HO#32

10 Christian Holidays and Beliefs Steeped in Pagan Traditions

Pagan traditions and celebrations preceded the onset of Christianity. Arising spontaneously in the ancient world, holidays and feasts developed in Syria and Egypt, Persia and Mesopotamia, in Gaul and the dark woods of present-day Germany, and in the Roman Empire. The Norse of Scandinavia, the Druids in England and Ireland, the indigenous peoples of the Americas, all celebrated holidays throughout the year. Despite the lack of communication all of these celebrations shared something in common. They all followed the sun. Festivals, feasts, and celebrations, centered around the winter and summer solstices, appeared in all pagan civilizations centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and continued for centuries after. Originally the Christian Church frowned upon these pagan rituals, but when traditions were too difficult to overcome the Church absorbed them, creating the ecclesiastical calendar around their existence. Scholars doubt that Jesus was born in December, even the Biblical account of shepherds watching over their flocks in the fields – which would not have happened in winter – make a winter birth unlikely. But celebrating Jesus birth' during the time of the existing pagan celebration of the solstice was convenient and the Church usurped the holiday. A drunken reveler is assisted by friends during the Roman Saturnalia. Here are some Christian holidays, beliefs, and rituals which are based upon pagan celebrations and beliefs, in both their timing and their traditions.

The Gregorian calendar established January 1 as New Year's in most countries, though the British opposed it until 1752. Wikimedia

New Year's Day

As early as 2000 BCE the Mesopotamians celebrated the New Year, but the timing of the celebration was centered on the vernal equinox, in March. The first calendar of the Romans, which contained only ten months in a solar year, placed the start of the year as March 1. The last four months of today's calendar reflect their position in the year through their names; September contains Septem, Latin for seven, October, Octo meaning eight, and so on. The exact time of the appearance of the months January and February is uncertain, but they were originally placed at the end of the year, rather than at the beginning.

The Roman celebration of Saturnalia, which centered on the winter solstice, spread with the growth of the empire. Exactly when the celebration of the New Year came to be placed at the first of January is disputed, but by 153 BCE much of the Roman Empire was using that date to salute the beginning of a new solar year. This continued through the first five centuries following the birth of Christianity, and in 567 CE the Council of Tours officially banned January 1 as the start of the New Year. Instead, the date of the New Year floated throughout medieval Europe, dependent on the calendar used in differing regions, some using December 25, some March 1, and some other dates, all of which were selected for their astrological significance.

The Gregorian calendar, which appeared in 1582, corrected errors in the Julian calendar and returned the start of the year to January 1. It also made January 1 the date on which Roman Catholics celebrated the Feast of the Circumcision. January 1 was thus established as the eighth day of the Christmas season in the Roman Catholic calendar. While Catholic nations adopted the Gregorian calendar immediately, as demanded by a Papal Bull, most protestant nations did not. Great Britain (and its American colonies) did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752. Until that time New Year's Day remained in March in the British Empire.

In selecting January 1 as the New Year and a feast of the Christmas season, the Gregorian calendar marked a date which was already a day of celebration among the Christian community, absorbed by them from pagan rituals which celebrated the restoration of the sun. The winter solstice is the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, immediately following it the days begin to grow longer in terms of hours of sunlight, and it was this which had been celebrated in the ancient world. The Gregorian designation of the date as a religious feast did little to impair the celebration of the return of the sun, or the traditions it established.

Under the Gregorian calendar, New Year's Day remains the octave of Christmas, but many other cultures and religions celebrate other days as the New Year, including China, Southeast Asia, India, and

in Islam (which uses a lunar, rather than solar, calendar causing New Year's Day to float). Although officially a solemn religious holiday in the eyes of several Christian Churches, the celebration of New Year's Day and Eve are more given over to hedonistic pursuits, as it was before the date was selected to be a major feast day of the Roman Catholic and Christian calendar.

