



# Royal Bank Letter

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## *The Spirit of Christmas*

*The Christmas season has become inescapable for everyone in our society, Christian or otherwise. But Christmas has also been drifting back to its origins as a general celebration of life. And what it stands for applies to people of any religion. Can anyone rightly object to peace and goodwill?*

It is probably only a nostalgic illusion that the Christmas season gets longer every year, but it certainly does seem that way, doesn't it? The frost has barely penetrated the ground here in Canada before tinsel decorations start sprouting out on the streets, and we are arbitrarily treated to the tediously familiar strains of Christmas music in shopping malls.

Whether or not it really does consume a larger part of our lives than it did in the good old days of our unreliable memories, the buildup to Christmas nonetheless makes hungry demands on our physical, financial, and emotional resources. Swept along by the advertising, the shopping, the partying, the special media presentations and all the rest, people in this society find it impossible to ignore.

The main complaint about Christmas, of course, is that it has become scandalously commercialized. Viewed critically, the season may be seen as a state of artificial excitement whipped up by business interests to hustle consumers into buying things they otherwise would not buy.

When it is not blatantly pitched at children who can be expected to harry their parents into providing alluring gifts, Christmas advertising attempts to pry open pocket books through mawkish appeals to sentimentality. Imbued with a feeling of obligation to "buy, buy, buy," families that could use money to meet more practical needs may blow it on costly presents and other luxuries.

Still, the commercialization of Christmas seems to be one of those things that everybody talks about but nobody does anything about. The reality is that it has become a kind of necessary evil in the retail sector of our economy, in which a "good holiday season" may

spell the difference between an annual profit and loss for many stores.

Part-time workers and students seeking pocket money have reason to be thankful for the materialistic turn Christmas has taken. Others owe a major part of their livelihood to the season — for instance, farmers raising turkeys or growing Christmas trees.

"Oh, this Christmas season!" sighs a character in a story by Hermann Sudermann. "I believe it was invented by some evil demon expressly to annoy us poor bachelors, to show us the more clearly the desolation of our existence. For some it is a source of joy, it is for us a torture."

That forlorn individual might have been speaking for all the multitudes of people who find themselves out in the cold at this time of year, looking in at the special warm glow it generates in contented households. Their ranks include the homeless, the bereaved, and individuals separated from their loved ones for any number of reasons. Within families themselves, the public display of extravagance makes it a bleak time for those financially unable to join in the spending spree.

Even members of reasonably affluent families may experience a kind of guilt at the fact that their relationships do not live up to the blissful scenes presented in the mass media's seasonal programming.

On television, the cosy affection of close-knit and trouble-free families reaches its peak around the Christmas tree. The underlying message is that there is something wrong with people who do not celebrate the occasion in an atmosphere of unconditional harmony.

Psychologists report a high incidence of depression around Christmas among people who feel that their lives should be more like those ideal fictitious situations. They are distressed because they feel that, at this emotive time of year, they should by rights be happier than they are.

In countries such as Canada where many religions co-exist, the general celebration of the birth of Christ places an added psychological strain on many non-Christians. Much to the discomfort of their parents, little Hindus or Muslims or Buddhists cannot be expected to understand why they should be excluded from the singing, the gift-giving, the pageantry and the revelry that surround them, tending to eclipse their own cultural celebrations. The feast of Hanukkah has taken on increased importance among Jewish families in western countries because of its proximity to Christmas. Jewish children are able to celebrate a sort of parallel feast — presents and all — connected with their own faith.

Well-meaning attempts have lately been made in multicultural communities to circumscribe the Christian content in Christmas decorations and events like Santa Claus parades and school pageants. There have even been attempts to suppress the use of the word "Christmas," so as not to offend people of other faiths.

*Smoothing the way  
for pagans to become  
followers of the cross*

So far, these ventures in social engineering have had little effect. Given centuries of conditioning in places where the majority of people were at least nominally Christian, it is difficult to instil the feeling that Christmas is just another faceless holiday like, say, Labour Day.

In any case, the fact is that, for all its outward rituals, Christmas is no longer a very "religious" occasion. The degree of devotion with which it is observed among Christian themselves is left largely up to individual belief.

It has long since been generally understood that you do not have to be a Christian to have the Christmas spirit. After all, the most popular and affecting of modern Christmas songs, "White Christmas," was written by an American Jew, Irving Berlin.

Traditionalists who object to the commercialization and secularization of the feast are prone to say that it is "taking the Christ out of Christmas." Some point with horror to the habit of abbreviating the name to "Xmas" as though it were a modern abomination,

oblivious of the fact that "X" is an age-old symbol for Christ derived from the first letter of the name in Greek.

