



Christmas

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Only two gospels recount stories of the birth of Jesus:

- Matthew: Jesus was born in Bethlehem; his father Joseph was told by an angel that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit; Jesus' birth took place when Herod was king; wise men came from the east, following a star and brought gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh;
- Luke: Jesus' birth took place when Herod was king; Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she would conceive and bear a son; Caesar decreed that all should be enrolled, so Joseph and Mary went to his home town Bethlehem; there was no room at the inn so Jesus was laid in a manger; angels told shepherds minding their sheep that a Saviour was born and they visited Jesus in the manger.

Historical facts:

- Most scholars assume Jesus was born between 6-4BC, based on the date of Herod's reign, working backwards from the date he began preaching, and records of the star the Magi followed;
- There is nothing in the Gospels which gives us any indication of the date when Jesus was born. The choice of 25 December would seem to be because the date coincided with the pagan winter solstice, specifically the great feast day of the Mithraic mystery religion, Dies Solis Invicti Nati, or Birthday of the Unconquered Sun, named after the god of light, Mithras, whose birthday was 25 December and which was initiated by Emperor Aurelian in 274 CE. When Christianity spread to northern Europe, Christmas fused with Yuletide, the winter solstice and the pagan Saturnalia festival;
- There is no written record of an annual celebration on 25 December to mark the actual birth of Christ until 354 CE when Julius I was Bishop of Rome. It was not until the Middle Ages that Christmas emerged as the other major date in the Christian calendar to Easter.
- The origins of Santa Claus can be traced to the 4th century Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor (southern Turkey) 280-342CE, who over the next 1000 years became synonymous with a multitude of causes and people, including protecting children. In 1821, the poem 'The Children's Friend' published in America, suggested St Nicholas (Old Sanctclaus) appeared on Christmas Eve.

Has Christianity gone out of Christmas?

- Church of England attendance figures for 2016 show 2,580,000 people attended church at Christmas, 2,490,000 people attended special services for the congregation and local community in Advent, and 2,849,000 attended special services for civic organisations and schools. This represents 4.6% of the population:
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/2016statisticsformission.pdf>
- In 'Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the secular and the sacred', Dr Chris Dearcy University of Kent, suggests people find religion through the secular and nostalgia, so that Christmas becomes a transcendent time. 'Christmas is not just a sacred event in an otherwise profane calendar. It transcends the rest of the year and, for all its materialist and ersatz trappings, is a time when we want to cultivate good, wholesome, edifying characteristics and behaviours.'
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