A bust containing relics of St. Valentine, in Poland. Wikimedia

Valentine's Day

February 14 is commemorated as Valentine's Day, or St. Valentine's Day in the calendar of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches, although in the Roman Catholic Church it was relegated to local status in Calendar of Saints, removed as a feast day, "since, apart from his name, nothing is known of Saint Valentine except that he was buried on the Via Flaminia on February 14." Though there were several early Christian martyrs named Valentinus or Valentine, little is known of any of them beyond legend. In 496 CE, Pope Gelasius added Valentine of Rome to the Calendar of Saints, with a Feast Day of February 14, citing his martyrdom in Rome in 269 CE.

February 14 coincided with the Roman celebration of the Lupercalia, which took place February 13-15 and was officially condemned by the same Pope Gelasius. Lupercalia was as old, or older, as Rome itself, with links to Ancient Greeks, who celebrated the god, Pan. The Romans worshiped a similar god named Lupercus. Both civilizations used symbols for gods based on wolves. Lupercalia as a festival was limited to Rome, and rituals connected with the festival used the Lupercal, the cave where Romulus and Remus were nursed by a she-wolf named Lupa, the Palatine Hill, and the Forum, sites associated with Rome's founding.

The rituals of Lupercalia included the slaying of sacrificial dogs and goats, the anointing of designated celebrants with the blood of the sacrifice, and then the manufacturing of crude thongs from the skin on the animals. Following a sacrificial meal the thongs were donned, and celebrants, clad only in the thongs, ran around a circle which included Palatine Hill and the Forum, before returning to the Lupercal cave. Those they encountered during their run were slapped with the ends of the thongs, believing that this would lead to fertility, or in the case of women already pregnant, successful birth. When Pope Gelasius tried to end the festival, the Senate opposed him.

Gelasius wrote that the festival was attended by "vile rabble" but in the face of opposition from the Senate he could not outright ban it. The creation of a feast day to an early Christian (and Roman) martyr was a means of limiting the Lupercalia. There was nothing to connect the Roman Valentine with romantic love at the time, and in medieval Europe, the feast was connected more with the coming of spring than with lovers. That changed in the England of Geoffrey Chaucer, with the emergence of courtly manners among the gentry. Legends of Valentine began to be merged with the fertility and romantic aspects of the Roman festival.

Saint Valentine, or the several different legends of men named Valentine, had nothing in his or their lifetimes to connect them to the holiday as it is celebrated today. Even their existence is murky. On the other hand, the records of the fertility festival of the Lupercalia in Rome are recorded even before the First Republic and were commented on by Plutarch, Tertullian, and other ancient writers. Whether the establishment of a feast for a martyr of which little is known as an attempt to subvert a pagan ritual or to replace it is a matter of conjecture, but it today has more to do with romantic relationships than a martyr of the church.

A baker celebrating Carnival in Berlin in 1956. Wikimedia

Carnival

Carnival was the period between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent, which occurs in northern climes in the dead of winter. During pagan times and emerging into the folklore of central and western Europe, this was a period in which heavy consumption of food was simply a matter of survival, in order to ward off the period of darkness associated with the shorter days of winter. As the days began to grow longer, consumption was increased, especially among the Germanic tribes, to both drive back the evil incarnate in the darkness and encourage the return of the light. As Christianity emerged and the lengthy fast of Lent became a requirement, the folklore remained.

The stocks which were harvested in the fall would not last through the end of the Lenten period, so they were required to be consumed before the fast began, to preclude their going to waste. As the calendar drew closer to the commencement of Lent the consumption increased. Sexual activity was curtailed as part of the Lenten fast, thus it was increased prior to Lent and a corresponding increase among the populace occurred. During the Middle Ages, the Church protested against the pagan practices which increased as the season of Lent approached, leading to the practice of appearing in public disguised, often in the skins of animals, which was a sin in the eyes of the Church.

