

CHRISTMAS INVENTED AND CONTESTED

By
Alison Ward

A Master's essay submitted to the Department of Religious Studies
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

August 2012

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the celebration of Christmas through the lens of Eric Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition, as well as how this process of invention can contribute to the discourse on contemporary Christmas issues. According to Hobsbawm's theory, an invented tradition is a custom that purposely fabricates a sense of historical continuity and appears to be old-fashioned even when it is new. This paper argues that the holiday, which began as a rowdy carnival and transformed into a quiet domestic affair, was invented through a process that combined disparate elements from paganism, Christianity, and secular customs. The paper investigates both the initial celebration as well as its modern manifestation. Such an analysis demonstrates that Christmas has no true, standardized, or infallible form. The subsequent examination of the contemporary Christmas issues involving paganism, commercialism, secularism, and multiculturalism accordingly demonstrates that the holiday cannot be categorized as fully Christian or non-Christian, or religious or secular. For example, the renaming of Christmas trees as "holiday trees" suggests both the Christian nature of Christmas as well as the celebration's secular capacity for inclusivity. Subsequently, this paper concludes that the hybridity of Christmas is necessary for negotiating expected and ostensibly clear boundaries within modern thinking and society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Richard Ascough for his generous support and advice, Dr. Pam Holmes for her guidance as my professor and as my second reader, and Ian for persuading me that I could in fact write about Christmas. I would also like to express my gratitude to my fellow classmates who took each step of the way with me, Angélique for making my year in Kingston full of roommate-joy, Patrick for his endless encouragement and wonderful friendship, and Mom, Dad, and Devon for all their help over the years.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of a traditional Christmas often paints an image of a home alit with the warm glow of a fire, the light reflecting in the glass ornaments on the Christmas tree. The children of the house are full of anticipation as the wrapped gifts under the evergreen beckon to be opened. In the kitchen, the table is being set in preparation for a grand feast. Snow gently falls outside isolating the scene from the bustling world of everyday life. This seemingly traditional and timeless image of a familial Christmas Day, however, was forged in the modern age. Christmas did not become the domestic celebration it is known as today until the nineteenth century. In fact, the celebration of Christmas as a whole does not reach back as far as Jesus' own lifetime; Christmas was first celebrated three centuries after Jesus' death. Through the lens of Eric Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition, which argues that some traditions are invented because they fabricate a sense of historical continuity and pretend to be old when they are in fact recent innovations, the celebration of Christmas is consequently revealed as an invented tradition.

Not only is Christmas an invented tradition, it is also the current source of heated debate. Issues of ecumenism, commercialism, secularism, and multiculturalism vehemently collide under the title of Christmas each year. For example, as Rod Dreher ardently declares, "These days... nothing signals the approach of Noel more reliably than assorted right-thinking jackasses forbidding any public acknowledgement of Jesus' birth, out of fear that someone, somewhere, will be offended. It has become an American civic tradition."¹ The season that is promoted as a time of peace on earth is in fact characterized by controversy.

¹ Rod Dreher, "Christmas Bombing," *National Review*, 31 December 2002, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.queensu.ca/ehost/detail?sid=3f6f88d1-0d94-4dc5-9bd0-4366eaaa7126%40sessionmgr13&vid=1&hid=110&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=8768376> (accessed March 30, 2012).

There have been several key scholarly publications concerning Christmas, its history, and the contentions associated with the holiday. First, Penne Restad provides a detailed and important overview of the holiday's history within the United States.² She traces the celebration as it developed from an eclectic combination of regional practices into a national holiday. The focus of her work is the nineteenth century with particular emphasis on the ways in which the Civil War shaped the holiday into a home-coming occasion. Her book notably features an extensive collection of first-hand accounts of Christmas experiences preserved in articles, letters, and diary entries. Overall, her work reads like a narrative history.

Leigh Eric Schmidt similarly contributes an influential work within the genre of Christmas scholarship.³ His book illuminates the complexities of religion and consumerism within the holiday tradition. He argues that the commercialization of Christmas is characterized by religious as well as secular forms. He examines the practice of gift-giving, its transition from a New Year's custom to a Christmas ritual, and its subsequent Christianization, concluding his argument with an investigation of the debates surrounding 'putting Christ back into Christmas'. His work provides a valuable and focused analysis of the combination of religion and commercialism within the holiday.

In his book, Stephen Nissenbaum analyses the revival and development of Christmas in the nineteenth century and the efforts undertaken by the middle class and industry to transform the celebration into a domestic holiday.⁴ Nissenbaum notably considers the impact of social relations and commercialism within this process. His chapter pertaining to the invention of Santa Claus provides a detailed case study concerning the domestication of the celebration. His

² Penne Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁴ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

work is effective in highlighting the conflict of interests involved within the emergence of the modern form of Christmas.

Elizabeth Pleck similarly examines the creation of Christmas as a “sentimental holiday”.⁵ She considers such factors as gift-giving and the role of women. Pleck, however, uniquely contributes an analysis of Christmas’ post-sentimental manifestation. She specifically considers the role the post-sentimental Christmas plays in the family, addressing such overlooked themes of ethnicity, homosexuality, and the “holiday blues”. Overall, while her investigation of Christmas is short, Pleck provides an innovative angle of analysis within Christmas scholarship.

Bruce David Forbes’ more recent book supplies an effective summary of the scholarship pertaining to Christmas, as well as a succinct history of the development of the holiday.⁶ He uses the metaphor of a growing snowball to describe the process of accumulation the holiday has undergone in its development. His work is particularly useful in tracing key aspects of the holiday from their inception to their popularization.

While drawing on the ideas presented in these important publications, this paper takes a different approach to the study of Christmas. Through the lens of Hobsbawm’s theory of invented tradition, this paper analyzes how and why Christmas was originally invented in the fourth century and then reinvented in its modern form in the nineteenth. The term “reinvention”, one may note, is not employed by Hobsbawm, and his theory mainly dismisses the concept. Motivated by Jonathan Z. Smith’s argument concerning the importance of the prefix “re”, however, I have chosen to expand Hobsbawm’s theory in this uncharted direction. Overall, the benefit of the theory of invented traditions rests in its capacity to remove notions of infallibility associated with traditions so that a custom may be studied from a multi-dimensional and critical

⁵ Elizabeth Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁶ Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas, A Candid History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

perspective. In the case of Christmas, the theory of invented tradition reveals that there is no true or standardized way of celebrating the holiday; throughout its history, Christmas Day has been an occasion for feasting, gambling, and drinking, as well as worshiping, gift-giving, and reuniting with family. Christmas, though officially the commemoration of Jesus' birth, has taken on many colourful – as well as controversial – forms.

Subsequently, this paper evaluates how Christmas' invented nature can contribute to the contemporary American discourse on Christmas debates involving paganism, commercialism, multiculturalism, and secularism. Christmas, I demonstrate, is a source of contentious conflict as Christian groups, for example, assert the necessity of a Christ-centered celebration while public Christmas displays simultaneously disrupt the reality of a multicultural and secular society due to their perceived Christian associations. I argue, however, that such controversies can be illuminated by the fact that the invention of Christmas comprises scattered elements from the ostensibly opposing spheres of paganism, Christianity, and the secular, thus creating a hybrid custom that blurs the expected boundaries between the Christian and the non-Christian, and the religious and the secular, which ultimately results in such controversy. Due to this amalgamative invention process, efforts to compartmentalize the holiday as pagan, Christian, or secular will ultimately fail. The seemingly "traditional" Christmas, however, should not be defended, but neither should the holiday be abandoned. Because the celebration fails to conform to the ideal of distinct categories, Christmas is a necessary exercise in negotiating and questioning the rigid boundaries within modern thinking and society. As a misfit toy, Christmas has the potential to challenge modern expectations and generate new ways of thinking.

The first section of this paper provides a detailed overview of Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition. The second chapter employs this theory to argue that Christmas is in fact an

invented tradition as well as demonstrate how Christmas was invented and reinvented. The third section analyzes the contemporary debates concerning Christmas within the American context.

In the conclusion, the ways in which the perspective of invention can explicate the contemporary Christmas controversies are considered.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SPARK OF INVENTION

Some traditions that appear or claim to be old are actually quite recent innovations. This is the starting point for Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions as outlined in the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*.⁷ The pairing of Hobsbawm's theory with historical analyses of Christmas is not an uncommon occurrence in recent scholarship. Daniel Miller,⁸ Penne Restad,⁹ and Stephen Nissenbaum,¹⁰ for example, all make this connection in the introductions of their historiographies. However, while these works all remark that Christmas contains elements of invention, Hobsbawm's detailed theory of invented traditions is not engaged beyond the surface or in a consistent fashion. This is unfortunate; a closer examination of Hobsbawm's theory reveals a dynamic method through which the history of the Christmas tradition can be thoroughly investigated and elucidated. Hobsbawm's theory demands a closer analysis, which this section provides.

The Theory of Invented Tradition

In the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm begins his theorizing by defining the phrase "the invention of tradition". He writes:

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.¹¹

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁸ Daniel Miller, "A Theory of Christmas," in *Unwrapping Christmas*, ed. Daniel Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

⁹ Restad, *Christmas in America*, viii.

¹⁰ Nissenbaum, *Battle for Christmas*, x.

¹¹ Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 1.

In other words, Hobsbawm defines invented traditions as a set of practices with ritual or symbolic value that are both aligned with a set of norms and seek to teach a set of norms. Furthermore, the use of repetition suggests that they have occurred and are rooted in the past. Hobsbawm also notes that this link to the past relies on a specifically appropriate connection rather than on an ambiguous notion of the past in general.

One may note, however, this definition does not clearly distinguish invented traditions from traditions in general. Indeed, his definition is generic in this regard. Hobsbawm, however, adds a pivotal distinction between traditions in general and those that are specifically invented: “[I]nsofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious.”¹² Thus, invented traditions are characterized by their fabrication of artificial historical continuity.¹³ Additionally, Hobsbawm identifies invented traditions as “novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.”¹⁴ As a result, one can discern that invented traditions lack an organic history because they are first and foremost new, and, since traditions are rooted in the past by definition, that they are subsequently forced to create a factitious past.

Consequently, the key to understanding invented traditions is that they are fundamentally new and therefore not traditional. That is, traditions can only become such in retrospect; the notion of new traditions is paradoxical because a practice cannot be both new and traditional at the same time. Invented traditions are recent innovations but pretend to be old, and therefore the “oldness” or historical repetition that traditions necessitate is largely factitious and fabricated. In

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ What is interesting to note here is that Hobsbawm is careful to qualify the continuity as factitious rather than the past itself. This would seem to imply that invented traditions draw lines between two seemingly unrelated matters, bringing them together and bridging any gaps, as opposed to constructing a wholly fictional story of the past.

¹⁴ Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 2.

this sense, not all traditions are invented because not all claim to be old or appear to be old-fashioned.

Furthermore, Hobsbawm recognizes two types of invented traditions that both fall under the umbrella of his term. First of all, there are traditions that are “actually invented, constructed and formally instituted.”¹⁵ He provides the example of the royal Christmas broadcast in Britain, instituted in 1932 (though he does not divulge further details). There are also, according to Hobsbawm, invented traditions that are more subtle, “emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity.”¹⁶ Hobsbawm exemplifies this kind of invented tradition through the rapid appearance of the practices associated with the Cup Final in British Association Football.¹⁷ As I argue below, in terms of Christmas, the invention of the celebration itself falls within the first category; Christmas was initially created and implemented by church officials for political reasons. The modern Christmas, which also is investigated, falls within the second type. In contrast, the modern celebration was not as abrupt in its creation but still acted as old-fashioned even when it was very new.

