

A humanist discussion of... religious festivals and ceremonies

Humanists, people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs, naturally do not have religious festivals of their own and value the freedom to choose when and how to celebrate. These days, religious festivals such as Diwali and Chanukah are increasingly following Christmas in becoming opportunities for holidays and celebration even for people who do not follow those particular religions. Like most people, humanists enjoy holidays, and the opportunity to take a break from work, see family and friends, exchange presents and go to parties. Humanists also recognise the value of ritual and ceremony in our lives and have created and organised ceremonies suitable for the non-religious.

People often wonder what non-religious people do on the Christian festivals that are still so much part of our culture, and humanists who enjoy these holidays are sometimes accused of hypocrisy. But since long before Christianity, people in Northern Europe have feasted and celebrated in order to cheer up themselves up in the darkest days of winter or to welcome the beginning of spring or harvest. These ancient feast days and traditions were simply adopted by early Christians as good times to celebrate. Most humanists and other non-Christians are happy to continue at least some of these traditions, though some may choose not to because they have no particular significance for them or because of their over-commercialisation.

There are, of course, many non-religious festivals that include everyone: local celebrations and anniversaries, film and book festivals, and fairs like Nottingham's annual Goose Fair. Humanists would like to see more of these, and some public celebrations that are meant for everyone, such as Remembrance Day on 11 November, becoming more inclusive and less religious. Humanists died or lost friends and relatives in wars too, but religious memorial services and ceremonies can make them feel left out.

What do humanists do at Christmas?

In a country where few people practise a religion, Christmas has become as much a secular festival as a religious one, with ritual television programmes, sports events, pantomimes, decorations, meals and parties. Joining in with Christmas festivities does not mean that you are a Christian or that you believe the Christian story, and Christians who complain that their festival has been hijacked by others are usually unaware of the long history of pagan winter festivals and the relative newness of Christian ones in the calendar. In the Northern hemisphere, Christmas comes at the darkest time of the year, and there have always been festivities at the time of the Winter Solstice (the shortest day of the

year), anticipating the return of the sun. Much of the symbolism of Christmas – candles, trees and other greenery in the house, yule logs, snowmen and robins – is natural and seasonal rather than specifically Christian. Some Christmas ‘traditions’ are actually very recent, or imported from elsewhere – eating turkey at Christmas, decorating a fir tree, Christmas stockings, Father Christmas with his elves and flying reindeer – and they too have little to do with Christianity. There are Christian elements too – the Christmas story, stars, gifts, Christmas carols, and, of course, the name of the festival – but the churches took a long time to agree on 25th December as the date to celebrate Christ’s birth, and the date seems to have been chosen largely because it was already a pagan holiday throughout the Roman Empire.

Humanist families choose for themselves what to do at Christmas. Some humanists prefer to celebrate ‘Winterval’ or the New Year. Some families contain both Christians and non-Christians and they usually find a compromise that suits everyone. Some humanists dislike stories about Father Christmas as untruthful and confusing, while others enjoy the magic and fantasy and think their children are undamaged by it. Some humanists object to their children joining in Christmas services and nativity plays at school (especially as they may feel obliged to go along themselves), while others tolerate these as colourful and harmless aspects of our culture and traditions.

One humanist parent and playgroup supervisor wrote, ‘At both the nativity plays I attended this year, I was pleased that the vicars involved did not try to press home that ‘the true meaning of Christmas’ is the birth of Christ. Either they thought that this was obvious and did not need saying, or they respected the variety of beliefs held by the audience. Either way, I felt more comfortable and included than in previous years’.

What do humanists do at Easter?

Although humanists can understand the symbolism of new life in eggs, chicks, and bunnies, and the connection Christians make between them and the Easter story, we can also see much older, and to us more meaningful, connections between eggs, chicks and bunnies and the arrival of Spring. The name ‘Easter’ derives from ‘Eostre’, the goddess of rebirth after the barren winter. Almost everyone feels happier as the days grow longer and warmer, flowers and leaves emerge, and the birds start to sing. Our ancestors, who would have been cold, hungry and confined to smoky dark homes for most of the winter, would have had even more reason to feel happy, and they would have enjoyed feasting on the last of their winter stores and some fresh foods, knowing that there would be plenty more over the summer. Even now, people who live in places with harsher and longer winters than ours (Eastern Europe , the Alps) seem to make more of Easter festivities and decorations than we do. Fasting and feasting, as in Lent followed by Easter, derive as much from the rhythms

of the seasons as they do from religious tradition. Humanists may well enjoy Easter eggs, though it probably depends on whether there are children in the family who expect them, or on how fond the individual is of chocolate. Generally humanists probably celebrate Easter by taking a few days off work, turning off the central heating and opening the windows, cleaning and putting away winter clothes, and doing some gardening. More people go to garden centres than to church at Easter – not a bad way to reclaim this spring fertility festival.

Are there any humanist holidays?

The word 'holiday' derived originally from 'holy day' and of course, in that sense, humanists have no 'holidays', just as they have no saints' days. But the word has long meant just 'a day of festivity or recreation, when no work is done' (Concise Oxford Dictionary), and humanists enjoy these days off and even have one or two of their own. Some humanists celebrate International Humanist Day on the longest day of the year, 21 June. Some celebrate Human Rights Day in December, and many humanists have joined the international campaign to have Darwin Day on 12 February, the birthday of Charles Darwin, declared a public holiday to recognise the achievements of this great scientist. Many humanists would also be happy to see more public holidays that recognised the variety of cultures and worldviews in our society, perhaps taking the place of some existing bank holidays that seem to have no real meaning.

Questions to think about

- What do you or your family do at Christmas, Easter, Divali, or any other religious festival? How much of what you do is religious? How much is cultural? How much is simply personal or family preference?
 - What new public holidays would you like to see? Why?
 - Create a ceremony for a public event that is genuinely inclusive of all the people who might participate, for example for the inauguration of your local mayor, or the retirement of a favourite teacher, or the opening of a new park, or the first anniversary of a successful school club. What readings, music, rituals would you include?
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