In the sixth century, the official period of fasting was designated to begin on Ash Wednesday, and Pope Gregory the Great determined that the period of relative gluttony known as Carnival was necessary to the Church Calendar, creating a clear demarcation from the period of fasting and self-denial, Lent. Carnival spread through the Catholic countries and eventually to North and South America through New Spain and New France. In 1466 elements of the ancient Saturnalia festivals of Rome were merged with Carnival by Pope Paul II, requiring Jews, after being fed heavy meals, to run naked through the streets of Rome.

uring the 18th and 19th centuries elements of the Saturnalia remained a part of the Carnival of Rome, and anti-Semitic features remained prevalent. Rabbis of Rome's Jewish communities were required to wear clothes or costumes which brought ridicule on themselves, while they endured the ensuing taunts and abuses of the crowds. When Pope Gregory XVI was petitioned to stop the anti-Semitic aspects of the Rome Carnival in 1836 he responded, "It is not opportune to make any innovation." Carnival was the necessary period of sin, to be atoned for during lent, and freed from by Easter and Pentecost.

Carnival began as a period of consumption by necessity, became a pagan ritual yet again associated with the rebirth of the Sun, was absorbed into the Christian calendar after years of opposition, and eventually became a largely secular festival of a few days preceding Lent. In some locations, such as New York in the United States and in the United Kingdom, it is celebrated without regard to the Christian calendar, with some areas celebrating it in June and others over Labor Day. In Toronto, Canada, it is held on the first weekend of August. Mardi Gras in New Orleans and several other cities in the Mississippi remain part of the Carnival tradition, celebrated in the days before Ash Wednesday.

An angel fights with the devil for the soul of the recently deceased. Wikimedia

The Immortality of the Soul

The immortality of the human soul is a belief of Christianity, one of its core tenets, and one that is based in pagan beliefs that well preceded those of the early Christians. The ancient Babylonians and Egyptians believed in life after death and a path to heavenly reward. The Egyptians worshiped the god Osiris, who was killed but brought back to life. Osiris offered the possibility of new life after death was the judge of the dead, and was thus associated with the cycles of life and death seen in nature, such as the changing of the seasons. After he was brought back to life he was elevated to some form of an afterlife in heaven, which the Egyptians believed he had opened for all who followed him.

The Egyptians came to believe that when a person died his spirit or soul began a journey to a Hall of Judgment, where they would be presented to Osiris, who was assisted with forty-two associates in the form of lesser gods. There they would be able to present their case for entry into eternal life. Those who failed, finding the balance of the scales of justice to be against them, were instead delivered to the underworld, to be torn to pieces by a demonic torments. Thus the concept of heaven and hell, and judgment before a savior, were parts of pagan beliefs in Egypt long before they were part of the Christian canon, which is infused with many similarities.

The pagan beliefs of a savior whom they could follow into an eternal afterlife arose spontaneously in religions throughout the ancient world, including in the Americas. In Europe, they traveled from Egypt and Babylon to Greece, from Greece to Rome and to the emerging Christian communities. The promise of a heavenly reward to the faithful was a feature of many ancient beliefs far removed from Christianity or the Judaism from which it arose following the life and death of Jesus. But in early Christianity and in Judaism the teaching was of an earthly reward following the coming of the Messiah in the latter and the return of Jesus in the former.

The Babylonian teachings of the goddess Ishtar (pronounced Eeshtar) included her bearing a son who died every year to experience a rebirth in the spring. Ishtar was venerated as the Queen of Heaven by the Babylonians and the Assyrians, among others, and was known to the Sumerians as Inanna. The Greek goddess Aphrodite contains many similarities to the legends and myths surrounding Inanna-Ishtar, and early Christians in the lands of the Middle East assimilated many of the traditional stories of Ishtar into those of the Virgin Mary which arose there, rather than in the Church in Rome.

Thus as Christianity spread during the first five centuries of the Common Era pagan rituals, traditions, and beliefs merged with the spread of Christian theology, which absorbed many of them into its own traditions, rather than replace them with new ideas and customs. The burning of incense, used by pagans to drive away evil spirits, remained and remains an intrinsic part of many Christian ceremonies. So does the use of candles, of an altar, and the preparation and presentation of a sacrifice as part of religious worship, all of which had roots in pagan ceremonies and celebrations.

