, Christian writers accepted that Christmas was the actual date on which Jesus was born. In the early eighteenth century, scholars began proposing alternative explanations. Isaac Newton argued that the date of Christmas was selected to correspond with the winter solstice, which the Romans called bruma and celebrated on December 25. In 1743, German Protestant Paul Ernst Jablonski argued Christmas was placed on December 25 to correspond with the Roman solar holiday Dies Natalis Solis Invicti and was therefore a "paganization" that debased the true church. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, creation as described in the Genesis creation myth occurred on the date of the spring equinox, i.e. March 25 on the Roman calendar. This date is now celebrated as Annunciation and as the anniversary of Incarnation. In 1889, Louis Duchesne suggested that the date of Christmas was calculated as nine months after Annunciation, the traditional date of the conception of Jesus.

The December 25 date may have been selected by the church in Rome in the early fourth century. At this time, a church calendar was created and other holidays were also placed on solar dates: "It is cosmic symbolism...which inspired the Church leadership in Rome to elect the winter solstice, December 25, as the birthday of Christ, and the summer solstice as that of John the Baptist, supplemented by the equinoxes as their respective dates of conception. While they were aware that pagans called this day the 'birthday' of Sol Invictus, this did not concern them and it did not play any role in their choice of date for Christmas," according to modern scholar S.E. Hijmans.

Varied traditions

Among countries with a strong Christian tradition, a variety of Christmas celebrations have developed that incorporate regional and local cultures. For many Christians, participating in a religious service plays an important part in the recognition of the season. Christmas, along with Easter, is the period of highest annual church attendance.

In many Catholic countries, the people hold religious processions or parades in the days preceding Christmas. In other countries, secular processions or parades featuring Santa Claus and other seasonal figures are often held. Family reunions and the exchange of gifts are a widespread feature of the season. Gift giving takes place on Christmas Day in most countries. Others practise gift giving on December 6, Saint Nicholas Day, and January 6, Epiphany.

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A special Christmas family meal is an important part of the celebration for many, and what is served varies greatly from country to country. Some regions, such as Sicily, have special meals for Christmas Eve, when 12 kinds of fish are served. In England and countries influenced by its traditions, a standard Christmas meal includes turkey (brought from North America), potatoes, vegetables, sausages and gravy, followed by Christmas pudding, mince pies and fruit cake. In Poland and other parts of eastern Europe and Scandinavia, fish often is used for the traditional main course, but richer meat such as lamb is increasingly served. In Germany, France and Austria, goose and pork are favored. Beef, ham and chicken in various recipes are popular throughout the world. Ham is the main meal in the Philippines.

Special desserts are also prepared: The Maltese traditionally serve Imbuljuta tal-Qastan, a chocolate and chestnuts beverage, after Midnight Mass and throughout the Christmas season. Slovaks prepare the traditional Christmas bread potica, bûche de Noël in France, panettone in Italy, and elaborate tarts and cakes. The eating of sweets and chocolates has become popular worldwide, and sweeter Christmas delicacies include the German stollen, marzipan cake or

candy, and Jamaican rum fruit cake. As one of the few fruits traditionally available to northern countries in winter, oranges were long associated with special Christmas foods.

Source: Wikipedia