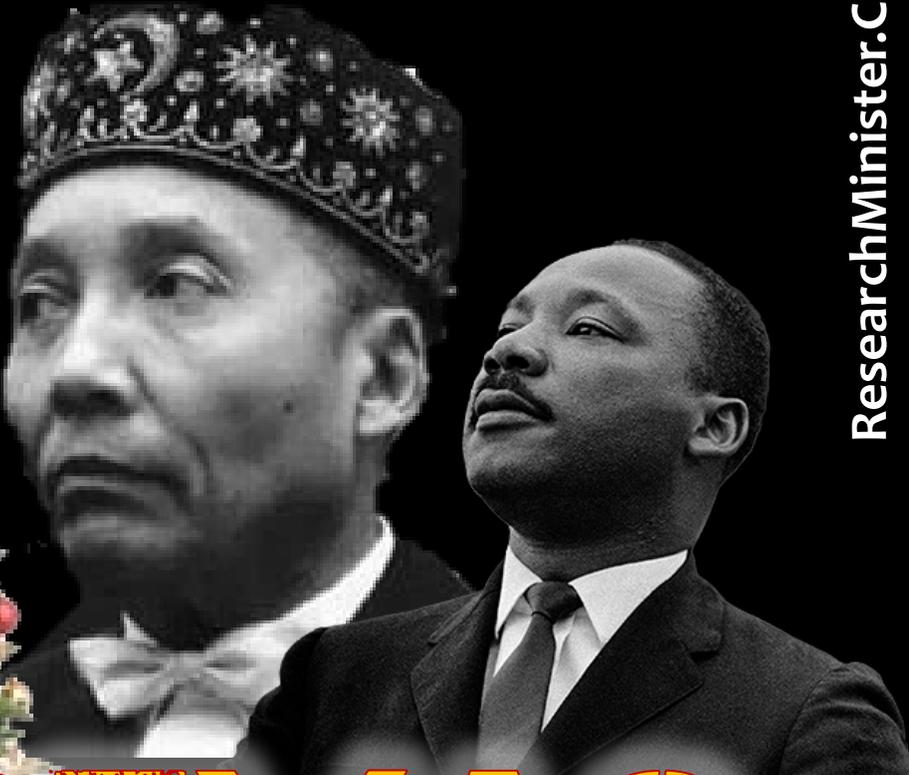


The Wise Men Speak

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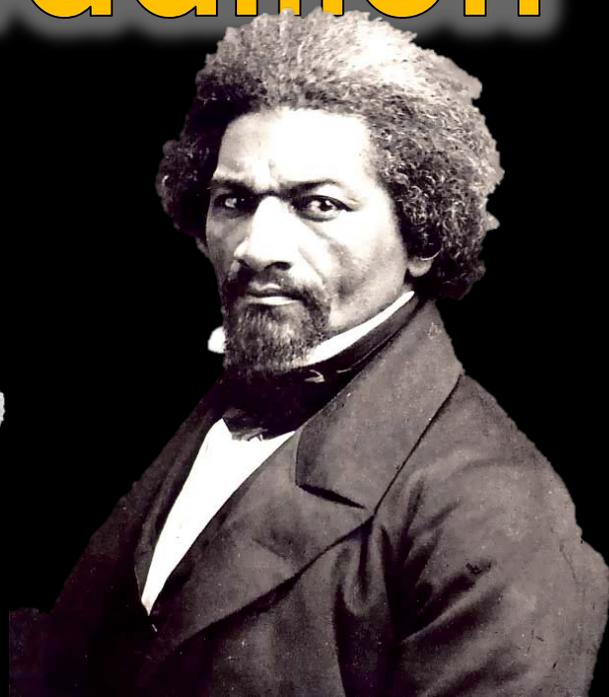


CHRISTMAS:

The Ugly Truth of a Cherished Tradition

Gifts Under The Tree

- Paganism
- Conspicuous Consumption
- Weakening the Freedom Struggle
- Encouragement to Sin and Vice



The Wise Men Bring The Gift of Truth!