The Roman Festival of Saturnalia celebrated the Winter Solstice and the god Saturn. Wikimedia

The Roman Saturnalia and Christmas

Prior to the reign of Pope Julius I, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth had been ascribed to several different dates of the calendar, including in December, January, March, and June. The biblical description of the event indicated that it was likely not in winter – shepherds would not be tending their flocks in the fields in December or January – and the description of the census being conducted indicated that it was likely in summer when travel would be easier for all citizens to return to the towns of their birth to be counted. Nonetheless Julius I selected December 25 as the date of the birth of Jesus, which corresponded not with a Roman census, but with the Roman festival of Saturnalia.

Saturnalia was a pagan festival which covered roughly the fourth week of December. The Roman god Saturn celebrated by the festival was the god of the harvest, and Saturnalia was about conspicuous consumption of food and drink. During its celebration, no prisoners were executed, and some were granted release. Masters served their slaves at the table during one point of the festival, and a slave was elected to serve as the King of the celebrations. Public feasts were held, and gifts were exchanged, some of them to public associates as jokes, while gifts given privately to family and friends were often of a more substantive nature.

Public business was suspended during the festival, which expanded from the original one-day celebration to one of a week over time. Schools were closed. Gambling was allowed, and slaves were allowed to gamble with their masters, often for stakes which included fruits and nuts. While many Roman festivals required access to the public sites of Rome, such as the Forum, the Colosseum, or the Palatine Hill, much of Saturnalia could be celebrated in the home, and it was thus celebrated throughout the Empire, with the official ceremonies only taking place in Rome, at the Temple of Saturn. Candles were lit to mark the days of the festival as it transpired.

When Julius I declared December 25 to be the birth date of Jesus he tied it in with the pagan festival, perhaps accidentally, and perhaps with the hope that it would provide an alternative holiday for Roman Christians, rather than celebrating the pagan god Saturn. Regardless the celebration of Christmas for the next few centuries coincided with the celebration of the winter solstice, which gained momentum as it coincided with several other pagan celebrations of the solstice in Europe. Christmas in Europe during the Middle Ages was celebrated with overeating, heavy drinking, gambling, and the exchange of gifts, as well as religious ceremonies.

Not until the Protestant Reformation would attempts be made to eliminate the pagan influences during the celebration of what was by then the Christmas holidays, including the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the Feast of the Circumcision, Epiphany, also known as Twelfth Night, and Candlemas. The Puritans banned many of the practices dating to Saturnalia, and throughout Europe some of the old traditions died out. Some later returned. The practices of exchanging gifts, lighting candles (Advent wreaths) and other activities enjoyed during Saturnalia, a pagan festival of the winter solstice, remain part of Christmas today.

The tradition of the yule log began, along with other Christmas traditions, with the pagan festival Yule.

The Norse pagan customs of Christmas

The Nordic peoples of Scandinavia and the Germanic tribes in northern Europe celebrated the winter solstice through the Yule festival, which was held for centuries before the arrival of Christianity in the region. Similar to the Roman Saturnalia, Yule grew over time, from a period of three days to a holiday of twelve days. The festival celebrated the return of the sun and the lengthening of daylight in the days following the solstice, and the god Odin was worshiped, with animal sacrifices and other religious rituals. Religious ceremonies were a central part of the Yule festival, as was feasting, drinking of ale and mead, and singing.

One ceremony which celebrated the return of the sun was the creation of a sun wheel, made by intertwining branches of evergreens and decorated with runes depicting the Norse gods. The sunwheel resembled the modern wreaths which are used to decorate homes and businesses during the Christmas season. The celebration of Yule was associated with the consumption of ale, and the feasts which were held featured boar and goat which were slaughtered sacrificially prior to being cooked and eaten by the celebrants. Toasts were offered and drunk ceremonially, in a specific order to the gods, with the first offered to Odin, followed by toasts to lesser gods, the king, and to those who had died during the preceding year.