Another key element of the theory of invented traditions addresses their purpose. “‘Invented traditions,’” Hobsbawm writes, “have significant social and political functions, and would neither come into existence nor establish themselves if they could not acquire them.”¹⁸ In this sense, the process of inventing traditions is not arbitrary but rather part of a particular agenda, whether social, political, or religious; one can situate them within the larger arena of

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ One can question, if the first type is *actually* invented in what ways the second type can also be considered invented. The response rests in the fact that within the second classification of invented traditions, the ‘traditionness’ itself is once again invented because it is, in actuality, a novel innovation.

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 307.

ideological discourse. Insofar as invented traditions “use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion,”¹⁹ one can conclude that their purpose particularly rests in pre-designated goals and unity amongst a group. Furthermore, it may be added that the use and manipulation of history by invented traditions is central to the fulfillment of their purpose.²⁰ Invented traditions in this way reap from history precedents and inspiration for their own novel purposes. The invented tradition of Christmas is no exception.

The Intricacies of Invented Traditions

Hobsbawm develops in detail how invented traditions link to the past. Since invented traditions both require and fabricate historical continuity they must be connected to the past. The past to which they refer, however, need not be lengthy, reaching back for ages. Hobsbawm stresses that the point is to select a past that is suitable to the invented tradition. He gives the example of revolutions or progressive movements, which, even though they constitute a break with the past, are nonetheless rooted in their own relevant history.²¹ Previous revolutions or heroes are often employed as points of contact with the past.²² Hobsbawm additionally considers “the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for novel purposes.”²³ Here, one may find the imagery of recycling useful; through invented traditions, ancient materials are given entirely new identities. Hobsbawm argues that there is a large store of materials that are accumulated over time which can then be grafted or borrowed for the purposes of new innovations.²⁴ Hobsbawm uses Swiss nationalism as an example, which acquired old folk songs for its own purposes. What may be gained from considering these points

¹⁹ Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 12.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 2.

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 6.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

is that invented traditions are not haphazard creations; they are selective and carefully transformative in their development.

Furthermore, while Hobsbawm recognizes that traditions have been invented across the span of history,²⁵ he nonetheless focuses his theory within the modern context. Indeed, he argues that invented traditions are more likely to arise during rapid social transformation. Such change is particularly prominent in the last two hundred years and therefore, Hobsbawm argues, it is “reasonable to expect these instant formulizations of new traditions to cluster during this period.”²⁶ The invention of the modern Christmas occurred within this timeframe, although the initial invention of the celebration dates from the fourth century, which may cause one to consider if this prioritizing of the modern period is a somewhat misguided decision on Hobsbawm’s part.

Regardless, Hobsbawm pinpoints three types of invented traditions in the period since the Industrial Revolution. He writes that, first of all, there are those “establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities.”²⁷ The second and third types of invented traditions that Hobsbawm identifies within the modern period are related to the first in that they likely follow from the establishment of social cohesion. They are those “establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority” and those “whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ Ibid., 9. Here a clear link to Benedict Anderson can be made; in his inquiry into nationalism, Anderson argues, first of all, that nationalism can fill the need for narratives of identity. Thus, nationalism can be viewed as central to social cohesion. Secondly, and more importantly, Anderson argues that nations are imagined political communities. He writes, a nation “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (*Imagined Communities* [Verso: London, 1983], 6). In this way, both Hobsbawm and Anderson recognize the role of traditions in forming group identity, whether the communities are real or imagined.

behaviour.”²⁸ As I demonstrate below, the creation of the modern Christmas involved all three types of modern invented traditions; the holiday was designed to ameliorate class relations while also reinforcing traditional authority and values of domesticity.

A final dimension to Hobsbawm’s theory of invented traditions is its relationship to the recording of history. Hobsbawm suggests that an element of invention can rest in “not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so.”²⁹ “History”, in effect, can be manipulated and even fabricated based on how it is preserved. This aspect of Hobsbawm’s theory can be applied to Christmas in that the celebration was partially invented through the written word, including periodicals, advertisements, and literary works. This is explored in further detail below.

Expanding the Theory

Hobsbawm’s theory can be further fleshed out and stretched in new directions. To begin, in his analysis, Hobsbawm argues that the strength and adaptability of old, genuine traditions should not be confused with the invention of tradition. He writes, “Where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented.”³⁰ Since invented traditions arise with a break from the past because they are characterised by the fabrication of an artificial sense of continuity, adaptations of old traditions do not fall within the concept of invented traditions; when old traditions adapt, continuity is overall maintained. Peter Burke, however, finds this argument

²⁸Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 9.

²⁹ Ibid., 13.

³⁰ Ibid., 8.

unsatisfying. He questions where exactly, from Hobsbawm's perspective, the adaptability of old traditions ends and a new tradition begins.³¹ Hobsbawm fails to elaborate.

However, some insight on the matter of adaption can be gained from considering Hobsbawm's assessment of revivals. Hobsbawm argues that revived traditions are invented because revival implies prior abandonment which subsequently implies a gap in a tradition's continuity.³² As a result, revived traditions must fabricate a sense of historical continuity, and thus they too constitute an invented tradition.³³ In this way, revival is a point at which old traditions stop fluctuating and subsequently become new traditions. Thus, Hobsbawm's analysis of adaption of old traditions is not as incomplete as it seems at first glance.

That being said, Hobsbawm's analysis of revivals as invented traditions can also raise some questions. In her theorizing of invented traditions, Judith Lieu uses the term "reinvention,"³⁴ a word that is entirely absent from Hobsbawm's work. This is because if reinvention implies revival, as it seems to in Lieu's case, then Hobsbawm would consider it as simply a form of *invented* – without the 're' – tradition because, like invented traditions, revived traditions involve a break in continuity and a subsequent fabrication of the past. However, there is notable benefit to employing the term "reinvention" as opposed to "invention". As Smith writes, "[T]he little prefix *re-* is perhaps the most important signal that we can deploy. It guarantees that we understand both the second nature of our enterprises as well as the

³¹ Peter Burke, "The Invention of Tradition by Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger; Book Review," *The English Historical Review* 101, no. 398 (1986), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/571469> (accessed April 6, 2012), 317.

³² Hobsbawm, "Introduction", 7.

³³ In this way, Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions is related to Aghananda Bharati's concept of the 'pizza effect' in "The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1970), <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.queensu.ca/stable/10.2307/2942625?origin=api&> (accessed March 24, 2012). According to the theory, the original pizza was a basic, Italian meal. It was not until Americans reintroduced it to Italy that the pizza as it is known today became such a popular Italian dish. This idea of a foreign revival that brings about a new status of a practice within its country of origin is termed the 'pizza effect' and is used by Bharati in his analysis of Hindu traditions and their new lives as scientific facts. Ultimately, since the pizza and other traditions under its 'effect' are revived, Hobsbawm would subsequently consider them invented traditions.

³⁴ Judith Lieu, "History, Memory, and the Invention of Tradition," in *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 70.

relentlessly social character of the objects of our study.”³⁵ To employ a term of Richard Ascough, Hobsbawm engages in the “myth of monocausality”³⁶; he assumes there is one point of invention for each invented tradition.

There are two different possibilities as to what this could signify for Christmas. If Hobsbawm is followed directly, then Christmas was invented in the fourth century and a new modern Christmas was invented during the nineteenth century. If the term “reinvention” is used, then Christmas was invented in the fourth century and was reinvented during the nineteenth century. The first phrasing emphasizes the breaks in continuity and the subsequent element of invention that lie at the heart of Hobsbawm’s theory; the second hints at fluidity. While Hobsbawm’s interpretation thus fits well with his overall theory, for the purposes of this essay I have chosen to stray from the theorist and employ the term “reinvention” for the reason that it will help to recognize the qualities and practices of Christmas – including its pagan elements – that have survived the breaks in continuity throughout the tradition’s history. That being said, since the modern Christmas overall assumed a new identity, it is not simply an adaption of an old tradition. It sits on Hobsbawm’s continuum, rather, somewhere between adapting old traditions and entirely new inventions. Consequently, it can be defined as a “reinvented” tradition. While Hobsbawm’s theory of invented traditions provides an effective lens through which to view Christmas, its application to the holiday will consequently also serve to untangle the theory and stretch it in new directions. This, I propose, is an advantage. It suggests the malleability that is characteristic of all good theories.

³⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, “A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religion’s History,” in *Relating Religion, Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 362.

³⁶ Richard S. Ascough, “Bringing Chaos to Order: Historical Memory and the Manipulation of History,” *Religion & Theology* 15 (2008), 300.

Another aspect of Hobsbawm's theory that can be and has been expanded is the meaning of the word "invention" itself. Lieu, for example, writes that "invention need not mean 'making up out of nothing' but rather 'discovery' (*invenio*)."³⁷ Yet Hobsbawm does not use the term invention to mean "make out of nothing" – he makes it clear that invented traditions recycle the old for novel purposes – and neither does he apply it in the sense of discovery. He uses it, rather, to simply mean that invented traditions involve *fabrication* of something new (pretending to be old). Marcel Sarot's analysis of the meaning of "invention" is perhaps more useful. Sarot notes that invention has a dual meaning.³⁸ In the case of invented stories or excuses, it can mean that invention is intended to make people believe something is true. However, the other meaning of invention is simply to think of and create something new. Sarot suggests that insofar as invented traditions involve both the construction of the tradition itself as well as the fabrication of a factitious past, Hobsbawm's use of the word 'invention' comprises both meanings.³⁹

The application of the term "invention" to traditions, however, has raised some concerns among scholars. Greg Johnson, for example, argues that the aspects of demystification and implication of inauthenticity make the language of invention challenging and possibly offensive.⁴⁰ In effect, the investigation of a tradition as invented has the potential to strip the tradition of its authoritative "traditionness"; that is, in Hobsbawm's line of thinking, it can be

³⁷ Lieu, "History, Memory," 70.

³⁸ Marcel Sarot, "Counterfactuals and the Invention of Religious Traditions," in *Religious Identity and The Invention of Tradition: Papers Read at a NOSTER Conference in Soesterberg, January 4-6, 1999*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Anton Houtepen (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2001 http://books.google.ca/books?id=rP0x4bq23M4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=Religious+Identity+and+The+Invention+of+Tradition:+Papers+Read+at+a+NOSTER+Conference+in+Soesterberg,+January+4-6,+1999&hl=en&sa=X&ei=ibv0T8zjGcW1rQH_qLHBAw&ved=0CDYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Religious%20Identity%20and%20The%20Invention%20of%20Tradition%3A%20Papers%20Read%20at%20a%20NOSTER%20Conference%20in%20Soesterberg%2C%20January%204-6%2C%201999&f=false (accessed March 24, 2012), 28.

³⁹ One may note, however, that Hobsbawm emphasizes the fabrication of factitious *continuity* rather than the past itself.

⁴⁰ Greg Johnson, "Authenticity, Invention, Articulation: Theorizing Contemporary Hawaiian Traditions," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, no.3 (2008), <http://www.ingentaconnect.com.proxy.queensu.ca/content/brill/mts/2008/00000020/00000003/art00003> (accessed March 24, 2012), 252.

revealed as a practice only pretending to be rooted in a long authoritative history. This act can be problematic to lived traditions that hold significant symbolic meaning. Johnson, however, implies that the lens of invention need not necessarily engage in a discourse of authenticity.⁴¹ Though he does not say this himself, the opposite of “invented”, for example, can be understood as “natural”, rather than “authentic”. In this sense, “invented” refers to how the tradition was created, not whether it deserves to be followed or discarded. Further, as argued below, in the case of Christmas, when there is conflict surrounding a tradition, benefit can be gained from stripping it of its misattributed infallible authority and viewing it from a multi-dimensional angle. Such an act will ultimately help to reveal the diverse nature of Christmas and the holiday’s consequent capacity to motivate the negotiation of classificatory boundaries within itself and modern society. Due to this resulting compromising capacity, the perspective of invention has the potential to be highly beneficial.

