

Christmas Time! ...and what Pagans do (KS2, KS3 & KS4)

I think that we can all agree that while Christmas may be, essentially, a Christian holiday, the celebration of Christmas has expanded well beyond the boundaries of Christianity. These days it's celebrated by people of many different faiths and those of none. Of course, the perception of the holiday may differ from one group to the next. A Muslim celebrating Christmas will have a different religious perception of the holiday, compared to a Christian, even though in many instances their days may appear very much alike. Likewise, secular Christmas, celebrated by the majority of Britons, is more or less the same from one household to the next, and still quite like the festivities of Christians, even though the secular, non-religious British citizen doesn't share their faith.

Pagans, are really no different. Well, mostly.

We, generally speaking, are very happy to get in on the holiday spirit. Many Pagans have a secular Christmas. But a lot of us have other winter holidays that we either celebrate along with Christmas or instead of it. Though, even in those cases where Christmas is not celebrated, our own holidays have many similarities to a typical Christmas.

We shouldn't be surprised by that, though. One thing that Pagans like about this time of year, is just how Pagan it is! Dozens of different traditions, many of them with Pagan roots, all weaving together into the modern Christmas. There are a lot of theories about what aspects of Christmas have Pagan elements or origins. Part of Santa Claus' character may have been adopted from old depictions of Odin. Bringing an evergreen tree into the house, to be decorated, a German tradition of uncertain origins, but it certainly seems very Pagan. Mistletoe, that sacred plant of the Druids, is also held in esteem in Heathen mythology. Even the ancient Romans exchanged gifts as a part of their Saturnalia festival, at this time of year. And having a big winter feast with lots of merriment and drinking, has been a part of mid-winter traditions all over Europe.

So, even those Pagans who engage with Christmas as a public, secular holiday, are still able to enjoy it through Pagan eyes.

Some of us, however, don't 'do' Christmas. We have our own winter festivals, which typically fall around the same time.

In many instances, the placement of these festivals is determined by the winter solstice, which typically falls on December 21st (sometimes the 20th or 22nd). These are, in most instances, Yule celebrations, and are shared by several different Pagan faiths. Yule originally comes from the Germanic peoples of Europe (like the Norse and Anglo-Saxons) and was the whole month. Those who follow a Germanic Pagan faith, like Heathenry and Asatru, tend to celebrate Yule at around the same time as Christmas.

Wiccans also have Yule as a part of their ritual calendar and so it is common practice for them to have a Yule ritual, which marks and celebrates the winter solstice. Druids, likewise, also mark the winter solstice. Those who follow a Pagan path that draws from ancient Roman religion, may have a Saturnalia celebration. Traditionally, Saturnalia could last up to a couple of weeks, though for the modern Pagan who has a job to go to, needs to pay

bills, etc. such celebrations may have to be skimmed down to a single party or gathering.

Despite having our own holidays, being a minority religion often means that taking part in holiday revelry has to be a small affair or, as can be the case at this time of year, it can mean that we have to fold our festivities into those of other people. So, Pagans from many different paths may all share a public Yule gathering. More notably though, Pagans may often have to blend their Paganism into the broader gatherings of friends and family. So, we might go to our family Christmas dinner, share in it as our “winter feast”, enjoying it from a Pagan perspective, even while our families enjoy it from their own (religious or non-religious) perspective.

That's not always the case, though. Modern Paganism is now old enough that we can talk about generations of Pagans. Pagan parents raising their children with Pagan traditions. I know of a number of Pagan families who don't celebrate Christmas, at all, but they do all celebrate Yule. The kids seem to be quite happy about this arrangement, as Yule tends to take place on December 21st, meaning that they get their presents before all their friends get theirs! Perhaps, as Paganism continues to grow and create more Pagan families, this will become more commonplace – or at least as common as the festivals of any other non-Christian religion in the UK.

For now, though...

Happy Yule – Merry Christmas – Io Saturnalia – Happy Hanukkah – Blessed Sol Invictus – Or whatever your tradition may be, have a good one!

This resource was written by Luthaneal Adams, one of RE:ONLINE's Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Pagan representative any questions about their beliefs, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/paganism/>