

'Why I, a Jew, believe Christmas is great'



by **Simon Kelner**

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On Christmas Eve this Saturday, Jews will mark the beginning of Hannukah. Jewish people have not traditionally celebrated Christmas – but non-Christians should unashamedly embrace it.



Starring role: About 81% of non-Christians celebrate Christmas in the USA, according to Pew.

My sister visited me the other day, and could barely contain her disapproval of my Christmas tree. It is not that she is a grinch: it is just that we are Jewish, and she takes these things a bit more seriously than I do.

For me, a Christmas tree – or, indeed, any of the other seasonal traditions in which I enthusiastically partake – has no religious significance at all, and yet I am as wholehearted about this celebration as any Christian could be.

I, as a Jew, love Christmas. And I mean really love it. From decorating the house to stuffing the turkey, from wrapping presents to going to **midnight mass** (yes, I do that too), I enjoy every last minute of it.

“AMID THE MATERIALISM, CONSUMPTION AND DOWNTON ABBEY SPECIALS, I CAN LOCATE A SPIRITUAL DIMENSION TO CHRISTMAS”

Given that I am not overlaying it with a patina of religious importance, I appreciate it as a cultural festival which also marks a time in the year for reflection, contemplation and gathering up one's thoughts about what may lie ahead. So, amid the materialism and the consumption and the *Downton Abbey* specials, I can locate a spiritual dimension to Christmas, but which for me has very little to do with baby Jesus.

I am not, as you have probably deduced by now, a practising Jew. I cannot actually remember the last time I went to a synagogue, and I do not observe the Jewish festivals, but I nevertheless betray the traits of my religious and cultural heritage. I am hopeless at anything practical (I have to find a non-Jewish man to help me if I get a flat tyre), I use the odd word of **Yiddish** in everyday speech, and, recently, I have found

myself pickling jars of cucumbers.

Some time ago, I was toying with the idea of writing a book called *What Jews Don't Do*. This would be a compendium of everything with which we Jews are uncomfortable, like, for instance, car maintenance or going to air shows or snorkelling. And traditionally, of course, the thing that we Jews did not do was Christmas.

I have a vague recollection from my childhood of celebrating **Hanukkah** in a rather half-hearted way (my parents were from the very liberal wing of Jewish observance). But as I went to a school in which Jewish pupils were very much in the minority, I think my parents were subject to peer pressure by proxy to celebrate Christmas, at least by the giving and, in my case, the receiving of gifts.

That must be where my interest in, and passion for, Christmas began. I blame the parents. I also got my love of sport from my father, and the fact that this is a time of year when sports fans can gorge themselves, too, would not have hurt. Even now, I think I may prefer **Boxing Day** to Christmas Day.

Nevertheless, I sign up for the whole kit and caboodle, from the first office party to the last Brussels sprout. But what I am looking forward to most is some quality time with myself in order to reflect on what has been, personally, an **annus pretty horribilis**. (I seem to remember saying that last year, too: perhaps it is a thing which comes from age.) And, in that, I see Christmas as a chance to pause and think, and to focus on self in a way we do not do, or do not have the chance to do, for the rest of the year.

We do not need to believe in the Christmas story. We do not need to believe in God. We all have our private gods with whom we can communicate. And now is as good a time as ever to do that.

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YOU DECIDE

Is Christmas still a Christian holiday?

ACTIVITIES

Find out about a cultural or religious festival in a tradition different to your own. Prepare a two-minute presentation to your class explaining what it represents and how it is marked.

WORD WATCH

Midnight mass – A Christmas Eve tradition in some churches, including in the Catholic and Anglican traditions, marking the beginning of Christmas – although it does not necessarily begin at midnight.

Yiddish – A language spoken by some Jews, initially a Germanic dialect. For nearly a thousand years, it was the primary – and in

some cases only – language of Ashkenazi (central or eastern European) Jews. The Holocaust caused a dramatic decline in Yiddish.

Hanukkah – An eight-day festival celebrated by Jews during winter. It marks the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem in the second century BCE. On each night of Hanukkah, one light on an eight-candle stick is lit.

Boxing Day – Professional football matches

are played in many countries, including England, on the day after Christmas. The author is a Manchester City fan.

Annus pretty horribilis – A pretty horrible year. The term 'annus horribilis' was used by the Queen in 1992, when her family endured multiple relationship breakdowns and fire engulfed Windsor Castle. It is a play on the term 'annus mirabilis', which means a wonderful year.

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 Notes