However, similar to Johnson, Paul Post writes that, regardless of whether it was Hobsbawm’s original intent, the concept of invented tradition has acquired a “rather pejorative context.”⁴² Associated with it are the ideas of artificially developed myths, falsification of history, and plotted manipulation. While he writes persuasively, Post does not discard Hobsbawm’s theory and in fact proposes its use within cultural, theological, and liturgical studies.⁴³ Overall, one should keep in mind that since “invention” can mean simply to create something new and not necessarily to falsify, the term does not need to trigger discourses of

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Paul Post, “The Creation of Tradition: Rereading and Reading Beyond Hobsbawm,” in *Religious Identity and The Invention of Tradition: Papers Read at a NOSTER Conference in Soesterberg, January 4-6, 1999*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Anton Houtepen (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2001), http://books.google.ca/books?id=rP0x4bq23M4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=Religious+Identity+and+The+Invention+of+Tradition:+Papers+Read+at+a+NOSTER+Conference+in+Soesterberg,+January+4-6,+1999&hl=en&sa=X&ei=ibv0T8zjGcW1rQH_qLHBAw&ved=0CDYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Religious%20Identity%20and%20The%20Invention%20of%20Tradition%3A%20Papers%20Read%20at%20a%20NOSTER%20Conference%20in%20Soesterberg%2C%20January%204-6%2C%201999&f=false (accessed March 24, 2012), 44.

⁴³ Ibid., 56.

inauthenticity, and that the theory of invented tradition's strength lies in its very ability to view tradition and its development differently, even if – or particularly since – it involves the removal of an implemented illusion.

According to Restad in the introduction to her history of Christmas, the principal problem with Hobsbawm's theory is that "[i]nvention is a helpful but too singular and static a word to encompass and explain the American Christmas."⁴⁴ Hobsbawm, however, characterizes invented traditions as a process.⁴⁵ In conjunction with his definition of invented traditions, the process is one of formalization and ritualization, and one that involves references to the past.⁴⁶ Restad, it would seem, is misguided in assuming that invention is necessarily stagnant and does not involve development and transition. Neil Armstrong similarly concludes that the theory of invented traditions is too limited to explain fully the modern Christmas and its greater significance.⁴⁷ Since the purpose of this paper, however, is to analyse how the holiday's invented nature can illuminate contemporary Christmas controversies, and not explain the entire phenomenon of Christmas, a focused approach to the investigation is not detrimental. Moreover, while the theory of invented traditions provides a restricted lens through which to examine tradition, it is nonetheless able to reveal tradition as multi-dimensional due to its capacity to remove notions of infallibility or standardization. As a result, Hobsbawm's theory is enlightening and useful.

A Valuable and Sophisticated Approach

Both Hobsbawm's theory and invented traditions as a whole must not be overlooked. Invented traditions provide an intriguing point of study due to the fact that they are paradoxical

⁴⁴ Restad, *Christmas in America*, viii.

⁴⁵ One may observe the similarity between Hobsbawm's perception of invented traditions as a process and Russell McCutcheon's reconceptualization of the notion myth as an ongoing process of mythmaking in "Myth," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Continuum, 2000), 193-198.

⁴⁶ Hobsbawm, "Introduction", 4.

⁴⁷ Neil Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 16.

because they are innovative while also attempting to be invariant. As Hobsbawm writes, “It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant that makes the ‘invention of tradition’ so interesting for historians of the past two centuries.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, Hobsbawm argues that there are two main benefits historians can gain from the study of invented traditions. First of all, “it may be suggested that they are important symptoms and therefore indicators of problems which might not otherwise be recognized and developments which are otherwise difficult to identify and to date. They are evidence.”⁴⁹ Invented traditions lead one to ask what was lacking – or present – that caused a particular invented tradition to arise. Hobsbawm provides the example of the history of the British cup finals as indicative of the development of an urban working-class culture. In this way, the study of invented traditions can offer insights that more conventional data do not.⁵⁰ This subsequently means, however, that the study of invented tradition cannot be separated from the larger historic context if it is to succeed beyond a basic discovery of an invention. The second benefit to the study of invented tradition that Hobsbawm provides is that invented tradition “throws considerable light on the human relation to the past, and therefore on the historian’s own subject and craft.”⁵¹ In this way, the study of invented traditions is useful in understanding the traditions themselves but also *how* history is shaped and perceived. In this way, the perspective of invention when examining tradition is both fascinating and beneficial.

Indeed, Hobsbawm’s theory of invented tradition provides an informative, sophisticated, and distinctive lens through which to view tradition. As this analysis demonstrates, his theory

⁴⁸ Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

can be advanced beyond its initial definition, and through it traditions can be revealed as complex and diverse creations. They can be temporarily removed from their authoritative pedestal and subsequently be explored from a critical perspective. While his theory is not foreign to historical accounts of Christmas, the underdeveloped analyses of Hobsbawm's theory within such works has led to an absence of a consistent and thorough account of the invention of Christmas and its meaning. Such an account is the purpose of the following sections.

CHAPTER TWO: FROM DEBAUCHERY TO DOMESTICITY

The celebration of Christmas with all its feelings of warmth, joy, and festive cheer has a certain aura of timelessness; holiday rituals seem to freeze the passing of time as they are repeated each year in the same way. This image of peaceful constancy, however, is a mirage. In reality, Christmas was not celebrated until three centuries after Jesus' death and was done so in an overwhelmingly drunken, violent fashion. Furthermore, the current version of Christmas – the custom that involves gift giving, Christmas trees, and Santa Claus – did not originate until the nineteenth century. In this way, Christmas' long “traditional” history reaching back as far as the happy scene of Mary, Joseph, and the baby in the manger is a fabrication. Indeed, it is such reasons that Christmas falls within the category of invented traditions as outlined in the previous segment. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate that Christmas is an invented tradition, but it also examines how Christmas was invented. In this investigation, I consider both Christmas' initial invention and its reinvention during the modern period.⁵² While institutionalization, Christianization, domestication, and commercialization played important roles in how Christmas was invented, I argue that at base the process can be characterized by the blending of Christian, pagan, and secular elements.⁵³

The Initial Invention

To begin, the Bible contains very little information pertaining to the birth of Jesus. Out of the four gospels, only Matthew and Luke provide nativity stories. Neither of these brief accounts, however, indicates the date of Jesus' birth nor suggests a celebration in commemoration. Accordingly, early Christians paid little attention to the birth of Jesus. As

⁵² The section pertaining to the modern invention of Christmas will be notably longer than that of the initial invention. This is due to Hobsbawm's focus on modern invented traditions, as well as the modern period's more direct connection to the contemporary Christmas controversies.

⁵³ While one must recognize that the terms “pagan”, “Christian”, and “secular” are constructed, it is necessary to employ them in order to advance discussion.

Jennifer Rycenga concludes, “All sources agree that the celebration of Christmas was not central to the earliest centuries of Christianity.”⁵⁴ However, by 336, Christmas was being celebrated on December 25 in Rome, according to the earliest known records.⁵⁵ There were additional dates that had previously been pinpointed as the day of Jesus’ birth; they varied from April 19 to May 20 to November 18, but none of these dates were officially selected.⁵⁶ After three hundred years of non-adherence, there are, nevertheless, distinct reasons why Christmas became a celebration and why December 25 was chosen as the date.

An investigation of Roman customs provides important insight in this regard. During the fourth century, there were several pagan winter festivals that greatly influenced the creation and celebration of Christmas. First of all, there was Kalends, the Roman New Year held on January 1. The festival involved the giving of gifts, decorating houses with greenery and lights, and unabashed drinking and gambling.⁵⁷ The second influential festival was Saturnalia, celebrated from December 17 to December 23 in honour of Saturn, the Roman sun god who oversaw agricultural matters. The festivities were very similar to those of Kalends, though the celebration also notably featured a Mock King, an opportunity for a man of any social standing to temporarily become king and preside over the occasion.⁵⁸ Between these two festivals there was a third celebrated on December 25: Dies Solis Invicti Nati.⁵⁹ The festival celebrated the birthday of Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun, and belonged to the religion of Mithraism, which was

⁵⁴ Jennifer Rycenga, “Religious Controversies over Christmas,” in *Christmas, Ideology, and Popular Culture*, ed. Shelia Whitely (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 78.

⁵⁵ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 4; David Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens* (New York: AMS Press, 2005), 21; Forbes, *A Candid History*, 26.

⁵⁶ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 4.

⁵⁷ Clement A. Miles, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition, Christian and Pagan* (Toronto: Bell & Cockburn, 1912), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19098/19098-h/19098-h.htm#Chapter_VI (accessed June 6, 2012), 168.

⁵⁸ Forbes, *A Candid History*, 7-9.

⁵⁹ The festival seems to have a variety of names, including Dies Natalis Invicti, Natalis Solis Invicti, and Natalis Invicti.

competing with Christianity for followers at the time.⁶⁰ Thus, in an effort to contend with pagan religions and their enticing festivals, and perhaps to regulate such decadent festivities, church officials selected and institutionalized December 25 as the date of Christmas. The birthday of the Sun became the birthday of the Son. Christians started to celebrate the birth of Jesus for the first time. As John Storey writes, “[T]he fixing of the Nativity by the Roman state was as much a political act as a theological one.”⁶¹ Christmas was implemented as a strategic political-religious move designed to gain power within the pagan world.

In exchange for converts, however, the Church paid a high price. Pagans became Christians, but the nature of their winter festivals remained the same.⁶² Christmas in its youth was granted the occasion by Christianity, but was overwhelmingly pagan in practice. One can even notice the similarities between the pagan winter festivals described above and the popularized version of Christmas known today; both involve greenery, lights, gift-giving, and partying. Such pagan elements have lasted throughout the course of the holiday’s history. As Clement A. Miles writes, Christmas practices were not being perverted but rather “the Christian symbolism was merely a gloss upon pagan practices.”⁶³ The profane was given a sacred veneer. In this way, the Christian holiday of Christmas was fused and blended with pagan elements from the time of its conception. The initial holiday was, in effect, invented through the mixing of Christianity and paganism.

However, it is important to note that this manner of celebration did not fail to generate objections. Gregory Nazianzen (329-389) is often cited for his protest against the disgraceful nature of the celebration; “[K]eep the Feast, not after the manner of a heathen festival, but after a

⁶⁰ John Storey, “The Invention of the English Christmas,” in *Christmas, Ideology, and Popular Culture*, ed. Shelia Whitely (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶² Restad, *Christmas in America*, 5.

⁶³ Miles, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*, 183.

godly sort; not after the way of the world, but in a fashion above the world.”⁶⁴ The saint’s concern unmistakably resembles contemporary Christmas complaints, as discussed below.

As Christianity spread to Northern Europe, the Christmas celebration continued to combine with pagan aspects, most notably from the festival of Yule. Indeed, “throughout England by 900, ‘Yule,’ the Anglo-Saxon name for the winter solstice season, had become synonymous with Christmas.”⁶⁵ This process of amalgamation is reflected in correspondence between Gregory the Great and Augustine of Canterbury in the sixth century. A letter from Gregory indicates that the Church used a policy of adoption in their proselytizing of Britain, writing that, in regards to festivals, converts “are no longer to sacrifice beasts to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the praises of God.”⁶⁶ Thus, through a process of incorporation, Christmas continued to absorb local pagan practices as it migrated from its place of origin.