“Christmas: The Ugly Truth of a Cherished Tradition”

Frederick Douglass, *New Duties and Relations*, 1882

“We were induced to drink, I among the rest, and when the holidays were over we all staggered up from our filth and wallowing, took a long breath, and went away to our various fields of work, feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go from that which our masters had artfully deceived us into the belief was freedom, back again to the arms of slavery. It was not what we had taken it to be, nor what it would have been, had it not been abused by us. It was about as well to be a slave to master, as to be a slave to whisky and rum. When the slave was drunk, the slaveholder had no fear that he would plan an insurrection, or that he would escape to the North. It was the sober, thoughtful slave who was dangerous and needed the vigilance of his master to keep him a slave.”



Whose Christmas ?



The ‘traditional’ English Christmas was invented between the 1830s and 1880s. Its invention was directly connected to the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation and only indirectly connected to religion. To claim that the English Christmas was invented in the nineteenth century is to raise the objection that the Nativity was then almost two thousand years old. Although the Nativity may well have been two thousand years old, it and Christmas are not really the same thing.

Constantine the Great, who was Roman Emperor between AD 285 and 337, established Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire in AD 325. In AD 336 the new Christian Church of Rome established 25 December as the date of the Nativity, the central event in the developing Christian calendar. There is absolutely no scriptural evidence for this date.

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Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *A Study in Mithraism* cited in the essay “Dr. King and Hon. Elijah Muhammad Expose Christmas as Rich Man’s Pagan Holiday” by Demetric Muhammad

*“When Mithraism is compared with Christianity, there are surprisingly many points of similarity. Of all the mystery cults, Mithraism was the greatest competitor of Christianity. The cause for struggle between **these two religions was that they had so many traditions, practices and ideas that were similar and in some cases identical.**”*

Dr. King goes on to highlight the fact that because of these similarities “many believed the Christian movement itself became a mystery cult.” He then lists 6 areas where Mithraism and Christianity are virtually indistinguishable from one another: “(1) both regarded Sunday as a holy day. (2) **December 25 came to be considered as the anniversary of the birth of Mithra and Christ also.** (3) Baptism and a communion meal were important parts of the ritual of both groups. (4) The rebirth of converts was a fundamental idea in the two cults. (5) The struggle with evil and the eventual triumph of good were essential ideas in both religions. (6) In both religions only initiates who passed through certain preliminary phases of introduction were admitted to the mysteries which brought salvation to converts.

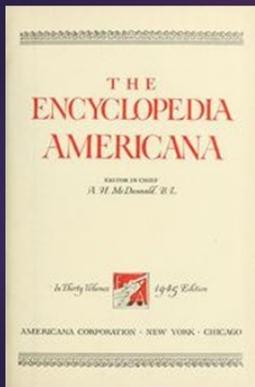
We get a sense of Dr. King's feeling upon these non-traditional histories of the origin of Christianity in his acknowledgment that there are so many similarities between Christianity and Mithraism that ***"the general effect is almost startling."***

Dr. King concludes his short essay with a bold confession. He writes, ***"That Christianity did copy and borrow from Mithraism cannot be denied..."*** Many of the views, while passing out of Paganism into Christianity were given a more profound and spiritual meaning by Christians, ***yet we must be indebted to the source.***

It is a shame that we have not been properly introduced to Dr. King as a religious scholar. For as a religious scholar we see him come into agreement with the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad who taught for many years that the celebration of Jesus birth on December 25th is of pagan origin.

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Whose Christmas?



The *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1944 ed., says: "Christmas. . . . It was, according to many authorities, not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian church, as the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than their birth. . . ." (The "Communion," which is instituted by New Testament Bible authority, is a memorial of the death of Christ.) "... a feast was established in memory of this event [Christ's birth] *in the fourth century*. In the fifth century the Western Church ordered it to be celebrated forever *on the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol*, as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed."



Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Our Saviour Has Arrived

So, you go out and spend your hard-earned money to worship with white people. They force you under disguise and defraud you into worshipping the birthday of that wicked old Nimrod on December. And if you knew the truth of him, you would not dare to worship it...

