

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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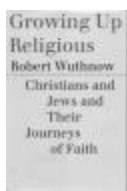
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The most important holiday

How do you celebrate Christmas? How did your family celebrate it when you were growing up?



Robert Wuthnow believes that our Christmas customs strongly influence our spirituality. In his book *Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith* (Beacon Press, 1999), Wuthnow says that interviewing adults about their religious upbringing has convinced him that spirituality is much more deeply rooted in personal histories and in families and congregations than in anything else.



A tangible experience of the sacred

Wuthnow, the director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University, found in his interviews that holidays were especially significant because “they were often the rare occasion on which people remember feeling the special joy of being lifted out of everyday life into something more ethereal and sacred.” In some way “they knew God was closer during the holidays than on most other occasions.”

Wuthnow finds that our Christmas customs—even those that we don’t consider religious—have an especially big influence on our spirituality and our faith, because for Christians no other holiday rivals Christmas in importance.



For most of the Christians Wuthnow talked with, he says, church services were included in their Christmas celebrations when they were growing up, but they described Christmas mainly as a family holiday. Some mentioned going with family members to candlelight church

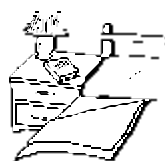


We’re creating memories

Daily practices and the objects they saw in their childhood homes, Robert Wuthnow found, are what adults mainly remember when they think about having grown up religious. Whether the memories are positive or negative, their influence is surprisingly strong. Compared with these memories, Wuthnow concludes, the formal teachings of religious leaders tend to pale in significance.



Many people told Wuthnow about religious pictures, statues, jewelry, and other objects that their families treated as sacred or used in daily religious practices.



Memories of family devotional times were strong, too. Above all, people mentioned seeing parents reading the Bible.

What mattered most to the people who remembered religious practices was seeing parents doing the practices for themselves rather than merely for the sake of the children.



Keeping spirituality secret

Many of the adults whom Wuthnow interviewed recalled rote prayers like “Now I lay me down to sleep” or a grace said at meals. Many heard no other prayers, which made spirituality seem like a kind of secret. Some saw it “almost like going to the bathroom,” while others merely got the idea it was best not talked about because it was too close to the heart.

Sights, sounds, and smells of childhood church buildings were also prominent in what Wuthnow heard. Many people told as much about their church buildings as about their homes. Like the home memories, some church memories were positive and some were negative but all were very influential. Memories of boring classes, peeling paint, and classrooms filled with outdated literature and dreary pictures often carried more weight than those of beloved teachers and beautiful sanctuaries.



What will our children remember?

Wuthnow’s findings say a lot about what we need to be doing now to create positive memories for the children in our homes and churches. Dreary, poorly maintained church buildings with outdated furnishings won’t help. Neither will keeping spirituality a secret in our homes.



services, but what they remembered was the going together, not the content of the service. Whatever religious meaning Christmas

had was conveyed through the warmth of family gatherings, gifts, decorations, and food. “These celebrations,” Wuthnow tells us, “created a tangible, memorable experience of the sacred.”

For some people, of course, Christmas is an unhappy time and earlier Christmases are painful to recall. As one of Wuthnow’s interviewees put it, “When things aren’t going right all year, and then the holidays point out all this loving family stuff, it’s got to be a very tense time of the year.” The great impact of negative Christmas memories, however, is evidence of the unique importance of Christmas just as the impact of happy ones is.

Rituals for gifts and meals

Many of Wuthnow’s interviewees told of rigidly followed practices—rituals, really—that were part of family Christmases. “As is always true of rituals,” he reminds us, “firm expectations were evident in most families about what to do, when to do it, and the appropriate demeanor in which to do it.”

Quite a few rituals related to opening Christmas presents. One interviewee mentioned gathering on the front stairs (not the back stairs that were the only ones used at all other times) and having to wait there until everyone was ready, before going down and opening the door to the room where the Christmas tree and presents were.

Rituals centered around Christmas meals were important, too. There were special favorite foods that appeared only at Christmas, perhaps, and the main meal was often a time for staying at the table for a long time, talking and laughing together.



Clear rules with an air of authority

Most people told Wuthnow that their families had clear rules to be followed in celebrating Christmas.



The rules usually weren’t written down, and they may never have been expressed in words, but all family members knew and observed them, and children quickly learned them.

Christmas was thus an occasion, Wuthnow saw, for demonstrating that one knew the family rules and was loyal to them. An air of authority cloaked these rules, Wuthnow observes, making the holiday a time when God’s bounty was evident for all who willingly obeyed the rules. Opening presents by birth order, inviting grandparents, making pilgrimages to visit aunts and uncles, saying special prayers, all showed that there was some higher code to which family members owed allegiance.

More than a stroll down memory lane



Even more important than following the Christmas rules, Wuthnow finds, was showing solidarity with one’s family.

