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THE FUTILITY OF CHRISTMAS

What is the point of Christmas? Every year the wreaths and lights are put up, trees are cut down or the artificial ones stored in garages and attics are assembled and decorated, gifts are purchased, and traditional “Christmas foods” – including the widely-ridiculed fruitcake – are eaten or re-gifted. There is “Christmas music” that seems to begin earlier each year, and other traditions, all of which come to a screeching halt no later than the first of the new calendar year. And, of course, people travel from place to place, often in wintry weather that may cause them to become stranded in airports.

It may be a kind of heresy to question what the point is. But asking difficult questions is the point of Freethought. It is not at all the same as simply saying: “Bah! Humbug!” Perhaps it's humbug and perhaps it's not, depending on what one takes to be “humbug.” Certainly, good food, visiting family, colorful lights and gift-giving may all be enjoyable, but what is the point of everyone trying to do these things on the same few days of the year? What does it accomplish besides producing heavier traffic, crowds and other predictable nuisances?

Christmas has its roots in the winter solstice as experienced in the Northern Hemisphere where ancient civilizations began. It is connected with the “rebirth” of the waning sun at that time and the promise of another season of livestock reproduction and of planting and eventual harvest, all central events for our ancestors. After hundreds of years Christianity claimed it as the birthday of their dying-and-resurrecting savior deity. This conveniently made Easter the time of the demi-god's conception. But Christmas is not and was never centrally important to Christianity. The Puritans went so far as to ban it. But with the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th Century, Christmas became more widely popular as a holiday for gift-giving. Thanks to the abundance produced by modern technologies,

it now seems a celebration of consumerism that many enjoy and some decry as materialistic.

Clearly the holiday of the Winter Solstice served important purposes in the past. It was one of several others that marked off the annual passage of the seasons. Christmas was, especially among the ancient Romans, also an occasion for the inversion of social roles. A “Lord of Misrule” was appointed, drinking, gambling and public debauchery were tolerated and masters would serve their slaves a banquet during the Saturnalia. We see this in abbreviated form in Charles Dickens' Scrooge character after his visitation by the Ghosts of Christmas. We also see it in the promotion of charities during the winter holidays today and the popular sense – encouraged by entertainment and the media – that Christmas is “about” generosity and “goodwill towards all.”

If these were the only purposes of Christmas today the Holiday would seem somewhat if not mostly obsolete. After all, less than 2% of Americans today are directly involved in agriculture, though ten times as many are employed in the food service and restaurant industries. As our modern economy took shape in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, Christmas was useful in encouraging increased consumption. Indeed, it was Karl Marx's fears that under Capitalism production would rapidly outpace consumption that led him to predict revolution leading to a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” It remains true today that holiday sales – those in November and December – account for a significant part of total annual retail sales, especially in the toy, gaming and hobby businesses. But it is still only about 30%, not even the majority of total annual sales in these sectors. Only about 20% of all annual retail sales come from the last 2 months of the year. It seems that holiday selling begins earlier and earlier every year, with a greater emphasis on

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“Black Friday” as well as all the other holidays through the year as a growing number of retailers miss no opportunity to entice consumers with advertisements of sales and discounts. And this is the entirely predictable result of the continuing increase in economic productivity.

Meanwhile, the rise of the welfare state has greatly diminished the urgency of charitable giving. Ebenezer Scrooge would be subject today to minimum wage laws and a host of other regulations. He would be less concerned with how little coal was needed to keep his premises above freezing than with how little he could spend on holiday parties and bonuses to keep his employees satisfied. For such reasons, updated re-tellings of Dickens' A Christmas Carol simply cannot convey the pathos of the original story that its readers of the 1840's appreciated.

So, is the annual ritual – some might say the ordeal – of Christmas an exercise in futility? Is it a relic of the past, a wasted effort?

It may be. At the same time, Christmas in 21st Century America probably serves social and cultural purposes. To the degree that it promotes the assembly of related individuals for socializing and recreation it is arguably also a strong promoter of family life. Even “Christmas Music” being seldom heard outside of the season may serve this purpose since it evokes memories and associations that simply cannot be held in the mind constantly but seem welcome at yearly intervals.

Christmas is a complex and interesting subject that offers many insights into human nature and the human condition. And what is called by some a “War On Christmas” is really just a much-needed and welcome effort – spurred both by benevolent reason and Adam Smith's “invisible hand” of self-interest – to reduce narrow and exclusive claims on an ancient seasonal Holiday and expand and universalize it so as to extend its usefulness as “social glue.” Thus, an important purpose and point of Christmas in 21st Century America is, bearing some similarities to the social inversions of ancient Rome, to break down the social barriers that stand between people in so many of their other pursuits and interests. Social peace and harmony is surely served in this. Yes, it would be a good thing if this were extended throughout the year. But Christmas is a good start. And if the word Christmas is to survive as a term for the Holiday then it must come to have as little religious significance as Wednesday does as a term for the fourth day of the week. We're getting there.

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar, or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of I-635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums on most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast/coffee (or not), in the atrium of the Embassy Suites DFW Airport North – on Bass Pro Drive in Grapevine beginning at 10:00 AM.

Game Night: Most Friday nights at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Imperial 2030, Dominion, Evolution, Le Havre, Ticket To Ride, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at www.twitter.com/ntcof !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“THE FUTURE IS OURS:
PROMISE OR THREAT?”
> Sunday, January 6, 2019 <
NEW LOCATION
TO BE DETERMINED !**

**THANK YOU !!
FOR YOUR GENEROUS
DONATION OF TIME & FINANCIAL
SUPPORT to the NTCOF !!
It is needed, appreciated and
Tax-Deductible !**

**The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers**

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