Consequently, in terms of Hobsbawm’s theory of invented tradition, the initial celebration of Christmas can be classified as invented in light of the way in which the holiday was suddenly institutionalized as a means to compete with and control pagan activities. The celebration of Christmas, that is, became an official tradition despite the fact that it had not been celebrated in the past, and certainly not since the birth of Jesus. In this way, Christmas was a new tradition that had to fabricate an artificial link to the past, therefore rendering it invented. The holiday exemplifies Hobsbawm’s first type of invented traditions – those that are “actually invented, constructed and formally instituted” – and it was implemented for explicit purposes, another key characteristic of invented traditions. As Olav Hammer and James Lewis suggest, the

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Rycenga, “Religious Controversies”, 78.

⁶⁵ Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens*, 22.

⁶⁶ Qtd. in Rycenga, “Religious Controversies”, 79.

invention of sacred tradition is a consistent theme within religious history.⁶⁷ Christmas, as the evidence suggests, is a prime example.

The Pre-modern Christmas

Not only is the initial celebration of Christmas invented, the modern form of the holiday is also a distinct reinvention. Before the modern version of Christmas can be examined, it is first necessary to contrast the holiday with its previous forms. Indeed, Christmas in the middle ages was overwhelmingly a chaotic and rowdy affair.⁶⁸ Even as Midnight Mass was taking place⁶⁹ and Christmas hymns were being written,⁷⁰ religious Christmas customs such as the Boy Bishop, for example, helped to transform the holiday into a carnival scene. The Boy Bishop was “a choir-boy chosen by the lads themselves, who was vested in cope and mitre, held a pastoral staff, and gave the benediction.”⁷¹ He was, in other words, a boy dressed up as a bishop. One can note the similarities between this practice and that of Saturnalia’s Mock King; in both cases a person of low social standing is elevated to a position of temporary festal authority. Furthermore, the practice of selecting a Boy Bishop is related to the Feast of Fools, a profane celebration involving costumes and feasting that was enjoyed by the clergy of all classes at Christmastime. As Miles writes, “[T]he Feast of Fools may be regarded as a recoil of paganism upon Christianity in its very sanctuary.”⁷² Christmas, even within church walls, was an occasion for inverted behaviour.

Similarities can also be drawn between these religious Christmas customs and the secular practice of the Lord of Misrule. David Parker describes the Lord of Misrule as “an anarchic

⁶⁷ Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis, “Introduction,” in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

⁶⁸ Most of the following examples pertain to Britain rather than other European countries due to its direct influence on the United States, the focus of this paper.

⁶⁹ Miles, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*, 95.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 304-306.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 303.

alternative ‘master,’ set to preside over the establishment in order to organize the revels, and to precipitate as much folly and indignity as possible.”⁷³ The link between the Boy Bishop and the Mock King, and the Lord of Misrule is again pronounced. In the case of the Lord of Misrule, an ordinary man became the licenser of unlicensed Christmas revelry.

In addition to such customs, Christmas was celebrated by extravagant feasting and raucous entertainment. Parker, in his overview of Christmas in England, lists at length the foods and their quantities that were divulged in during the holiday season; pies, rabbit, mutton, almonds, and the customary boar’s head graced the tables as wealthy lords opened their doors to host their servants and the poor during the Christmas festivities.⁷⁴ Wassailing was also a common Christmas activity; “Guarded against disappointment by a bowl they carried with them, filled with hot ale and roasted apples..., wassailers went around their neighbourhood, singing Christmas songs, and asking for money, food, and drink.”⁷⁵ Unlike the carolers known today, wassailers were loud and forceful in their drunken festivities. Another popular custom similar to wassailing was mumming. Mummers would disguise themselves in exotic costumes (or by cross-dressing) and then travel door to door performing short rude skits, often demanding money in exchange.⁷⁶ Nathan Boughton Warren, in his work entitled *Christmas in the Olden Time*, writes that mumming became a punishable offense during the reign of King Henry VIII due to all the crimes that had been committed under the guise of mummers’ costumes and activities.⁷⁷ Furthermore, as Parker writes, “From the later middle ages through to the eighteenth century, evidence shows, Christmas revelry was prone to degenerate into mob disorder.”⁷⁸ Even more

⁷³ Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens*, 31.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁶ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 10.

⁷⁷ Nathan Boughton Warren, *Christmas in the Olden Time, Its Customs and Their Origins*, (London: James Pattle and George Glaisher, 1859), 43.

⁷⁸ Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens*, 44.

shocking are the pre-Renaissance accounts of rape and murder that sometimes arose as a result of Christmas celebrations.⁷⁹ The pre-modern Christmas was overall an occasion for unrestricted revelry and rowdy behaviour, sometimes escalating to the point of criminality.

As settlers crossed the Atlantic, Christmas customs such as wassailing and mumming continued. Early Americans, however, did add some of their own seasonal activities to the holiday. For example, in the south, it was a common (and occasionally dangerous) custom to fire-off firearms at Christmastime.⁸⁰ Other noisy activities and alcohol also tended to accompany the shooting. Overall, however, the festive occasion of unruly and licentious behaviour remained the same. The holiday experienced such incidents as large bands of people invading wealthy neighbourhoods⁸¹ to increased sexual activity among unmarried couples.⁸² In the words of sixteenth-century bishop Hugh Latimer, “Men dishonour Christ more in the twelve days of Christmas, than in all the twelve months besides,”⁸³ succinctly capturing the rowdy nature of the festival. In this manner, Christmas, prior to its modern reinvention, was far from the domestic occasion it is known as today.

Puritan Opposition

The celebration of Christmas, however, suffered major decline with the rise of Puritan opposition to the holiday in England. Puritans objected to Christmas for two main reasons. First, they thought Christmas was un-Christian; it was perceived as rooted in paganism and was simply an invention of the Roman Catholic Church without any Biblical warrant. Secondly, they viewed Christmas as an occasion that was rank with immoral behaviour, including drinking,

⁷⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Father Christmas Executed,” in *Unwrapping Christmas*, ed. Daniel Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47.

⁸⁰ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 36-37.

⁸¹ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family Rituals*, 48.

⁸² Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 22.

⁸³ Qtd. in Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 7.

gambling, and over-indulgence.⁸⁴ Consequently, legal action was taken in order to subdue the festivity. Under Oliver Cromwell's government, Christmas was banned by an Act of Parliament on July 3, 1647.⁸⁵ Five years later, Parliament proclaimed again that "no observance shall be had on the five and twentieth of December, commonly called Christmas day; nor any solemnity used or exercised in churches upon that day in respect thereof."⁸⁶ Previously, in 1642, seasonal plays had been outlawed, and from 1644 to 1656 the parliament made a deliberate point of meeting on Christmas Day. Shops were mandated to stay open on December 25, as well.⁸⁷ Christmas was being suppressed in "merrie olde England". The celebration was not made legal again until the fall of Cromwell's government in 1660.⁸⁸

In New England, the holiday was similarly repressed. Christmas was viewed as a day of work, not as a religious occasion and certainly not as a time for leisure. In 1659, the celebration was banned by the Puritans of Massachusetts who declared that anybody "found observing, by abstinence from work, feasting, or any other way" the holiday of Christmas would be fined five shillings.⁸⁹ Similarly, in Connecticut both Christmas and mince pies were banned. As late as 1870, schools remained open on December 25 in Boston.⁹⁰ In this way, Christmas did not begin its celebration in the United States as a widespread and welcomed custom. However, it is after this period of Puritan opposition to the holiday that Christmas was revived and transformed into its modern reinvented form.

⁸⁴ Forbes, *A Candid History*, 56.

⁸⁵ Storey, "The Invention of the English Christmas", 19.

⁸⁶ Qtd. in Storey, "The Invention of the English Christmas", 19.

⁸⁷ Forbes, *A Candid History*, 57.

⁸⁸ Storey, "The Invention of the English Christmas", 19.

⁸⁹ Leslie Bella, *The Christmas Imperative* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1992), 65.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

The Modern Reinvention of Christmas

The domestic Christmas centered on customs of gift-giving, Christmas trees, family reunions, and church services – the Christmas that is often perceived as having remained fundamentally the same despite growing influences of commercialization – this holiday is in fact a recent creation. As William B. Waits writes, “Most Americans believe that our way of celebrating Christmas is old, that we have observed the Yule season in essentially the same way for centuries...[However], our current form of celebrating is not very old, dating only from about 1880.”⁹¹ Restad similarly pinpoints the birth of the modern form of Christmas; she writes, “By the 1880s Americans had reinvented Christmas.”⁹² Thus, relatively speaking, the modern version of the celebration is young; it has existed for less than a tenth of the holiday’s history, beginning only in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, a glance at the dates surrounding modern Christmas traditions demonstrates how recent the holiday is overall. The following examples pertain to the American context, as does the rest of this section, for the reason that, as Russell W. Belk indicates, America “has become an arbiter of Christmas celebrations around the world.”⁹³ The United States most notably gave birth to Santa Claus who was given life in 1822 when Clement Clarke Moore wrote the widely popular poem “A Visit From Saint Nicholas”.⁹⁴ While the custom of giving gifts was originally associated with the later winter holiday of New Year’s, in New York by the 1820s the Christmas bazaar had begun⁹⁵ and by the 1830s advertisements exclusively for Christmas gifts were already appearing.⁹⁶ Christmas trees similarly started to become popular in the United States in the

⁹¹ William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), xv.

⁹² Restad, *Christmas in America*, 105.

⁹³ Russell W. Belk, “Materialism and the Making of the Modern American Christmas,” in *Unwrapping Christmas*, ed. Daniel Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 75.

⁹⁴ Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 72.

⁹⁵ Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 126.

⁹⁶ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 53.

1830s.⁹⁷ However, it was not until June 26 1870 that Christmas became a federal holiday in the United States.⁹⁸ That year Christmas also became a lesson topic in the publications of the American Sunday School Union founded in 1824.⁹⁹ By 1880, the holiday had become a complete reinvention.

Overall, this modern reinvention was the result of processes of Christianization, domestication, and commercialization. As Schmidt writes, the holiday was “recast in the crucibles of middle-class consumption, religion, and family life.”¹⁰⁰ In terms of Christianization, the holiday was slowly adopted among a growing number of Christian sects. While the Puritan influence was effective in stifling religious participation in Christmas, by the end of the eighteenth century Baptists and Calvinists – Puritan descendants – were drawn to the holiday.¹⁰¹ According to Schmidt, “The growing alignment of evangelical Protestants behind the modern Christmas was integral to the holiday’s cultural ascent.”¹⁰² Subsequently Christmas church services started to be actively promoted, and beginning in the 1840s there was a large increase in religious Christmas music.¹⁰³ As Schmidt concludes, “The process of sacralisation always remained incomplete, but by the end of the nineteenth century Christmas had come to stand out as a major religious event in American culture.”¹⁰⁴ Thus Christmas, due to growing religious acceptance, became increasingly more Christian.

In its transformation, however, the holiday was also subjected to secular influences. Christmas became a domestic occasion where families – whether religious or not – became the

⁹⁷ Karal Anne Marling, *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America’s Greatest Holiday* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 161.

⁹⁸ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 104.

⁹⁹ James H. Barnett, *The American Christmas* (New York: The Macmillan Company: 1954), 7.

¹⁰⁰ Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 108.

¹⁰¹ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 30-31.

¹⁰² Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 121.