When King Haakon I arrived in Norway, he concealed his prior conversion to Christianity in order to obtain the support of local chieftains, all of whom were pagans. It was Haakon who ordered the extension of Yule to twelve days, according to the *Saga of Hakon the Good*, written by a Norse poet in the early thirteenth century. Haakon I ruled in the tenth century, and as he consolidated his rule he began to bring priests and eventually a bishop to his realm, to preach the Christian gospel and baptize converts. The gathering of the tribes and families during Yule offered an opportunity to convert many people at one time and place.

Haakon made attendance at the Yule celebrations mandatory, threatening to tax heavily any who failed to attend the ceremonies, extended them to twelve days, and stipulated what the attendees must bring, including food and ale. The Yule festival had traditionally included the burning of a large log, decorated with runic symbols, the predecessor of the modern yule log. Gradually the heathen customs of the Yule merged with the Christian celebration of Christmas with which it coincided. It was the Norse who first decorated fir trees during the solstice festival, with fruits, nuts, and homemade ornaments reflecting family and ancestors, and other items.

The tradition of singing songs composed for the seasonal celebration was part of the Yule festival long before the Christianization of the Nordic peoples, and many were songs praising the pagan gods and the rebirth of the sun, in a manner akin to the Christian songs of the season, which celebrated the birth of a son. Mistletoe was another symbolic plant used in the celebration of the pagan Yule which remains a large part of the season of Christmas in modern times. According to the *Saga*, Balder, the god of light, had been killed with an arrow of mistletoe wood, and the red berries of the plant were turned white by the tears of his mother Frigga. The white berries resurrected Balder, making mistletoe a plant which could restore life in the pagan tradition.

The singing of Christmas Carols descended from the practice of wassail and other pagan traditions.

Wassailing

The practice of singing carols, both of a religious petition or of celebration, is descended from the pagan practice known as wassailing in some cultures, Yule singing in others, and caroling in yet others. The practice emerged as part of the winter solstice celebrations in varying pagan cultures, seemingly spontaneously, including ancient Greece, Georgia, the British Isles, and the Nordic cultures. Wassailing was the gathering of singers who sang songs of petition, either for gifts from the wealthier landowners or to the gods for the purpose of receiving a good harvest in the coming year, from both the fields and the orchards and vineyards.

Initially, the practice was associated with rowdy behavior, as groups of young men, well-fortified by strong beverages, would enter the houses of the wealthy singing songs demanding gifts, usually more of the same strong beverages. The songs included the threat of remaining on the property until the requisite gift was bestowed. Householders who did not comply were subject to reprisals, which included damage to their property, although violence was relatively rare in the northern climes. Wassailing was part of the Nordic Yule festival, where the songs were prescribed by tradition, and many were recorded in the sagas.

By the middle ages, the practice of wassailing was part of the Christmas celebration, though the pagan songs were in most cases replaced with less religious-oriented songs. The wassail was usually part of the Twelfth Night celebrations, and feudal lords and ladies were wassailed with requests for food and drink. The lords responded with gifts, and the practice of wassailing became little more than a form of begging, though one which was accepted as part of the winter solstice and later the Christmas season. Wassailing was thus another formerly pagan practice which was absorbed into the Christian celebration of Christmas when it was decided that Christmas was December 25.

Another form of wassailing was a pagan practice during the celebration of the winter solstice in which orchards, fields, and vineyards were visited by wassailers. The songs sung in the orchards and fields were to the gods of the earth and harvests, of thanks for the harvest of the preceding season and of petition for harvests of the coming year. By the sixteenth century in England, the orchard wassail included the leaving of bread at the base of trees or hanging in their branches, and the oldest tree in the orchard, which from pagan times was believed to be the spot where the orchard's spirit resided, was given the last of the cider which the men consumed as they moved among the trees.

Throughout the pagan world, the belief in spirits both good and evil prevailed, and the failures of crops and other misfortunes were blamed on the evil spirits which came with the darkness. The winter solstice was a time when the sun began its return for the coming year, and encouraged by its presence following the solstice, evil spirits were believed to be driven off by the singing of songs which evoked the gods, with the singers further fortified by spirits of another nature. Such songs were a part of all of the winter solstice celebrations of the pagan world, and became a part of the Christian tradition when the Christmas season was set during the solstice.