Non-Christians and non-practising Christians who feel uneasy about participating in the event may take some comfort in the fact that it was not an exclusively Christian celebration to begin with. When Christianity was being suppressed by the Roman Empire and the later barbarian conquerors, members of the faith joined in the winter pagan rites for protective coloration. Later, when the religion came out of the catacombs, Christian missionaries merged their ceremonies with local modes of worship, reasoning that it would smooth the way for pagans to become followers of the cross.

Lacking an exact record of Christ's birth, church leaders settled on December 25. It was an improbable date in the context of the Christmas story; for instance, in that inclement season, shepherds in Galilee were unlikely to be watching their flocks by night. But the date had an advantage; it coincided with the pagan period of rejoicing at the rebirth of the sun after the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere.

Originally Christian communicants confined themselves to performing a special mass, *Cristes maesse*, amidst the hubbub of the pagan winter solstice festivities. The timing fitted neatly with the concept of Christ bringing light to the world.

Christmas as such was not widely celebrated until the fourth century AD, mainly because the first Christian leaders feared anything that might precipitate a relapse into paganism. They condemned the public celebration of birthdays as most objectionably pagan, recalling the orgies that once took place in the course of commemorating the Roman Emperors' births.

The early churchmen preached that the date of a person's physical birth was of no consequence; what really mattered was the date of one's spiritual birth on becoming a Christian through baptism. Thus for many years the chief celebration of Christ's coming into the world was of his baptism, marked by the feast of Epiphany. Some sections of the Eastern Orthodox Church still combine the observance of Christmas (properly speaking, the Nativity) and the Epiphany on January 6.

In strict Christian liturgy, the Nativity is merely the fourth-ranking feast of the year, after Easter, Pentecost (the visitation to Christ's disciples of the Holy Ghost), and the Epiphany. Christmas was variously celebrated in January, March, May and September in different locales until the late December date became standard some time after AD 500.

The prime model for this Christianized winter feast was the Saturnalia, honoring the Roman god of agriculture. Many of the customs we now observe at Christmastime can be traced back to this pre-Christian affair, notably the hanging of decorations, the lighting of candles, and the giving of presents. When, in our present-day armed forces, the officers serve Christmas dinner to the enlisted ranks, they are following a tradition that harks directly back to the Saturnalia banquets at which masters waited on their slaves.

In fact, most of the customs we automatically follow at Christmastime today have their roots in pagan rituals. Though the Christmas tree as we know it comes from eighth century Germany (or, arguably, Latvia or Estonia) it represents an extension of the age-old worship of trees as spirits. The ancient Egyptians are known to have put up green palms indoors during sun-worshipping ceremonies. The Romans hung trinkets on live pines, while the Druids used tree branches to make offerings of cakes, candles and painted fruit to the gods.

Popular singers who croon about the genesis of romance under the mistletoe are unwittingly referring to the pre-Christian role of that plant as a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation. Among the ancient Britons, enemies who met under the mistletoe, which grew as a parasite on the branches of oaks, were obliged to drop their weapons and embrace — hence the modern convention that couples who find themselves under the mistletoe at a Christmas party must kiss.

*The lighting on suburban streets goes back to primitive belief*

In northern cultures, the dark days of December were a time of superstitious dread, so people placed wreaths of ivy and evergreen boughs in their houses to evoke the mysterious power of the evergreen to resist wilting in the deadly cold of winter. This explains the ubiquitous presence today of artificial decorations and wrapping paper bearing an evergreen or ivy motif.

Ancient northerners believed in having plenty of light in the form of bonfires and torches to encourage the sun to make a speedy return to its full life-giving power. When you drive down a suburban street and see all those coloured fairy lights festooning the houses and lawn ornaments, you are witnessing an electric variation of those hopeful rites.

Pagan influences set the tone of Christmas as a time of unrestrained merriment. Europeans in the Middle Ages adopted that idea with enthusiasm and aplomb. For ordinary folk, the holiday happened to

fall at an ideal time for letting oneself go, in the lull between harvesting and planting when farm work was in abeyance. Latter-day Scrooges who deplore the waste of productivity and overindulgence during the Christmas holidays may be referred back to the days when the carousing went on practically non-stop for the better part of a month.

From that era comes the custom of the wassail bowl, containing a special brew for all comers. The custom is perpetuated today by people who serve their guests eggnog, punch, or other specially prepared seasonal drinks.

This is often done on Christmas Eve, which was really part of the same day among the early Christians who, like the Jews, started the day at sunset. It was

*'No Christmas!' they cried; and plum puddings were banned by law*

then that carols were sung, the word having been derived from the Latin *cantare* — to sing — and *rola*, an expression of joy. One might think that such a light-hearted feast would

come last on the list of things that Christians could find to quarrel about. But it did become a subject of bitter controversy and contention after Martin Luther's Reformation in the 16th century.

Luther's disciples tried to tone down the revelry, especially the heavy gambling involved, but they preserved the Roman Catholic custom of marking the occasion. In England, the Anglican Church also decided to carry on the Catholic festive tradition with some restrictions on its wilder aspects. It was a policy for which the leaders of the Church of England were fiercely attacked.