¹⁰³ Christmas music as a whole played an important role in shaping the holiday. *Christmas, Ideology, and Popular Culture* edited by Shelia Whitely contains several essays on this topic.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

reason for the season. One principle way the holiday became domestic was through periodical publications. Leslie Bella in her study of Christmas argues that men and women alike were instructed through periodicals on how to celebrate Christmas in a family-centered manner.¹⁰⁵ Women were coached on how to express seasonal sentiments, cook popular festive dishes, and decorate the home. Men were instructed on how to erect the Christmas tree and set up the seasonal lights.¹⁰⁶ The periodicals painted images of the perfect family occasion, images that were idealized by and for their readers. In setting popular Christmas trends and actively promoting holiday customs, these publications helped to reinvent the celebration as a domestic occasion. By 1868, *Harper's*, a popular magazine, claimed that Christmas was predominately a home-festival.¹⁰⁷

The literature of Charles Dickens was also notably important in giving rise to the modern domestic Christmas. Dickens was influenced by Washington Irving, whose work *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* is known for its popular depiction of an “old-fashioned” English Christmas full of hospitality and nostalgia. Dickens’ *Sketches by Boz* and *The Pickwick Papers* contain similar imagery, but with the publication of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, the face of Christmas drastically changed.¹⁰⁸ Dickens’ depiction of Christmas in the Cratchit household transcribes “a universal, perfect model family Christmas. Kindness, generosity, reconciliation, and cheerfulness are all central.”¹⁰⁹ At the tip of Dickens’ pen, families, rich or poor, came together to celebrate each other’s company. Furthermore, his illustration of Christmas charity in

¹⁰⁵ The argument of Bella’s work *The Christmas Imperative*, however, is that there is an imperative on women to recreate Christmas each year. Her overall focus on men’s roles is limited.

¹⁰⁶ Bella, *The Christmas Imperative*, 106.

¹⁰⁷ Marling, *Merry Christmas!*, 302.

¹⁰⁸ Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is subject to extensive scholarly interpretation. While one cannot examine the modern Christmas without considering Dickens’ contribution, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete analysis of his Christmas works. For more information see Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens*.

¹⁰⁹ Bella, *The Christmas Imperative*, 81.

A Christmas Carol transformed the celebration into a humanitarian occasion.¹¹⁰ His story of Ebenezer Scrooge and Bob Cratchit inspired readers to close their businesses on Christmas Day or give charitable gifts to poor children and their families during the Christmas season.¹¹¹ In this way, Dickens' "Carol Philosophy", as it is often called, also helped to cast Christmas as a sentimental occasion to be spent with family. Overall, as Parker concludes, Dickens "was responsible for adapting the way we think of it [Christmas] to changes in sensibility that yielded the modern era. He left so distinct a mark upon the festival, moreover, that he can never be far from our modern understanding of it."¹¹² Thus, periodicals and the literature of Charles Dickens instructed and inspired readers to create a domestic holiday setting, consequently aiding in the creation of a home-based festival.

In conjunction with the domestication of the holiday, Christmas also underwent a process of commercialization. As Nissenbaum writes, "Making Christmas an indoor family affair meant enmeshing it in the commercial marketplace."¹¹³ That is, prior to the domestication of Christmas, gifts of food and drink were given during the season in the form of hospitality, but as a family occasion, it no longer made sense to give such gifts to people with whom one lived. Thus, celebrants started going to the market for presents, consequently commercializing and advancing the reinvention of the holiday. As Storey indicates, "What the new urban middle class invented was a Christmas with a firm emphasis on commercialism."¹¹⁴ Additionally, such

¹¹⁰ Barnett, *The American Christmas*, 14-15.

¹¹¹ Storey, "The Invention of the English Christmas", 24-25.

¹¹² Parker, *Christmas and Charles Dickens*, xii. While Parker argues that Christmas was not invented by Dickens because the holiday already existed and was popular despite Puritan opposition, he does advocate that the writer significantly transformed the holiday. In terms of Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions, it does not matter that Dickens did not revive Christmas; the point, rather, is that he helped to create something sufficiently new, which subsequently resulted in a break in the tradition's continuity thus contributing to its (re)invention.

¹¹³ Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 132.

¹¹⁴ Storey, "The Invention of the English Christmas", 22.

commercialism notably contributed further to the secularization of the holiday; secular aspects of shopping, advertisements, and gift-giving became intertwined within the celebration.

Additionally, Christmas became an occasion for giving gifts because the custom of gift-giving originally associated with New Year's migrated to the celebration of Christmas.

Elizabeth Pleck suggests that gift-giving was moved from New Year's to Christmas in order to don importance on a religious rather than secular holiday, though she does not divulge further details.¹¹⁵ Schmidt suggests a more general and convincing explanation; overall, holiday festivities flowed together but were subsequently condensed for reasons of simplicity, thus leaving the growing holiday of Christmas with the custom of gift-giving.¹¹⁶ Regardless, Christmas came to be associated with the giving of gifts and as the festival became increasingly domestic, people turned to stores and market places to fulfill their gifting needs.

Furthermore, the commercialization of Christmas was embraced by Christian organizations, which aided the overall process. As Schmidt writes, "[T]he churches were drawn into the new commercial Christmas, and their embrace of the consumer-oriented version of the feast was hardly unwitting or half-hearted: The churches often happily participated in the construction of the Christmas bazaar."¹¹⁷ Santa Claus, for example, would visit Sunday schools to hand out gifts to the young students. Additionally, Protestantism maintained the view that financial success was an indicator of faith, and therefore, that commerce and the accumulation of wealth were desirable. This view contributed to people's willingness to buy Christmas gifts, subsequently escalating the holiday market.¹¹⁸ That is not to say that there were no Christian-based objections to the commercialization of the holiday; as the Puritan opposition to the holiday

¹¹⁵ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 48. In comparison to New Year's Christmas would have been perceived as a more religious occasion.

¹¹⁶ Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 123.

¹¹⁷ Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 176.

¹¹⁸ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 73.

indicates, for example, the celebration had long been subjected to Christian criticism. The point, rather, is that due to a growing Christian acceptance of Christmas and its commercialization, the holiday was given increased opportunity to assume its modern commercialized form.

Not only did the commercialization of Christmas gain acceptance among Christian organizations, people in general embraced the consumer culture of the holiday. As Nissenbaum argues, celebrants were not mere victims of capitalism; the commercial Christmas may have been pushed on them by stores and advertisements, but it was also approved by the holiday shoppers.¹¹⁹ Waits, in his detailed analysis of Christmas gift-giving, argues that holiday shopping and spending underwent active reforms. Celebrants, for example, made the conscious switch to giving Christmas cards to distant friends and associates rather than buying cheap presents called gimcracks. In light of such reforms, Waits similarly argues that Christmas did not move “steadily beyond the power of celebrants to control it.”¹²⁰ Thus, the commercial aspects of Christmas were actively embraced, which subsequently aided in its transformation into the modern commercialized holiday.

In this way, Christmas was reinvented through processes of Christianization, domestication, and commercialization. Christmas was increasingly adopted by Christian organizations, subsequently giving it new religious meaning. However, as Schmidt writes, “[E]ven as it had been sacralised, Christmas had been secularized.”¹²¹ Alongside the Christianization of the holiday, December 25 also became a domestic and commercial occasion. Family and gift-giving became central components of the holiday, consequently removing the necessity of religious participation. Christmas had assumed a new form.

¹¹⁹ Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 155. Nissenbaum argues this point in his analysis of an American family’s diaries and letters concerning Christmas.

¹²⁰ Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America*, 79.

¹²¹ Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 188.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that Christmas' reinvention was the result of particular motivations and incentives. First and foremost, there was cause to transform the holiday into a controlled occasion. As a glance at the pre-modern Christmas celebrations indicates, Christmas was a festival of the streets and holiday customs often involved drinking, crime, and trespassing on wealthy properties. Furthermore, as a time of low employment due to the winter weather, such activities began to take shape as a form of social protest.¹²² Thus there was incentive, particularly on the part of the upper classes, to reform the holiday out of basic concerns for security. Indeed, Nissenbaum concludes that "the domestic reform of Christmas was an enterprise of patricians, fearful for their authority."¹²³ He frames his extensive argument within an analysis of Santa Claus who, as a friendly plebeian man that delivers gifts to homes in an unobtrusive manner, was created to symbolize and help restore the old symbiotic relationship between the rich and the poor. Storey presents a similar argument but through the lens of Christmas charity. Charity, he writes, does not supersede the need to provide such donations and therefore, the modern invention of a charitable Christmas was intended to help maintain and represent traditional feudal power relations where the poor rely upon the rich.¹²⁴ In this way, the recasting of Christmas as a domestic occasion was intended to restore the ostensibly peaceful class relations of the past and transform the holiday into a safe celebration.

Christmas was also reinvented due to changing views of children and childhood. As birth rates decreased among middle class families, giving birth and raising children gained new significance, as did, consequently, Jesus' birth itself, which, unlike his resurrection, was an accessible experience.¹²⁵ Children were seen as deserving honour, like Christ himself.

¹²² Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 52.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹²⁴ Storey, "The Invention of the English Christmas", 24-30.

¹²⁵ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 43.

Furthermore, in accordance with the developing Victorian conception of the innocence of children, young ones were reconceptualised as less of an economic asset and more of a repository of virtues that adults had abandoned in their stressful responsibilities and routines.¹²⁶ Thus, Christmas, as the celebration of the birth of Christ, was seen as an occasion to embody and celebrate the Victorian view of children, consequently subjecting it to domestic and commercial reform. As Pleck writes, “There was no better way to reward precious children than to give them special treats at Christmas.”¹²⁷ Christmas, as a result, became the modern domestic and commercial holiday it is known as today to correspond with the created image of innocent, deserving children.

Another contributing reason for the reinvention of Christmas was the desire to counter meaningless commercialism, which, somewhat ironically, contributed to the commercialization of Christmas. Modern Christmas’ Santa Claus, for example, despite the fact that he inhabited department stores and delivered lavish gifts, served to disassociate Christmas with commercialism due to the way in which the mythic figure caused gifts to appear in homes without the exchange of money or shopping.¹²⁸ In this way, Santa Claus helped to transform the commercial act of giving of gifts into a childhood miracle. Furthermore, as Christmas started to become a child-oriented, domestic festival, the giving of gifts was increasingly instilled with sentimental value, rendering a commercial practice a sign of familial affection.¹²⁹ In both these cases, however, commercialism was of course promoted. Nonetheless, the framing of modern Christmas as a sentimental celebration and an occasion of meaningful commercial interactions was central to its modern reinvention.

¹²⁶ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 47.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 56.

¹²⁹ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 51-53.

For these reasons, Christmas was remade as a Christian, domestic, and commercial celebration. Ambitions to reform class relations, embrace new views of childhood, and counter meaningless commercialism initiated and molded the reworking of the holiday. However, the intricacies of its transformative process are not easily separated from the similarly interrelated reasons for its reinvention; the creation of the modern form of Christmas was dynamic and involved many connecting factors that all contributed to the final product. My investigation here is designed to provide a succinct examination of the most important elements pertaining to the reinvention of the holiday.

Furthermore, thus far it has been argued that Christmas underwent processes of change that resulted in the modern form of the holiday, but the modern celebration of Christmas also explicitly constitutes an invented tradition as outlined by Hobsbawm. First of all, the modern Christmas broke with past continuity. As Miller indicates, there is an emphasis in scholarly writing on a break in the mid-nineteenth century between previous versions of Christmas and the current version of the holiday.¹³⁰ Moreover, as John R. Gillis writes, in terms of Christmas, “Ironically, both sides of the Atlantic broke with the past in the name of tradition.”¹³¹ That is, even though the modern Christmas fragmented past continuity, it did so under the guise of an old-fashioned holiday, as is characteristic of Hobsbawm’s invented traditions. As Lévi-Strauss further suggests, there is an archaic feeling surrounding Christmas that juxtaposes – and offsets, one might add – the modern origin of the celebration.¹³² Indeed, the festival, even a few short years after its modern birth, was imbued with an aura of timelessness, an impression that was reinforced by writers who searched for the origins of the national holiday.¹³³ In this way, the

¹³⁰ Miller, “A Theory of Christmas”, 3.

¹³¹ John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basic Books, 1996), 102.