An Irish Halloween in the 1830s, known as snap-apple night. Wikimedia

Halloween

It is easy to forget that Halloween (a contraction of All Hallows Evening) is part of a religious observation of Allhallowtide, which consists of All Hallows Eve, All Hallows Day, and All Souls Day. In the Catholic Church, All Hallows Day is known as the Feast of All Saints. The date was set for All Hallows Day by Pope Gregory III in the eighth century, though the date for All Souls Day was not established until the eleventh century. The three-day Christian observance was and is intended for the remembrance of the saints and martyrs of the Church (All Hallows) and the souls of the faithful (All Souls), with such importance placed on the observation of All Hallows that it was assigned a vigil, Halloween.

Whether the timing of the day now known as Halloween was a deliberate attempt to Christianize a pagan festival or not is a matter of conjecture and debate. What is fact is that All Hallows Day was originally established to be observed on May 1. Two hundred years later it was moved to November 1, making it coincident with the Celtic pagan festivals of Samhain in Ireland and Calan Gaeaf in Wales. The Celts had the curious practice of counting sunset as the beginning of the day, rather than its end which made All Hallows Day begin at sunset on October 31. October 31 was the day of Samhain, which means Summers End in Old Irish.

Samhain was the most important of the four days of the Celtic year which marked the quarters of the year. Samhain was the beginning of the dark season, a time when spirits could more easily cross from the spiritual realm into the physical. The spirits were acquiesced to with food and drink left outside of homes, and the spirits of deceased family members and ancestors were welcomed into the home with places for them set at the table, or by the hearth. Games were played which were said to foretell the

future and included bobbing for apples, and roasting nuts on the fire. Bonfires were lighted and their ashes were used for the telling of fortunes.
The Church tried to eliminate these activities as it spread the Gospel through the Celtic lands, including the outright banning of some of the bonfires, but it could not completely dispel them. All Hallows Eve (which means All-Holy) was intended by the Church to be a day of vigil for the following day which celebrated all of the holy saints and martyrs, and tried to stay the practices of superstition and fortune-telling of Samhain, but with little success. The Celtic festival continued to expand, by the sixteenth century it included a practice called guising, in which people would call on neighbors while disguised to receive gifts of food and drink.
Virtually all of the customs of Halloween, which is a Christian observance, are descended from the rituals of the Celtic festival, with additional pagan practices from others (such as the Jack'o'Lantern derived from the Druids). It became over the years an almost entirely secular holiday, though the Church resisted, and still resists, it is being so considered. Beginning around the middle of the nineteenth century, with expanding immigration of Irish and Scots to America, it emerged as a major holiday in the United States and Canada. It was the immigrants who at home had carved Jack'o'Lanterns from turnips who discovered that the pumpkin provided a more satisfying substitute.
The Wedding Ceremony
The modern wedding, as performed in the Christian Churches and even by civil authorities, contains many traditions, rituals, and other links to pagan beliefs and traditions. The very idea of a father giving a daughter away is linked to the pagan practices which preceded the church by centuries. These too were absorbed into Christian tradition when they proved to substantial to eradicate. Many are based on the belief that they warned away evil spirits, or appeased pagan gods, who would then bestow good fortune on the wedded couple. They come from nearly all of the ancient pagan beliefs and religions, and are reflected in modern wedding ceremonies.
The bridal veil has been traced to ancient Rome, prior to Christianity, where it was worn by the bride to ward off evil spirits which would otherwise ruin her day. It was believed by the ancient Romans that the bride was particularly susceptible to evil spirits on her wedding day, having gone to great lengths to make herself attractive for her wedding. In medieval Europe and during the heyday of arranged marriages, often the first time a groom would see his bride was at the wedding, and the veil became a means of concealing her features until the vows had been exchanged, often to protect a business arrangement between the prospective in-laws.
Another means of protecting the bride and the other members of the wedding party from evil spirits was through aromas. Pagan practices included the bride carrying and wearing different herbs or plants including wolfbane, St. John's Wort, and assorted plants and wildflowers. The pagan belief in the activity of evil spirits also led brides to carry onions, scallions, leeks, or garlic, in order to protect them. The aromatics had a secondary purpose as they were believed to be able to ward off plague, an important consideration when in a crowded area. The bunches of aromatics were the precursors of the bridal bouquet.
Pagan weddings also included escorts for the bride which were the forerunners of the modern bridesmaid. They too, were a response to the presence of evil spirits, and were selected to be sacrificial should the spirits crash the wedding. The bride's escorts were intended to distract and confuse the evil spirits, which they accomplished by being dressed in a manner similar to the bride. Bridesmaids have been traced to pagan traditions in Rome and Greece, Persia, the Nordic tribes, and among the Celts in Ireland and Wales. They too were often heavily veiled, in order to more effectively confuse the evil spirits.
Even the placing of the wedding ring on the so-called ring finger of the left hand is a tradition leftover from pagan practice. Wedding rings themselves were introduced in Ancient Egypt, but it was the Ancient Greeks who established the practice of placing the ring in the traditional location. The Greeks believed that a vein, the vena amoris (vein of love) ran from that finger to the heart, and since the left hand is closer to the heart that was the hand-selected for the wedding ring. Engagement rings also began in