Nimrod gets a great ovation on the 25th day of December; one of the most wicked leaders that ever lived....

The great false worship of December 25 is a lie. The worship of Jesus' birthday, which they claim is on the 25th of December, is one of the most open lies against the truth. And the authors of their religion, Christianity, know that they are wrong in trying to tell the world that that is the day Jesus was born on....

God taught me that the 25th day of December is the day of the birth of Nimrod, and that the scientists know that that is Nimrod's birthday. Nimrod was a leader, born as an opponent of Moses' teachings...

Hands Up! Don't Buy!



Christmas was invented first and foremost as a commercial event. Everything that was revived or invented – decorations, cards, crackers, collections of carols, going to a pantomime, visiting Santa Claus and buying presents – all had one thing in common: they could be sold for profit.

Therefore, it does not make historical sense to bemoan the fact that Christmas is too commercial; it was invented as a commercial festival. It was commercial from the very start. Part of what was being celebrated was the achievements of industrial capitalism – conspicuous consumption in a market economy....

What the new urban middle class invented was a Christmas with a firm emphasis on commercialism. Its central organising figure was Santa Claus/Father Christmas and not Jesus Christ. If a nativity was being celebrated, it was the birth of a market economy underpinned by the new power of industrialisation. The profoundly commercial-secular nature of the invention has made possible its incredible international success. Even an officially atheist society like the People's Republic of China has no difficulty in embracing the festival (see Figure 1.1, p. 23). –John Storrey



Ralph Woodrow's Babylon Mystery Religion cited in "Dr. King and Hon. Elijah Muhammad Expose Christmas as Rich Man's Pagan Holiday" by Demetric Muhammad

As proof that the "authors" and "scientists" of the Christian faith know the truth of which Mr. Muhammad and Dr. King have attested to, we bring to the "witness stand" noted scholar and author Ralph Woodrow who wrote an excellent book entitled **Babylon Mystery Religion**. On page 151, Woodrow quotes from James George Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* that, "**The largest pagan religious cult which fostered the celebration of December 25 as a holiday throughout the Roman and Greek worlds was the pagan sun worship-Mithraism...**This winter festival was called 'the Nativity' –the 'Nativity of the SUN'". Woodrow continues "Was this pagan festival responsible for the December 25 day being chosen by the Roman Church?" Woodrow cites The Catholic Encyclopedia to provide a definitive answer to this question, "**The well-known solar feast of Natalis Invicti—the Nativity of the Unconquered Sun- "celebrated on December 25th, has a strong claim on the responsibility for our December date!"**

Moreover, Woodrow writes "as pagan solar customs were being 'Christianized' at Rome, it is understandable that confusion would result. Some thought Jesus was Sol, the sun-god!"

Woodrow's research and admissions even strike a blow at the gross consumerism of the Christmas 'winter festival.' He condemns the rationalization that gift exchanges should be the primary way to celebrate the birth of Jesus. According to Woodrow "Some have sought to link Christmas gifts with those presented to Jesus by the wise men. **This cannot be correct.** By the time the wise men arrived, Jesus was no longer 'lying in a manger' (as when the shepherds came), but was in a house (Matthew 2:9-11). This could have been quite a while after his birthday. **Also, they presented their gifts to Jesus, not to each other.**

On the use of Christmas trees Woodrow states "The Christmas tree as we know it, only dates back a few centuries, though ideas about sacred trees are very ancient. An old Babylonish fable told of an evergreen tree which sprang

out of a dead tree stump. **The old stump symbolized the dead Nimrod, the new evergreen tree symbolized that Nimrod had come to live again...**"

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Hands Up! Don't Buy!



First Christmas Card -1843



Indulgence towards excess is pictured in numerous cartoons and Christmas cards from this time onwards. It is apparent in what has been identified as the first proper Christmas card, now dated 1843, designed by John Calcott Horsley, ...It proved instantly popular with those who could afford it; a thousand copies were lithographed, hand-coloured and sold for a shilling each,...The central panel portrays a happy family feast, with the foreground figures toasting the viewer with goblets of what is presumably wine, and a small child being given some in the middle of the picture. It did attract some adverse comment for its encouragement of drunkenness. This was to set the scene for many card illustrations to come...