¹³² Lévi-Strauss, “Father Christmas Executed”, 41.

¹³³ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 106.

modern reinvention of Christmas falls squarely within Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions: modern Christmas fabricates a sense of historical continuity as it pretends to be old despite its recent origins.

Additionally, in terms of Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions, one may note that the modern form of Christmas constitutes Hobsbawm's second type: those "emerging...within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity." As Pleck writes, the key holiday customs of the Christmas tree, Santa Claus, Christmas card etc. "were quickly defined as tradition...in the United States[,] old-fashioned Christmas on the family farm."¹³⁴ Within a short period in the 1800s, the modern form of Christmas was created and subsequently designated as tradition. Furthermore, as the efforts to adapt to class struggles, Victorian views, and commercialism indicate, Christmas was reinvented for specific purposes, a requirement of Hobsbawm's theory; invented tradition would not come into existence without a reason. Lastly, one may note that the modern form of Christmas involves all three types of invented traditions that Hobsbawm identifies as having occurred since the Industrial Revolution.¹³⁵ The holiday was created in part to foster social cohesion between the rich and poor, but also to legitimize traditional authority. Moreover, the celebration was intended to regulate behaviour and enforce Christian, domestic, and commercial values.

In applying Hobsbawm's theory, it is clear that the holiday was suddenly invented first in the fourth century and then reinvented in the nineteenth. In terms of the modern Christmas, the celebration assumed a new identity as a family occasion but with the fabricated appearance of an old-fashioned holiday, which served to conceal its recent and therefore non-traditional origins. Furthermore, from this investigation it can be discerned that the holiday was invented at base

¹³⁴ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 46-47.

¹³⁵ Refer to pages 5 and 6 for Hobsbawm's categories of modern invented traditions.

through a process that combined pagan, Christian, and secular elements. The initial celebration openly blended pagan modes of celebrating winter holidays with Christian meaning. The pagan roots of the holiday still thrive today in the form of Christmas greenery, lighting, and feasting. With the less raucous, modern reinvention of Christmas, the celebration continually and increasingly fostered Christian significance. At the same time, however, the holiday adopted secular elements and meaning; as it was transformed into a domestic and commercial occasion, Christmas became a festival that expanded beyond the necessity of Christian belief and reached far into the profane realm of shopping and advertisements. In this way, the building blocks of Christmas are fundamentally pagan, Christian, and secular. The invention of Christmas extracted elements from each ideological sphere resulting in an elaborate holiday concoction. This blending of pagan, Christian, and secular components is further demonstrated by an analysis of contemporary Christmas controversies, as is the topic of the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: CONTROVERSY IS COMING TO TOWN

Christmas is the site of passionate discourse. In the eyes of the author of the Bible Truth Ministry on the Internet, Christmas has become corrupted; he writes, “Don't abandon Christmas and don't be overcome with the evils of its abuse...Look at Christmas as an opportunity to EXALT CHRIST.”¹³⁶ From the perspective of one Catholic mother, Christmas has been forsaken; “We're stampeding so hard to embrace every other religious holiday that we're trampling on our own traditions. God forbid if we asked Muslims to change Ramadan.”¹³⁷ Indeed, each year at Christmastime heated controversies over how the holiday should be celebrated arise. People question, for example, whether Christmas decorations should be displayed in public, or how to counter the incessant commercialism, or whether is it appropriate to say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas”. The debates are extensive and complex. Through an examination of diverse contemporary issues associated with Christmas, it is clear that controversies concerning Christmas have erupted due to the ways in which the holiday blurs the expected boundaries between the Christian and the non-Christian, and between the religious and the secular. The blending of these categories can ultimately be traced back to how Christmas was invented and reinvented.

The Problem of Paganism

Seventeen hundred years after its creation, the involvement of pagan practices in the celebration of Christmas is still a point of contention from the perspective of some Christian sects. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses have taken an official stance against the Christmas celebration. One of their principal reasons for doing so is due to the overwhelmingly non-Christian nature of the holiday. Many Watch Tower articles accurately identify the pagan roots

¹³⁶ David L. Brown, “Christmas, What Makes It Important?” Bible Truth Ministry on the Internet, <http://www.btmi.org/Christmas/important.html> (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹³⁷ Dreher, “Christmas Bombing,” *National Review*, 31 December 2002.

of Christmas, noting that, since Jesus' birthdate is not indicated in the Bible, December 25 was chosen as the date for Christmas for the ulterior reason that such dating would generate the opportunity to Christianize the coinciding pagan festivals. These articles also correctly assert that pagan aspects were consequently absorbed and still exist within the contemporary celebration in the form of feasting and decorating.¹³⁸ One article responds to this widespread paganism by ardently posing the question: "Do you find it acceptable that a religious leader would give a seemingly Christian meaning to events and symbols whose roots go back to ancient paganism?"¹³⁹ Their objection, one may note, is parallel to that of the Puritans in the seventeenth century; Christmas lacks Biblical warrant and, in light of its roots and many of its current customs, the holiday is overwhelming pagan. Therefore, they argue, Christmas should not be participated in by Christians.

Some Evangelical and Roman Catholic groups similarly oppose the pagan elements of the holiday. In contrast to Jehovah's Witnesses, however, they propose not the abandonment of the celebration, but rather a movement to "Put Christ Back Into Christmas". Accordingly, while these Evangelical and Roman Catholic groups argue that contemporary Christmas is becoming overridden by non-Christian practices, the pagan elements of the holiday are overall viewed as ulterior to the true, Christ-centered meaning of Christmas. For example, according to an online article from the Bible Truth Ministry, the non-Christian holiday practices are not what make the celebration of Christmas important. The article recognizes Christmas' adoption of pagan festival dates and its mimicking of pagan traditions in media such as decorated trees but nonetheless

¹³⁸ Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "Christmas Customs, Are They Christian?" The Watch Tower, http://www.watchtower.org/e/20001215/article_01.htm (accessed February 8, 2012); Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "Has Christmas Lost Christ?" The Watch Tower, http://www.watchtower.org/e/19981215/article_01.htm (accessed February 8, 2012); Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "The Truth About Christmas," The Watch Tower, http://www.watchtower.org/e/201012/article_02.htm (accessed February 8, 2012).

¹³⁹ Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "Can A Pagan Holiday be Made Christian?" The Watch Tower, http://www.watchtower.org/e/20071215/article_01.htm (accessed February 8, 2012).

asserts that these are all irrelevant to Christmas because the holiday is first and foremost about Christ.¹⁴⁰ Another article from [christ4christmas.info](http://www.christ4christmas.info) assumes a more alarmist position, arguing that not only are these pagan practices irrelevant, they are also anti-Christ because they are explicitly pagan.¹⁴¹ Regardless of degree, however, the paganism of Christmas is a point of contention within the Evangelical and Roman Catholic response to contemporary Christmas.

As the history of the invention of Christmas indicates, the holiday inextricably involves Christian and pagan components. The contemporary Christian objections to the pagan elements of the holiday further testify to this fact, but also demonstrate that there is an expectation that Christian aspects can and should be separated from the pagan, non-Christian elements. Jehovah's Witnesses cast the holiday as openly pagan in nature but Evangelicals and Roman Catholics advocate that pagan practices must be removed and Christ put back into the celebration, thus restoring the holiday as a rightfully Christian occasion. In this way, the holiday's historical amalgamation of Christian and non-Christian aspects is reflected in contemporary contentions. Christmas is neither fully pagan nor fully Christian but there is desire to categorize it wholly nonetheless.

Commercial Corruption

The increasing influence of commercialism on the Christmas celebration additionally is a source of widespread contemporary complaint. Each year before the holiday, persistent advertising and pressures to find the perfect gift force people to navigate packed shopping malls and wait in long line-ups. The true meaning of the season, it is often argued, is being extinguished by such prevalent commercialism. Similar to issues of paganism, it is not uncommon for Christian groups to protest the commercial side of Christmas. For example,

¹⁴⁰ Brown, "What Makes It Important?" <http://www.btmi.org/Christmas/important.html>.

¹⁴¹ "Christ in Christmas," Get Christ Back Into Christmas, <http://www.christ4christmas.info/> (accessed March 30, 2012).

Jehovah's Witnesses condemn the holiday for the reason of its rampant commercialization and consumerist practices. Indeed, one Watch Tower article questions whether malls have become the new temples, demonstrating a concern that secular, commercial sites have become sacralised.¹⁴² Another article points out that even the explicitly religious nativity scenes displayed during Christmas have not escaped the clutches of big business.¹⁴³ Other Christian sects similarly oppose the commercialism of the holiday. In 1992, for example, a coalition of American Protestant and Catholic ministers firmly proclaimed, "We have seen the spirit of Christmas reduced to a carnival of mass marketing. Consumption has taken on an almost religious quality; malls have become the new shrines of worship. Massive and alluring advertising crusades have waged war on the essential meaning of the spiritual life, fostering the belief that the marketplace can fulfill our highest aspirations."¹⁴⁴ More recently, Pope Benedict XVI likewise protested the commercialization of Christmas in his 2011 Christmas Eve mass during which he urged people to "see through the superficial glitter of this season and to discover behind it the child in the stable in Bethlehem."¹⁴⁵ In this way, Christmas is depicted as being corrupted by the far-reaching influences of commercialism.

The protest against the commercialization of Christmas, however, is not restricted to Christian groups. People regardless of religious belief have expressed disapproval of the commercial Christmas. For example, from the perspective of economist Joel Waldfogel, Christmas gift-giving destroys economic value because gifts are consistently found unsatisfying by their recipients. If, for instance, a fifty dollar sweater is only seen as being worth forty dollars

¹⁴² Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "The Spirit of Christmas is Spreading, Why?" The Watch Tower. http://www.watchtower.org/e/201012/article_01.htm (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁴³ Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "Has Christmas Lost Christ?" http://www.watchtower.org/e/19981215/article_01.htm.

¹⁴⁴ Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 175.

¹⁴⁵ "Pope Benedict XVI Attacks Christmas Consumerism at Mass," *BBC*, 24 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16328318> (accessed June 12, 2012).

by its consumer, then the gift is no longer a fifty dollar sweater but one of lesser value. As a result, Waldfogel overall describes the holiday custom as a red tornado that rains down unwanted presents.¹⁴⁶ The Society to Curtail Ridiculous, Outrageous, and Ostentatious Gift Exchanges (SCROOGE), founded in 1979, similarly protests the giving of unnecessary gifts during Christmastime. As an alternative, the association proposes the giving of such useful items as first-aid kits or smoke alarms.¹⁴⁷ More widespread is the sentiment that James Carrier effectively captures; “Americans commonly see Christmas shopping as an onerous task. People regale each other with stories about how hard it is and they resolve to start earlier next year... Stores put up their decorations earlier and earlier, the advertising, the Christmas sales, and the need to buy more and more drown out the familial values.”¹⁴⁸ Commercialism is perceived as having placed heavy burdens on an otherwise joyful holiday. There are even self-help books such as *Unplug the Christmas Machine*¹⁴⁹ and *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas*¹⁵⁰ that are intended to help people simplify the holiday and escape some of its material excess. Overall, the commercialization of Christmas is an extensive contemporary American concern.

As the previous section illustrated, however, the modern version of Christmas exists as such in part due to its commercialization. The holiday underwent a process of commercialization in order to become the domestic celebration it is today. That is not to say that the commercialization of Christmas has not increased to the extent of excessiveness. My point, rather, is to note that contemporary Christmas cannot be separated from commercialism and that

¹⁴⁶ Joel Waldfogel, *Scroogenomics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁴⁷ Belk, “Materialism and the Making of the Modern American Christmas”, 96.

¹⁴⁸ James Carrier, “The Rituals of Christmas Giving,” in *Unwrapping Christmas*, ed. Daniel Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 61-62.