Ancient Egypt as simple bands, diamonds were added by the Romans for the more wealthy of their citizens.

Buddha and acolytes, all adorned with halos. Wikimedia

The Halo

The halo or nimbus is associated with Christianity, with Jesus, Mary, the apostles and saints, and some luminaries of the Old Testament depicted with a radiant light emanating above their heads in paintings, tapestries, stained glass, and on statues and basilisks. The halo, also called a nimbus or an aureole predates Christianity and was present in the works of the ancient pagan civilizations centuries before it appeared as a symbol of the holiest of the Christian sect. In Asian depictions, it is sometimes presented as flames arising from and around the head, and it appears in Hindu and Buddhist works.

It is sometimes referred to in the writings of ancient pagans, including Homer of the Ancient Greeks, who described the light above the heads of warriors in battle in *The Iliad.* The Colossus of Rhodes was crowned with an aura reflecting a type of halo, which was centuries later copied to crown the Statue of Liberty by its French designers. Sumerian writings refer to the glow emitted through the crown of the gods and human heroes, as well as the temples dedicated to them. Roman frescoes depict many haloed figures, as does some coinage which survives, and by the time of Jesus the Roman Emperor was often depicted as haloed.

The halo was thus in use by the pagan religions and cultures long before it appeared in Christian symbolism, another pagan practice which was absorbed by the Christian culture. Not until the fourth century CE did it appear in Christianity, and when it did it was limited to Jesus of Nazareth. In medieval art, Jesus was often depicted with a cruciform halo, with a cross within the aura of the halo, a practice which began as the use of a halo spread to others of the early Christian church. During the fifth century angels appearing in Christian art began to wear halos, which soon spread to depictions of the saints and martyrs of the early Church.

By the fifteenth century, the use of full halos in paintings declined, forced out by the increasing realism practiced by artists. Rather than depicting a full aura emanating from the head and shoulders of the subject, artists began to place a ring above the head, indicating the nimbus. The paintings of Jesus began to lose the cruciform halo, which was replaced with the simple ring, usually golden, above the head. During the Renaissance, halos were often dispensed with entirely, and the subject of the painting was situated in a manner by which natural light could be displayed as coming from behind the subject, another nod to realism.

Like many other symbols of Christianity, the halo was borrowed from the pagan – that is, non-monotheistic – religions which it purported to replace. As it expanded, Christianity used the traditions, festivals, rituals, and symbols of those converted to it, largely to make conversion easier and less threatening to the leaders and traditionalists of the people. As a result, the holidays and traditions of modern Christianity are irretrievably linked to the pagan cultures of the past, handed down by generations and melded with the traditions of other pagan cultures.