

## Responding to False Ideas About Christmas

### Part 3: Christmas Trees Aren't Pagan

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The idea that Christmas trees are pagan has become an annual mantra. Google “Christmas tree origins” and see what the search engine gives you: mere Neo-pagan and Atheist propaganda.

For example: “Many ancient cultures have worshipped trees that have become a symbol of life. The Yggdrasil in Norse mythology is an eternal and sacred Ash tree ... Ancient Celts held nature and animals in high regard, and their Celtic Tree of Life served as a portal to invisible worlds and a source of sacred knowledge ... In ancient India, we come across the Kalpa Tree 'Kalpavriksha' ...an object of adornment and worship. ... Among Native American tribes, Cedar is considered the most sacred tree. According to the Navajo (Dineh), it was the first tree planted by man in the Third World to save people from a flood... the Mixtec, Aztec, Maya, and other cultures considered the Ceiba tree to be sacred. ... in ancient and modern times trees play an important role in traditional cultures around the world. In many mythologies, the tree is represented as the source of life, the center of the universe, and the cosmic tree.”

<https://www.ancientpages.com/2020/12/11/ancient-history-of-the-christmas-tree-and-its-pagan-roots-how-the-forbiddentree-survived-against-all-odds/>

This is a confused mishmash of facts about the religious use of trees. There's a great deal to say the remnants and echoes of truth found in cultures and religions around the world, the relationship between trees and the trees in Eden, and other elements of tree symbolism. But that's a subject for another time. But what does this have to directly do with the *Christmas* tree? Nothing. As a symbol of eternal life and God's light in the darkness, the Christmas tree has a specific focus and meaning- one distinctly Christian in origin.

The roots (pardon the pun) of the Christmas tree are rather obscure. Some have suggested the origins in the presentation of Paradise Plays during Advent. These introduced evergreens (since deciduous trees are without leaves in early winter) for the tree in Eden. Yet that doesn't fully explain the use of an evergreen at Christmas. This seems to emerge in a very specific region of Germany, in fact one specific city: Strasburg. This local usage was first connected with the gifts

(especially apples) left by St. Nicholas for good children, in a kind of miniature Judgment Day ceremony in Advent. The transmission of this local usage to other places as a Christmas practice was very gradual. It only came to all of Germany in 1830 through the influence of Therese, Queen of Bavaria (also originator of Oktoberfest). Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, brought the practice to England, and drawings of the practice in the palace led to widespread imitations throughout the British Empire. Prince Albert sent Christmas trees to many schools and to army barracks. German immigrants seem to have transplanted the use to the United States, and there is some evidence of such usage as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the real spread of the Christmas tree in the USA was due primarily to Charles Follen (German immigrant, professor at Harvard, and education reformer); fellow reformer Harriet Martineau in her story “Little Charley's Christmas Tree” in 1835; and their friend Catherine Sedgwick's story “New Year's Day” published in *The Token and Atlantic Souvenir* in 1836. With such wide publicity, the practice spread quickly after that.

All kinds of legends have been cited about the origins of Christmas trees. These include the 8<sup>th</sup> century act of St. Boniface. He cut down the pagan Oak of Thor and suggested the evergreen tree as a symbol of the eternal life found in Christ instead. Some say Martin Luther began the practice of putting lit candles on an indoor Christmas tree after seeing the stars through an evergreen. The evidence for these connections with the Christmas tree, however, is lacking. The Christmas tree is a pretty recent thing, but it isn't pagan. It is *Christian* in origin. The evergreen points us to eternal life and the triangle shape of the tree should remind us of the Holy Trinity.

Does its recent origin diminish our use of the tree? In no way, as long as we use our decorations to point us to Jesus. Some families also use the Jesse Tree, a very old practice based on Isaiah 11:1-10 (<https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/liturgical-year/advent/the-jesse-tree/>). Some hang a nail in the middle of their tree, pointing forward to the tree of the cross (E.g., look for “The Christmas Nail” on Amazon). Christmons are another more recent development many have found edifying (<https://www.adcrucem.com/collections/christmons>). But **whatever we use and do, let it point us to Our Lord**. For all good things are His and created for His glory (1 Tim. 4:4-5; Col. 1:16; Ps. 19:1-4)!