Herbert Armstrong's *The Plain Truth About Christmas* cited in "Dr. King and Hon. Elijah Muhammad Expose Christmas as Rich Man's Pagan Holiday" by Demetric Muhammad

In addition to Woodrow popular 20th century Christian evangelist and scholar Herbert Armstrong ruffled many feathers when he published his popular **The Plain Truth About Christmas**. In it he notes that "*recognized historical authorities show Christmas was not observed by Christians for the first 200 to 300 years-a period longer than the entire history of the United States as a nation!*"

Rev. Armstrong's scathing revelations and uncovering of Christmas' true origin also agrees with that of the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On page of 11 of his pamphlet size tome Rev. Armstrong discusses Nimrod. We read "*From many ancient writings, considerable is learned of this man who started the great organized worldly apostasy from God that has dominated this world until now. **Nimrod was so evil, it is said he married his own mother, whose name is Semiramis.** After Nimrod's untimely death, his so-called mother-wife, Semiramis, propagated the evil doctrine of the survival of Nimrod as a spirit being. She claimed a full-grown evergreen tree sprang overnight from a dead tree stump, which symbolized the springing forth unto a new life of the dead Nimrod. **On each anniversary of his birth, she claimed, Nimrod would visit the evergreen tree and leave gifts upon it. December 25th was the birthday of Nimrod. This is the real origin of the Christmas tree.***"

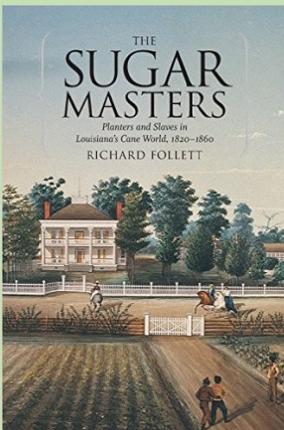


God taught me that the 25th day of December is the day of the birth of Nimrod, and that the scientists know that that is Nimrod's birthday. Nimrod was a leader, born as an opponent of Moses' teachings. Allah taught me in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad, to Whom Praises are due forever, that this man was born in the last 300 years of Moses, 2,000 years. The whole of the scope of independent teachings of Moses is 1,700 years and not 2,000 years. Because of this Nimrod breaks the 2,000 years by 300.

William W. Freehling cited in *THE TIME O' ALL TIMES? MASTERS, SLAVES, AND CHRISTMAS IN THE OLD SOUTH* by Shauna Bigham and Robert E. May

Although William W. Freehling also presents Christmas within the context of a master class's "psychological tyranny" over its subjects, he emphasizes the holiday more as a safety valve for slaveowners than for their slaves: masters, unsure of their legitimacy, translated the ostentatious, ceremonial bestowing of presents upon slaves, which elicited thanks from recipients to their "generous masters," into "annual paternalistic re-elections."

Frederick Law Olmsted cited in *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* by Richard Follett

