

Lena Eisner's Essay

Resolved: That the Jewish child shall celebrate Xmas.

I know the very word Christmas spells trouble, not only among the orthodox Jews, but among the non-Christians who do not like it because to them also it seems to indicate a sectarian festival. But we must know that long before the birth of Christ, the reappearance of the summer solstice was the motive for a celebration. Among the various pagan nations that gave us the most picturesque features of our present Xmas customs, and most of the poetry of the songs and games are rituals. The ancient Goths and Saxons called this festival Yule which is preserved in the Scottish word for Xmas, and also in the name of the Yule log. The ancient Teutons celebrated the season by decorating fir trees, for they thought of the sun riding higher and higher in the heavens as the spreading and blossoming of a great tree. Thus our own Xmas fir tree was decorated as a symbol of the celestial sun tree. The candles represented the flashes and lightning overhead, the golden apples, nuts, and balls symbolize the sun, moon and stars and the little animals hung in the branches, sacrifices made in gratitude to the sun god. After the introduction of Christianity, the ancient feasts were interpreted with a new spirit, to mean the banishment of darkness and ignorance, selfishness, and ill will, and to inculcate and spread the gospel of new light, hope and knowledge, love, kindness, and tolerance.

We must also remember that we are living in a nation whose history, traditions and makeup are essentially Christian and if we are to free ourselves from the ban of exclusiveness and segregation, we should enter into the spirit of these joyous times also -- for we pride ourselves upon our open mindedness, generosity of heart, charity to all and evil to none and Christmas day asks surely for nothing else than the practice of these virtues. To localize the sentiment, let me give you an instance here in San Francisco, we have been accused of lacking in that "get together" spirit which our Southern Sister city Los Angeles has used with such magnetizing force to draw to, and add to her resources. Might we not continue the parallel and say we Jews will lose nothing, but rather gain incalculably by joining with our Christian brethren to help the common cause of humanity, and to spread the gospel of love, peace and harmony.

Who has a better right not only to follow but to lead in the celebration, for was not the greatest teacher, Christ, given to the world by a Jewish mother? If we celebrate a sectional (secular) holiday like our own Thanksgiving Day, the birthday centenaries of great patriots, teachers, philosophers, writers, poets, painters and musicians in a manner befitting their lives and influences, why should we not take part in the commemoration of the birth of the world's greatest guide, philosopher, and friend. How can we excuse ourselves if we forget the noblest figure of all times and ages, who was especially our own. We speak of ourselves as the chosen

people, and like to think that perhaps we were chosen for the greatest achievement of all the peoples --the giving of a Jew who was to make possible a real Christianity of loving kindness, humanity, and fellowship. Why should we not be more tolerant and liberal when even among the Mohammedans, Christ is greatly reverenced and whenever the name of Jesus is mentioned, they always rise in a sign of respect. If we have survived as a race despite centuries of persecution it is because of the older than the ages law of the "survival of the fittest" and we do not need to play up to orthodoxy to hold our own place in the scheme of the world's religions. For long before Christ came, our monotheistic idea was the forerunner to the great thought wave that followed establishing one spiritual ruler of the universe.

Now all this is for those of us of larger growth "lest we forget" we are to represent the examples to our children of the precepts of the world we would have them follow. But the children, bless them, have rights of their own, and children, with deeds of kindness and tender mercy, warm hearted help for the poor and needy, the helpless, and the distressed. Only child of very wealthy Greek parents who left him an immense fortune, he gave always great gifts to the needy but always in secret. There are many stories illustrating his splendid courage, his burning delight in the love of children, his worship by sailors and seamen and citizens, and they are fascinating ones, but time does not permit the tracing of the reasons why he became their patron Saint and guardian and protector, not the history of the different symbols represented in the statues of St. Nicholas after whom 365 churches in England are named -- twice as many as are called after St. George England's patron saint. All along the coast of Europe are chapels erected in his honor and all over the world, great churches are named after him. His is intensely popular among the Laplanders and North Siberian peoples who are not Christians but heathens, and he is adored by all the world. I had timed the date of my world tour so I could be in Bethlehem and Jerusalem during Xmas week and in my walks through both cities, I was led by curiosity to ask many Jewish children whom I saw playing with new toys about their gifts. There, as elsewhere in the world, the answers did not surprise me. The children worship to their Santa Claus as they love to call their Saint Nicholas, and care nothing for the religious side of it. And whether the grownups seek the spiritual side or the children realize only the material object of Christmas, we ought all agree that there is no more glorious anniversary to celebrate than the birthday of one whose chief contribution to the human mind and heart was the greatest thing ever brought to the world, boundless universal love, peace on earth, good will to all men, and that is why the season has such an intimate place in our hearts, and why it's jubilant bells find this echo there;

"Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring happy bells across the snow,  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,

Ring in redress to all mankind.  
Ring out the slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife.  
Ring in the modern modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.  
Ring out the want, the care, the sins,  
The faithless coldness of the times,  
Ring out false pride of place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite.  
Ring in the love of truth and right.  
Ring in the common love of good.  
Ring out old shapes of foul disease,  
Ring out the narrow lust of gold,  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.  
Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kinder hand.  
Ring out the darkness in the land,  
Ring in the tolerance that ought to be.

Mrs. M. S. Eisner  
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San Francisco, Ca. {no date}

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Poem paraphrases  
{In Memoriam, {Ring out, wild bells}  
by Alfred Lord Tennyson

Essay from Lena Eisner folders in the Milton Daniel Eisner (1886-1959) Papers box, Bancroft  
Library at UC Berkeley

Copied by Dave Forrest - August 2019