Under the influence of John Calvin's cry of "thrift, industry, and sobriety," the English Puritans could not stand to see these qualities turned on their heads at Yuletide. Railing against the heathen character of the celebrations, the Puritans declared that Christmas should be kept as a fast instead of a feast.

After Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth seized power in England in 1642, a law was passed banning Christmas observances. The Puritan Parliamentarians went to the lengths of outlawing plum puddings and mince pies. Town criers roved the streets shouting "No Christmas!" Whole congregations were arrested for defying the ordinance.

The ban was repealed after the Restoration in 1660 of the suitably nick-named "merry monarch," Charles II — but not before the Puritans had carried their detestation of this "pagan mockery" across the Atlantic to the American colonies.



In 1659 the General Court of Massachusetts imposed a law making any observance of December 25 a penal offence, punishable by a hefty fine of five shillings. The resistance to Christmas in the future United States gradually died out over the next two centuries; but it lived on in Scotland, where Calvin's ideas held sway in the dominant Presbyterian Church.

Despite their exposure to media influences from England and the U. S., Scots today still treat Christmas as a minor occasion, very much secondary to Hogmanay, their New Year's celebration. Similarly, the big day in mainly Calvinist Holland is the Feast of Saint Nicholas on December 6, when presents are given out.

With the Dutch colonization of what is now the northeastern United States, the gift-giving saint underwent a metamorphosis from "Sint Nikolass" to "Sinterklass" to "Santa Claus." It was not until well into the 1880s that he emerged as the jolly figure driving a team of flying reindeer on Christmas Eve.

*Not enough good  
will towards men,  
and therefore not  
enough peace*

That was thanks to the poem "The Night Before Christmas" by Dr. Clement Clarke Moore of New York City, and cartoons in *Harper's Weekly* by Thomas Nast

depicting a suitably jovial philanthropist.

A Turkish-born bishop, the real St. Nicholas was indeed revered for his generosity. But long before he was born in the fourth century, Christmas and its antecedent feasts were known as a time when people gave the generous sides of their natures free rein.

The Romans instituted the custom of distributing gratuities to tradespeople, a tradition we carry on when we stick a few dollars in a Christmas card for our newspaper carrier or regular waitress. (The forerunners of all greeting cards, Christmas cards were a 19th century English innovation.) Medieval churches had boxes hung on their walls in which parishioners put money for the poor, the precursors of today's Salvation Army kettles. The boxes were opened on December 26, known ever since as Boxing Day.

St. Nicholas was also renowned for his love of children, who still delight in his image. Christmas always has been a magical time for the very young. For a brief while, it puts the little ones at the head of the line, allowing them to fulfil their fondest desires even at the expense of a tummy ache. Children provide a foil for adults who enjoy celebrating Christmas hugely, all the while protesting, "We only do it for the kids."

"Perhaps what Christmas is all about is to help us rediscover the child in all of us, the fact that we have hearts and are capable of loving," said Jean Vanier, the saintly Canadian founder of the L'Arche movement for mentally disabled people. Certainly it is a time when we tend to revive childhood memories, and when grown-up "children" feel a longing to be with their parents and siblings. Just as it is a time of renewal in the cycle of the sun, it is a time of renewal and confirmation of family ties.

It is also a time to be with friends, showing our appreciation of them through our hospitality. But if we behave with extra kindness towards our intimates, the basic character of Christmas calls upon us to be just about as kind to everybody else. The traditional Yuletide throughout Christendom was a highly egalitarian feast, in which the more fortunate shared their bounty with their poorer brethren. This is the theme the familiar carol "Good King Wenceslaus", in which the king of Bohemia regales a poor serf with food and drink.

It is paradoxical that though Christmas is the most secular of all religious feasts, it is also the most "Christian" in terms of bringing to life Jesus Christ's teachings. He urged generosity, tolerance, and forbearance, all of which we must exercise if we are to "keep Christmas" in the true meaning of the event.

It is difficult to think about Christmas without thinking about the saying that Christianity might be a good thing if anybody ever tried it. All too many "Christians" only qualify for that description conceptually for a few weeks every year, oozing good will towards their fellow men until after the New Year, when they can go back to their dog-eat-dog existence and their indifference to the plight of other human beings.

The strife-torn history of the world shows that Christians have a disgraceful record as followers of the figure whose birth was heralded by the words, "and on earth, peace, good will towards men." Up to this very day, there has never been enough good will among Christians themselves, or between Christians and other believers. And because there was not enough good will, there has not been enough peace.

The spirit of Christmas, by which people of any religion can abide, is a compound of kindness, generosity and understanding. Criticize the institution as we may, there is only one thing essentially wrong with it. And that is that everyone does not have the Christmas spirit all year round.