¹⁴⁹ Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, *Unplug the Christmas Machine* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).

¹⁵⁰ Bill McKibben, *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

such complaints fail to recognize that the modern Christmas is inherently commercial as a result. Furthermore, the commercialization of Christmas ultimately helps to render the holiday a secular occasion. Indeed, it has led to Christmas being celebrated as a time primarily to give gifts, consequently encompassing non-Christian celebrants who subsequently assign the holiday more secular meaning. Thus, the commercialization of Christmas casts the holiday as a secular occasion despite its Christian motivations, blurring, as result, the expected and seemingly distinct boundaries between the religious and the secular. This is discussed further below.

Issues of Secularism and Multiculturalism

The place of Christmas in a secular and multicultural society is a particularly complex and contentious contemporary dispute. Indeed, there have been two incidents in the United States pertaining to Christmas decorations that have resulted in major court cases. The first case, *Lynch v. Donnelly*, was ruled on by the Supreme Court in 1984. The case concerned the displaying of a crèche by the City of Pawtucket in the downtown shopping area. The court ruled 5-4 that the nativity scene was not primarily religious for the reasons that the display involved some secular symbols as well, such as a wishing well, and that the scene was erected for a secular purpose – to boost sales in the shopping district. Thus, the city-instituted nativity scene was ruled not to be a violation of the separation of church and state.¹⁵¹ In the second case, *Allegheny County v. ACLU*, the Supreme Court ruled in 1989 that a crèche displayed in the county’s courthouse square with the banner proclaiming “Gloria in excelsis Deo” was a violation of the separation of church and state. The same case, however, also addressed the issue of a second display on county property that involved a Christmas tree, menorah, and a banner bearing a message of liberty. This display was ruled as permissible because of its combination of

¹⁵¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “God Save this Honourable Court,” in *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 383.

religious symbolism with the secular meaning of the patriotic message of the banner, as well as of the Christmas tree. The fact that a multiplicity of religious symbols was displayed was also considered in the ruling that the display was not an explicit state endorsement of religion.¹⁵²

These two cases exhibit the degree of legal severity issues of Christmas can reach. They also indicate that Christmas decorations can assume secular meaning but under other circumstances that they can be viewed as an endorsement of Christianity. As ambassadors of the holiday, Christmas decorations thus suggest the dual nature of the celebration as both secular and religious, a nature that results in disagreement and court cases such as these.

Moreover, the secular-religious debate concerning Christmas has not subsided with these court rulings. Contention over the use of the word “Christmas” continues to fill the media. Indeed, the *Christmas* tree has become a topic of heated debate. For example, an article published in *USA Today* in 2005 reports on the lighting of the “holiday tree” in Boston. The farmer who donated the tree to the city is cited as having said that he would rather send the tree to the wood chopper than have it be called a “holiday tree”. Mathew Staver, president of the Liberty Council, adds, “It’s like calling a menorah a candlestick.”¹⁵³ This incident in Boston is not an isolated case. The controversy, for example, continued in Rhode Island when governor Lincoln D. Chafee announced the lighting of the “holiday tree” in 2011. The governor’s choice of words resulted in a notable backlash. The article published in *The Providence Journal* reporting on the matter cites Bishop Thomas J. Tobin, head of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence, as describing the term “holiday tree” as “an affront to the faith of many citizens.”¹⁵⁴ As these

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 384.

¹⁵³ Emily Bazar, “Trimming ‘Christmas’ from Trees Stirs Debate,” *USA Today* 1 December 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-12-01-trimming-debate_x.htm (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁵⁴ Philip Marcello, “Controversy Over ‘Holiday Tree’ Takes Root,” *The Providence Journal*, 30 November 2011, <http://global.factiva.com.proxy.queensu.ca/ha/default.aspx> (accessed April 6, 2012).

cases demonstrate, the renaming of Christmas trees in favour of the inclusivity of “holiday tree” has generated heavy criticism.

Similarly, there have been issues surrounding the use of the word “Christmas” in store advertising. For example, Wal-Mart refrained from employing the word for several years, using instead the title of “holiday”. However, after pressure and boycotting from religious groups, the corporation resumed its specifically “Christmas” advertising in 2006.¹⁵⁵ Similar controversies have surrounded the advertising of other major corporations such as Best Buy, Macy’s, and Target.¹⁵⁶

The contentions pertaining to the use of the words “Christmas” and “holiday” demonstrate the complications between political correctness and religious freedom. The replacement of “Christmas” with “holiday” removes the specifically Christian associations and thus it can be interpreted as an attempt to be inclusive, but also as censorship of Christian expression. Furthermore, while there are perhaps secular reasons for opposing the replacement of “Christmas” with “holiday” (such as simply wanting to maintain a cultural tradition), the significantly Christian-based resistance to such marketing depicts the festival as a Christian holiday. At the same time, however, attempts to make the season more accessible to people of all faiths alludes to the secular qualities of the celebration that are already present. That is, if Christmas were fully Christian, efforts would not be made to render the holiday an all-inclusive event. In this way, these controversies similarly demonstrate the ill-defined boundaries between

¹⁵⁵ “Wal-Mart Opts for ‘Christmas’ Marketing,” *msnbc.com*, 15 November 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15639425/#.T3idEqsV2TV> (accessed March 30, 2012). For a detailed analysis of Wal-Mart and Christmas advertising see Rycenga’s “Religious Controversies over Christmas”, 73-77.

¹⁵⁶ Tricia Bishop, “Stores Revert to ‘Merry Christmas’,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 24 November 2006, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2006-11-24/news/0611240128_1_merry-christmas-merry-christmas-commercialization-of-christmas (accessed June 13, 2012).

the religious and the secular within the Christmas tradition; the holiday comprises both ends of the ostensibly oppositional religious-secular spectrum.

Furthermore, issues of multiculturalism and Christmas accumulate in what has been termed the “December Dilemma”. The phrase “December Dilemma” is used to describe the complications generated by the coincidence of Christmas with other holidays, particularly with the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah. As Ron Wolfson demonstrates in an article published in *Jewish News*, the fact that the more prominent celebration of Christmas overshadows the celebration of Hanukkah presents issues within Jewish households. He writes, “Some elevate Hanukkah’s importance to provide a counterbalance to Christmas, while others de-emphasize the Jewish festival to prevent it from becoming ‘the Jewish Christmas’.”¹⁵⁷ The point is not that it is unfortunate that the two holidays happen to occupy the same time of year, but rather that the overwhelming Christmas spectacle undermines the supposed reality of religious diversity. The Jewish scholar Stephen M. Feldman further argues that from the perspective of a religious minority, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, and all the other possibly secular symbols of the Christmas celebration are in fact clearly denoting a Christian holiday.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, he argues, pluralist displays are not necessarily the answer, either. First of all, they still ask for participation, but not all people participate in such occasions. Secondly, they may fail to point out important differences between celebrations. For example, such displays do not impart the fact that Hanukkah is not the Jewish version of Christmas.¹⁵⁹ In this way, the “December

¹⁵⁷ Ron Wolfson, “December Dilemma,” *Jewish News*, 18 December 2008, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.queensu.ca/ethnicnewswatch/docview/364859618/135D54DF1926F842862/4?accountid=6180> (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁵⁸ Stephen M. Feldman, *Please Don't Wish Me A Merry Christmas* (New York: New York University Press, 1997),

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¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Dilemma” raises problems concerning the Christian supremacy in contemporary culture and challenges the reality of multiculturalism.

Recently, however, there have been efforts to ameliorate these issues of religious diversity. For example, in 2003 the popular T.V. show *The O.C.* created the idea of ‘Chrimukkah’. This combination holiday of Christmas and Hanukkah was so popular among viewers it subsequently became a real event, with Chrimukkah cards and gifts to go along.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, a line of greeting cards has been developed in order to address and formulize the “December Dilemma”.¹⁶¹ For example, one card on the outside reads: “At this time of year some people celebrate Christmas. Others, Hanukkah.” On the inside is written: “Ah, the joys of sects.”¹⁶² Despite such efforts, however, the “December Dilemma” remains an important point of discussion among the extensive contemporary Christmas controversies.

In addition, the “December Dilemma” serves to further demonstrate the unclear boundaries between the religious and the secular within the holiday. The dilemma, for example, addresses the concern of whether presumably secular symbols in fact compromise their secularity under the title of Christmas. This questioning suggests that there is disagreement as to the existence or form of secular aspects of the holiday. Furthermore, one may ask whether the presence of Christmas in the public sphere denotes Christian hegemony or a secular festival. That being said, from the perspective of the “December Dilemma”, Christmas is overwhelmingly Christian. The holiday is depicted as casting its festive shadow over the similarly religious holiday of Hanukkah, and yet the celebration fills the presumably secular public sphere each

¹⁶⁰ Diane Werts, *Christmas on Television* (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers, 2006), 218.

¹⁶¹ Jeffrey Shandler and Aviva Weintraub, “‘Santa, Shmanta’: Greeting Cards for the December Dilemma,” *Material Religion* 3, no. 3 (2007), <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.queensu.ca/ehost/detail?sid=81f089a0-2d05-41dd-b3d7fa039716d854%40sessionmgr104&vid=1&hid=110&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWlhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#d b=a9h&AN=28108808> (accessed March 30, 2012), 382.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

year. Overall, the place of Christmas in a multicultural and secular society is contested, a result of the hybridity of the festival as both religious and secular.

The contemporary Christmas controversies pertaining to the proper place of the celebration have resulted in the equally controversial “War on Christmas”. Christmas is perceived by the “War’s” advocates as being suppressed in the “War on Christmas”. The website [waronchristmas.com](http://www.waronchristmas.com) greets its visitors with the bolded message, “Yes, there really is a ‘War on Christmas’ ... This is the place to fight back!”¹⁶³ The site argues that the “War on Christmas” is undoubtedly real and began when the rich, meaningful word “Christmas” began to be replaced by the empty term “holiday”. Furthermore, it asserts that Christmas is part of traditional American culture and it has nothing to do with being Christian. Think, for example, of the *Christmas* sales and the *Christmas* parties that do not pertain to Christianity. Christmas is depicted as crucial to the American people and in need of preservation as a part of their culture.¹⁶⁴ While the overall problem is depicted here as extraneous to debates of religion and secularity, the “War on Christmas” provides an important perspective on the removal of Christmas from the public sphere and the response it can generate.

Indeed, the threat to Christmas has been represented as part of a much greater assault. In an article by Bill O’Reilly, the talk-show host frames the attack on Christmas as a scheme to remove religion from the public sphere in order to advance progressive movements.¹⁶⁵ He employs Canada as an example of what could happen; due to the decline of religion within the country to the north of the United States, liberal initiatives have caused the legalization of gay

¹⁶³ “Christmas: An American Holiday to Love and Preserve,” War on Christmas, <http://www.waronchristmas.com/> (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. One should keep in mind, however, that Christmas in America began as an unpopular practice and did not become a national holiday until 1870, as discussed in the above examination of the history of Christmas.

¹⁶⁵ Bill O’Reilly, “Christmas Under Siege: The Big Picture,” *Fox News*, 24 December 2004, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,140742,00.html> (accessed March 30, 2012).

marriage, high welfare funding, and an undersized military. Thus, the U.S. must fight against the removal of Christmas from the public sphere in order to prevent a progressive secular invasion, as already seen in Canada. O'Reilly concludes, "The struggle today is not about Christmas, but about the spirit of our country."¹⁶⁶ Here, the removal of Christmas from the public sphere is cast as a vicious attempt by liberal secularists to eradicate America's religious (Christian) culture – no attempts are made to hide the religious associations of the holiday.