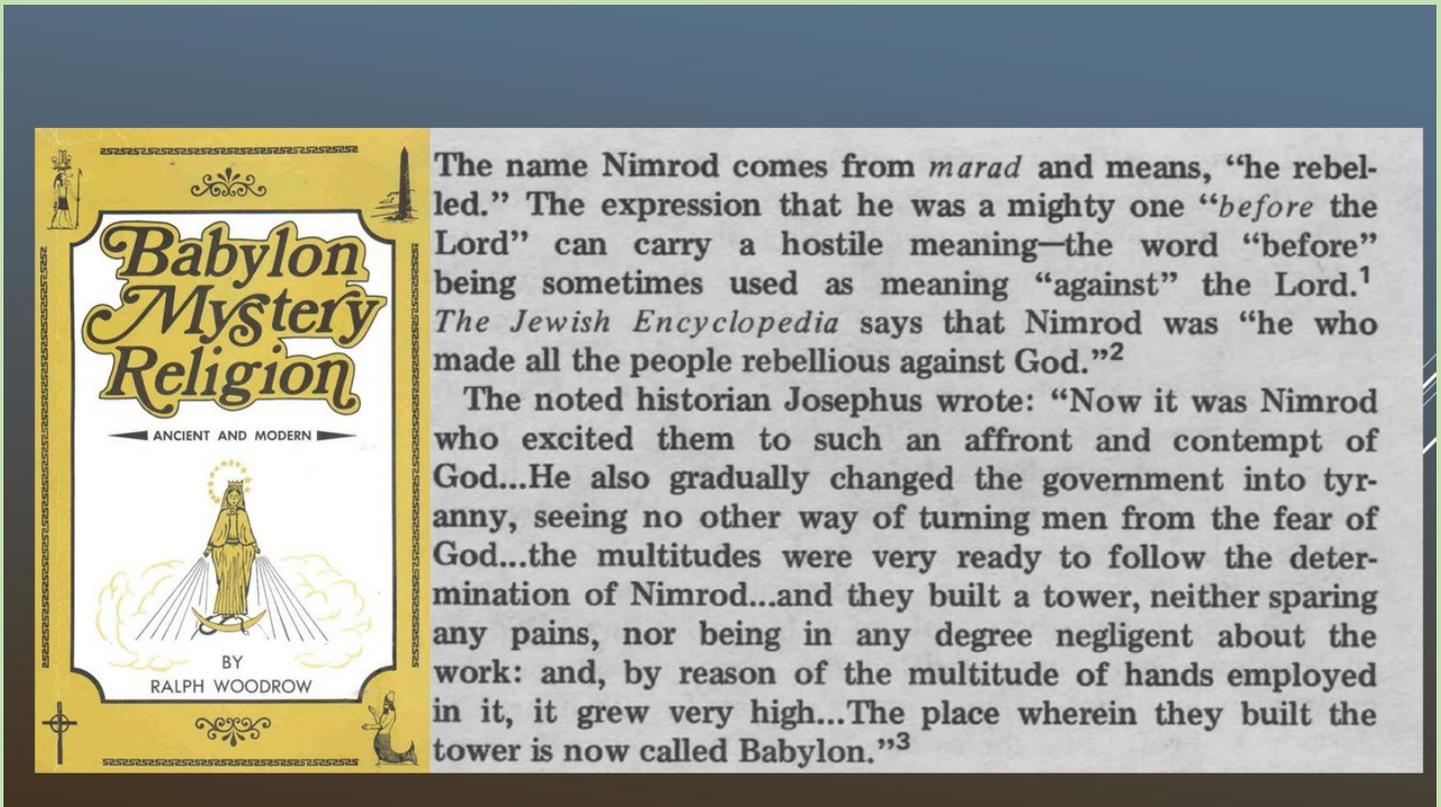


Frederick Law Olmsted was not alone in concluding that "men of sense" found Christmas rewards a profitable way to create powerful economic and social ties between the enslaved and the enslavers. In parts of the South both before and after emancipation, a system of market paternalism served to motivate workers, reduce monitoring costs, and reaffirm the planters' class power. Market paternalism, one historian argues, "must be built upon an illusion which conceals the commercially oriented nature of the employment contract." Slaveholders accordingly had to veil their economically focused incentives beneath a façade of paternal reciprocity that seemingly bound the slave and his or her interests to the goodwill of the master. Such masking allowed slave masters to disguise their incentives – and the prevailing market dynamics of the master-slave relationship – with the sheen of paternalism. In order to do this, planters had to "handcraft their social authority link by link" through gifts, Christmas rewards, acts of apparent charity, and both practical and

symbolic rituals.

Olmsted further noted that both master and slave enforced a community-wide work discipline, and that "if any slave had been particularly careless or lazy, it was remembered at this Christmas dole...The effect of this arrangement was to give the laborers a direct interest in the economical direction of their labor: the advantage of which is said to be

very evident.” For the sake of a few hundred dollars – a pittance in the annual costs of making sugar-the master succeeded in creating a highly-effective labor regime. Slackers received no payment at all, and the slaves self-policed themselves by exerting pressure on laggards.