Many people mentioned relatives coming at Christmas. The family might have been poor in material things, and thus unable to give a large number of gifts or expensive gifts or foods, but that wasn’t what was most important. Times like Christmas, Wuthnow writes, have meaning “because they are embedded in family relationships— and their significance continues because of later stories, interpretations, and memories passed along by the family.”



As a result, for many people, according to Robert Wuthnow, “recollections of the holidays are more than simply a stroll down memory lane; they are also occasions for moral lessons about who one was and the kind of values one learned.” For many people, he assures us, “how they had celebrated Christmas was an indication of what kind of family they were.”

Reconsidering Christmas memories

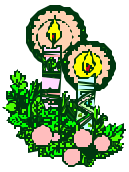
In recent years I’ve thought a lot about various aspects of my life and their influence on my beliefs and behavior patterns, but until I read Wuthnow’s book I hadn’t thought much about the meaning or effect of my family’s Christmas customs. I invite you to consider yours as you read what I’ve seen from looking at mine.



My fondest Christmas memories are these.

- Shopping for gifts in beautifully decorated stores

■ Wrapping the gifts, often with my mother or my daughter, and often using favorite papers and package decorations saved from earlier Christmases or using glitter to add the recipient's name or a design



■ Making Christmas decorations—wall hangings, tablecloths and centerpieces, and place mats made from Christmas cards received in earlier years

■ Decorating the Christmas tree, with ornaments that include family favorites from many years, and then enjoying seeing the tree, packages, and decorations for a week or two before Christmas

■ Making Christmas cookies with my mother and then with my daughter



■ Sending and receiving Christmas cards, especially those with personal notes reporting the year's news



■ Hearing *Messiah* and other great Christmas music and a wide variety of carols, and rehearsing and performing them in my church choir or a community chorus

■ Seeing outdoor Christmas lights

■ Preparing foods that are different from everyday fare

■ Opening gifts on Christmas morning with family members.



Parts of Christmas became stressful

Over the years some of these Christmas customs became less enjoyable, however. When I was growing up, most Christmases in my home included only my parents and me. With marriage, however, I joined a family whose Christmas celebrations included large groups of relatives and friends. I began feeling that I had to please both families, yet that was impossible because some members disliked what others considered essential. As children grew up and married and parents aged, even more preferences entered the picture. Choosing gifts got harder.

Family members became less willing or available to help with preparations. Christmas came to mean a lot of stress rather than the carefree enjoyment it once had.



My feelings about gift-giving have changed, too. I'm now reluctant to acquire more things or to give more to other people who are as over-supplied as I am. In an effort to remedy this, we've considered giving to good causes instead of to each other, but long-time habits have turned out to be too strong. Having few packages to open, or having their contents be merely certificates announcing gifts to good causes, takes too much of the fun out of Christmas despite the fact that it's probably a more sensible and more faithful way to celebrate.



Like gift-giving, Christmas music has also become less enjoyable for me than it once was. Contemporary Christmas music rarely reveals God to me or seems to represent giving one's best to God. I hear only the same few carols over and over at church, instead of the variety of carols that for me would make worship mean more. Seeing Christmas decorations in public places even before Halloween turns me off, too, as do the many decorations and performances that to me seem to trivialize the meaning of Christmas. As a result I've become rather Scrooge-like about Christmas.

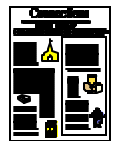


Messages from the memories

I've tried to see what these memories and feelings mean. Some mean that when I was growing up Christmas was nothing but fun for me because my mother took all the responsibility. Some simply mean that I've gotten older. Some remind me that I like sharing activities with other people but that my

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I'm a United Methodist laywoman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. Connections is a one-person ministry that I do largely at my own expense. Connections goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, plus some non-churchgoers.



enjoyment depends a lot on what the activities are, not just on who I do them with. I see, too, that for me family rituals and expectations often seem too confining rather than revealing God or welcome solidarity.

With age, however, I may finally be getting back to enjoying Christmas more. More often now, I can remember that I'm not responsible for all other family members' enjoyment, and that helps.

I'm not sure how my Christmas feelings and memories relate to spirituality. I wonder about the importance of beauty and quality, for revealing God



and worshipping God. I wonder whether giving a gift mainly because of feeling obligated lessens its value. I don't consciously think of gift-giving as a religious act, but maybe it is.

Every year we see again the unique importance of Christmas. People attend church then who rarely attend at other times. At some level, it seems, all of us recognize the message of Christmas as a singularly powerful and life-saving one, even if some of our Christmas customs and memories hide it at times.

Barbara

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tender
mercy of
our God,
the dawn from on
high will break upon
us, to give light to
those who sit in dark-
ness and in the
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guide our feet into the
way of peace.

—Luke 1:78-79

