



Year 6

(Unit 6/b)

3 hours

Sacred and secular Christmas

- *What is the difference between the sacred and secular Christmas?*
- *What would a Christian think Christmas should be about?*
- *Should Christmas be banned for people who are non-Christian?*

Sacred v Secular Christmas

Aim of lessons:

To help pupils differentiate between traditional celebrations which reflect the real meaning of the first Christmas and those that are purely secular.

Many pupils are unaware that even the word 'Christmas' has any religious meaning.

- Write the word on the board and ask if they can see a name in the word. 'Christmas' comes from Christ Mass.
- Ask pupils to look up the word 'mass' in a dictionary.

Why is Christmas celebrated in this country on December 25th?

The Romans decided to replace the pagan winter solstice celebrations with a day for celebrating the birth of Jesus. Jesus is unlikely to have been born in December as the month is too cold for shepherds to have been out in Palestinian fields at night. Ask pupils to find out how and when other countries celebrate Christmas. In Austria the holiday begins on December 6th, in Mexico festivities start on December 16th, while in Spain gifts are not given until January 6th.

- Read an account of the first Christmas.
- Give the class a selection of old Christmas cards.
- Ask the pupils to sort them into those with a religious meaning and those with none. There are likely to be several cards that they are not sure about (i.e. "Do bells count?") which can lead to a class discussion to decide. Pupils can also be asked to look at the difference in the words printed inside.
- Provide pupils with Christmas catalogues from stores such as Boots, Tesco, Sainsbury's or Asda. Working in pairs ask them to find any evidence of the sacred meaning of Christmas in amongst the merchandise. They may find kings, crowns, angels (fairies don't count!) or stars.
- Ask pupils to compile a list of Christmas traditions. The [Why Christmas](#) website has a wealth of information about Christmas customs and traditions from around the world.
- Using the Why Christmas site (see link above) or the book 'What's the Point of Christmas?' ISBN 0 7459 1505 1 @ 99p (available locally from our Resources Co-ordinator at the e-mail address on our Home Page), explain some of the origins of Christmas traditions which have now lost their sacred meaning.

Here are a few examples:

The kind Bishop of Myra (St. Nicholas) in 4thC Asia is said to have thrown money down a chimney to provide an anonymous gift for a poor family. The money landed in the girls' stockings which were hanging up by the fire to dry leading to the traditions of **Father Christmas, Christmas stockings & gold chocolate coins**. Father Christmas has only been depicted in red and white since an advertising campaign by Coca Cola early last century.

Evergreen trees have been used as a symbol of everlasting life ever since the 8th century when St. Boniface, an English missionary to Germany, stopped a child being killed in the woods as a sacrificial offering. He suggested that the child's life should be spared and that a small fir tree nearby could be cut down instead. Martin Luther (Germany 1540) was said to have been the first person to bring a tree indoors at Christmas and put candles on it as a sign that God was welcome in his home (fairy lights). Prince Albert made the Christmas tree popular in this country.

Delicious food was baked in small open pies (called 'shrid pyes' - later known as **mince pies**) as a reminder of the baby Jesus in the manger. In France they bake a cake with a crown on the top (a Galette des Rois) which they eat on 12th night. Inside the cake is a hidden token and who ever finds it is allowed to be 'king or queen for the day'

Christmas carols used to be 'caroles' which were dances performed at religious gatherings.

The Bible does not tell us how many Magi came to visit Jesus. Three gifts - gold, frankincense and myrrh are mentioned which has led to the traditional idea of there being just three wise men - there could have been dozens!

- Play a selection of secular Christmas music - *Jingle Bells*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day* etc and then listen to *Silent Night* or *In the Bleak Mid-Winter* *Silent night* was written by Phillips Brooks who spent Christmas in Bethlehem in 1866. *In the Bleak Mid-Winter* was written by the Victorian artist and poet Christina Rossetti.
- Ask pupils to explore the real meanings of the words.
- Look at the poem by Gordon Bailey, *Christmas/sacred or Christ/massacred*. You can find a copy of the poem at the end of the story about [Josh's birthday](#), also by Gordon Bailey. You may like to use the story to reinforce the idea of Christmas without Christ.