According to an article published in *Time* magazine, a poll conducted in 2006 found that 68% of respondents affirmed their belief in a "War on Christmas".¹⁶⁷ However, its author Alex Altman satirizes the so-called "War". He writes, "So there you have it: the war on Christmas is a godless plot cooked up by a cabal of latte-sipping liberals, greedy retail tycoons, bearded ACLU communists and Ban Ki-moon acolytes who secretly gather in Bay Area synagogues to smoke pot, deface Bibles and perform abortions."¹⁶⁸ Even though he depicts the supposed war in such sarcastic terms, Altman nonetheless concludes that the perceived war rages on.

What is more, the House of Representatives introduced a resolution in December 2011 to protect Christmas. The resolution states that the House, "(1) recognizes the importance of the symbols and traditions of Christmas; (2) strongly disapproves of attempts to ban references to Christmas; and (3) expresses support for the use of these symbols and traditions by those who celebrate Christmas."¹⁶⁹ However, according to an article published by Americans United, this bureaucratic act is fueling the flames of a fake war. It poses the clever question, "When the White House is filled with Christmas trees, parades and pageants are taking place across the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Alex Altman, "A Brief History of the War on Christmas," *Time*, 24 December 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1868542,00.html> (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ H. RES. 498: Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the symbols and traditions of Christmas should be protected for use by those who celebrate Christmas (2011), (accessed <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hres489/text>, March 30, 2012).

nation, and the U.S. Senate engages in Secret Santa exchanges, who can fairly say Christmas is being repressed?”¹⁷⁰ The article overall dismisses the “War on Christmas” as an attempt by politicians to flaunt their faith.

Regardless of whether the “War on Christmas” exists or whether the debate is a matter of American integrity or the suppression of Christianity, the use of the term “war” and the images it evokes testify to the level of gravity issues associated with Christmas can reach. As such disagreement demonstrates, the holiday is the site of passionate and ardent ideological discourse. Furthermore, a close look at the “War on Christmas” also unearths confusion as to which side of the perceived religious-secular divide the holiday falls. The website waronchristmas.com argues that the removal of Christmas is a problem for all Americans and that the holiday is not about being Christian. O’Reilly, in contrast, frames the matter as an attack on Christianity. In this way, one party casts Christmas as secular while the other labels it as religious. However, the affront on Christmas, according to O’Reilly, is one of secularization, subsequently implying that the holiday, even if it is agreed that it was originally Christian, now combines religious and secular elements. Consequently, an investigation of the “War on Christmas” also reveals the holiday’s tendency to obscure the lines between the religious and the secular as it simultaneously assumes both identities.

Overall, as was demonstrated by an investigation of the invention of Christmas, an examination of Christmas controversies similarly depicts the fractured nature of the holiday. Under some circumstances Christmas decorations have been ruled secular while at other times religious. The replacement of the word “Christmas” with “holiday” alludes to the inclusive, secular side of the festival but at the same time Christian disapproval of this change depicts the

¹⁷⁰ Emily Krueger, “House of Representatives Continues to Fuel the Fake ‘War on Christmas’,” Americans United, <http://www.au.org/blogs/legislative/house-of-representatives-continues-to-fuel-the-fake-war-on-christmas> (accessed March 30, 2012).

holiday as a religious occasion. The “December Dilemma” and the “War on Christmas” raise important questions concerning the public and possibly secular nature of the holiday, as well as the issue of a hegemonic Christian culture. Christmas in this way blurs the boundaries between the religious and the secular; it would not generate such contention if it could accurately be categorized on one side or the other of the perceived religious-secular divide.

The Expectation of Clear Boundaries

Within modern society there is an expectation that boundaries between religions and between the religious and the secular should be clearly defined. In terms of religions, as Smith writes, “Perhaps the most fundamental classification of religions is ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’.”¹⁷¹ That is, there is a desire to distinguish between one religious system and another. Religions are packaged into “Christianity”, “Hinduism”, or “paganism” in order to draw distinctive lines around and between religious traditions. This is evidenced in the introduction to *Christianity, A Very Short Introduction*, in which Linda Woodhead writes, “There are...limits to what can count as Christian, for in opening up some possibilities for life and thought it rules out others.”¹⁷² This introductory phrase demonstrates a key point: Christianity, in this case, is not all-encompassing. It excludes, and in so doing, boundaries are delineated. These limits are intended to be clear in order to impart meaning to each side. Furthermore, in terms of Christianity and paganism, the two religious systems are often juxtaposed with each other. For example, Carol M. Cusack describes Christianity as disembodied, spiritual, and other-worldly and labels paganism as the exact opposite: embodied, natural, and this-worldly.¹⁷³ Bronislaw Szerszynski sets up a similar

¹⁷¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Classification,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Continuum, 2000), 39.

¹⁷² Linda Woodhead, *Christianity, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

¹⁷³ Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), xiii.

dualism between the two worldviews.¹⁷⁴ Christianity and paganism are thus depicted as incompatible. Religions are overall expected and framed as having boundaries that should and do not overlap.

Similarly, modern society has the expectation of clear boundaries between the religious and the secular. As Shelia Greeve Davaney writes, “The premise of many discussions concerning religion and secularity has been that the secular and the religious are two separate and distinct, and indeed for some, opposing spheres.”¹⁷⁵ The *Encyclopedia of Religion* also characterizes this understanding; “The relationship between the sacred and the profane can be understood either abstractly, as a mutual exclusion of spheres of reality, or cognitively, as a way of distinguishing between two aspects of that reality.”¹⁷⁶ The religious and the secular are perceived as occupying two different spaces. It is understood that there is an identifiable division between the two categories. Furthermore, this perception is embodied within modern constitutional documents. For example, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”¹⁷⁷ Thus this authoritative statement makes the assertion that, in guaranteeing its freedom, religion is an identifiable ‘thing’, but it also declares what is often called the separation of the church and state, or secularism; religion can be separated from – and thus distinguished from – the secular state. What is more, this separation and distinction between the religious and the secular rests at the heart of democratic society. As Charles Taylor writes, “It is generally agreed that modern

¹⁷⁴ Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology, and the Sacred* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 16-18.

¹⁷⁵ Shelia Greeve Davaney, “The Religious-Secular Divide: the U.S. Case,” *Social Research* 74, no. 4 (2009), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.queensu.ca/docview/209672394/fulltextPDF?accountid=6180> (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁷⁶ Carsten Colpe, “The Sacred and the Profane,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 7964.

¹⁷⁷ Bill of Rights, (accessed <http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/billofrights>, March 30, 2012).

democracies have to be secular.”¹⁷⁸ In this way, the modern understanding of a duality between the religious and the secular is embodied in the democratic state.

Christmas, however, disrupts these notions of clear boundaries. Indeed, the existence of contemporary Christmas controversies actualizes the expectation of distinct limits; that is, such contentions exemplify the uncertainty and debate generated when expectations are not fulfilled. The above examination of the contemporary Christmas contentions demonstrates that Christmas is not fully pagan or Christian, or religious or secular despite desires for clear classifications. Christmas dislodges the perceived dualism between Christianity and paganism by combining elements and meaning from each sphere. Christmas, though it is a Christian occasion, comprises pagan customs. The denouncement of Christmas as a pagan festival by Jehovah’s Witnesses and the call to purge the pagan elements from the holiday by Evangelicals and Roman Catholics indicate the dual nature of the celebration as both Christian and pagan. Similarly, commercialism has fostered the secular side of Christmas, but the holiday is nonetheless officially a religious occasion with religious meaning, as appeals to exalt Christ and resist profane corruption demonstrate. Issues surrounding secularism, multiculturalism, and the proper place of Christmas likewise illustrate that the celebration straddles and upsets the line between the religious and the secular. In being both religious and secular, the holiday thus challenges the understanding that they are two separate spheres. In this way, Christmas has given rise to controversies due to the ways in which the holiday blurs and disrupts the expected boundaries between the Christian and non-Christian, and the religious and the secular, an overall result of its eclectic process of invention and reinvention.

¹⁷⁸ Charles Taylor, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34.

CONCLUSION

Christmas, invented first in the fourth century and reinvented in the nineteenth, is the concern of many contemporary controversies. Pressures, for example, to “Put Christ Back Into Christmas” combine with the passionate discourse of the “War on Christmas” during the festival season. The contemporary controversies concerning Christmas can be illuminated by the fact that Christmas was invented and reinvented through a process that combined Christian, pagan, and secular elements. Based on the understanding that such classifications are and should be distinct and delineable, conflicts concerning Christmas have consequently erupted. Thus, the invented nature of Christmas casts the contemporary Christmas controversies as deeply rooted in the custom’s history, but it also indicates that Christmas has no pure, standardized, or infallible form as wholly Christian, pagan, or secular. Attempts to compartmentalize it as belonging to one category or another will ultimately fail as a result.

Perhaps this means that complaints concerning Christmas are baseless and futile; if Christmas has no true and absolute form, then no justifiable claim can be made that it must be celebrated in one way or another. Christmas cannot be too secularized, for example, because that would signify that there is a standard form of the celebration from which Christmas has strayed, and that the holiday is not a fluxing, diverse tradition, in contrast to the evidence provided above. This of course does not mean that people cannot prefer to celebrate the holiday in one way or another; it means, rather, that authoritative assertions as to how Christmas must be celebrated cannot accurately be made. Christmas has no template that must be followed. In this sense, Christmas conflicts would seem to be ill-advised and unfortunate. This, however, is not the case.

The conflicts concerning Christmas are in fact highly significant and serve an important role within society. Indeed, the debates surrounding Christmas are representative of larger

problems of modernity and are not merely restricted to the holiday. For example, while each year at Christmastime disputes arise as to whether Christmas decorations should be displayed in public locations, the larger issue at hand is how to balance secularism with religious freedom. Similarly, efforts to “Put Christ Back Into Christmas” express a genuine concern that commercialism has been allotted too much meaning and power, and that the place of Christianity is uncertain in modern society.¹⁷⁹ In this way, Christmas is a vehicle for communicating larger concerns and issues; the problems at hand are not merely seasonal quarrels concerning Christmas tinsel and toys.

Furthermore, as the site of larger issues of modernity, Christmas is ultimately a necessary exercise in negotiation and creative thinking. Modernity, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, attempts to see the world through the rationality and discreteness of a black and white lens. As discussed above, for example, there is an expectation that different religious systems are and should be distinct and that the religious and the secular are two separate spheres. The ideal of modernity is overall characterized by the juxtaposition of opposites: the public versus the private, reason versus revelation, traditional versus modern.¹⁸⁰ In reality, however, there are many shades of grey, to which the multiplicity within Christmas itself attests. The modern focus on difference and dualism fails to recognize the abundance and complexities of the diversity within contemporary society. Therefore, it is necessary to have hybrid traditions such as Christmas to challenge the expectation – and misconception – of concrete, distinct boundaries, and to motivate reflection and improvement within modern thinking and society. Christmas forces differing

¹⁷⁹ These problems are related to modernity due to the ways in which the modern period is characterized by individualism, the right to criticism, autonomy of action, and the choice of religion, as outlined by Jürgen Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 17. In other words, modernity gave rise to detailed notions of secularism and constitutional freedoms. Christmas has subsequently complicated these conceptions.

¹⁸⁰ As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, there are “‘modern’ distinctions between the secular and the sacred, between the feudal and the capitalist, between the nonrational and the rational” in *Habitations of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xx.

groups to engage in dialogue and to reconsider commonly held views. In this way, Christmas is not unlike Plato's gadfly,¹⁸¹ as a fissure within the ideal modernity, Christmas can serve to improve society through its controversy and subsequent demands for cooperation, self-reflection, and new ways of thinking.

¹⁸¹ "I [Socrates] was attached to this city by the god...as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly." Plato, "Apology," in *Plato, Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 30e.

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