The name Nimrod comes from *marad* and means, “he rebelled.” The expression that he was a mighty one “before the Lord” can carry a hostile meaning—the word “before” being sometimes used as meaning “against” the Lord.¹ *The Jewish Encyclopedia* says that Nimrod was “he who made all the people rebellious against God.”²

The noted historian Josephus wrote: “Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God...He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God...the multitudes were very ready to follow the determination of Nimrod...and they built a tower, neither sparing any pains, nor being in any degree negligent about the work: and, by reason of the multitude of hands employed in it, it grew very high...The place wherein they built the tower is now called Babylon.”³

Cotton Mather, Puritan Sermon 1712

“[T]he Feast of Christ’s Nativity is spent in Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, and in all Licentious Liberty...by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, by rude Reveling...”



Robert E. May

Historians, by illuminating Christmas as the quintessence of slaveowner paternalism, lose sight of continuing patterns of oppression even in the great majority of households and on the vast majority of plantations where masters conceded the holiday to their bondpeople. Accounts of antebellum southern Christmases tend to obscure Christmas brutality against slaves, as owners struggled to maintain what they believed were necessary levels of discipline over the holiday. “He was badly whipped about last Christmas,” explained a runaway slave notice in a Huntsville, Alabama, paper in 1826. For more stark commentary, consult Bennet Barrow’s journal for 1836: “House Jerry and Israel chained during Christmass Jerry for general bad conduct—for a year and better—Israel bad conduct during cotton picking season.” Former slave Frances Patterson remembered that her master beat her nine-year-old brother so badly on Christmas for failing to keep cows out of a wheat field, that the boy bled to death over the following days. One former slave, interviewed by a Cincinnati paper in 1938, considered it poetic justice that his mistress died on Christmas morning, a day after denying her slaves’ requests for flour and threatening them with a whipping.³⁶

THE TIME O’ ALL TIMES? MASTERS, SLAVES, AND CHRISTMAS IN THE OLD SOUTH

Shauna Bigham and Robert E. May

Virtually all important studies of slavery in the Old South have something to say about Christmas. Scholars generally describe Christmas as the most important holiday in the plantation calendar—a time when slaveowners, “even the severest,” displayed their most paternalistic inclinations. During the Christmas season, masters and mistresses lavished feasts, presents, and days off from labor upon household servants and field hands alike. Thus Charles Joyner discovered that “no holiday was more important than Christmas” in the “annual cycle of off times.” William H. Wiggins reports Christmas as “the largest and most universally observed slave holiday.” Albert J. Raboteau presents it as “the most festive holiday of all.”¹

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¹ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1956), 169; Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, IL, 1984), 134; William H. Wiggins, Jr., *O Freedom! Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations* (Knoxville, 1987), 26; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978), 224; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, IN, 1995). John W. Blassingame, however, suggests that Christmas was not more important than holidays celebrating “the end of labor on the crops before harvesting.” Blassingame, *The Slave*

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Although few accounts of slavery give any recognition of slave-trading operations during Christmas, they did occur with some frequency. Francis W. Pickens, for instance, broke up several slave families through purchases during the 1846 Christmas season. Domestic slave traders, rather than suspend operations over the holiday, continued the most horrific practices of their craft. Thus Thomas Burton spent his Christmas in 1845 taking a coffle of chained slaves along frozen roads from North Carolina to Mississippi. When he reached Alabama, Burton apparently decided that the slaves were far enough removed from familiar surroundings that they could be safely unshackled. On December 24, 1831, slave trader Paul Pascal spent the day scheming how to smuggle slaves into Louisiana in defiance of that state’s short-lived ban on slave

importations. Yet another slave trader reported, on December 31, 1859, that three thousand slaves were awaiting sale in the New Orleans market. Where are these slaves in the literature on antebellum southern Christmases?³⁷

Furthermore, many slaveowners who hired out slaves, which often separated loved ones at least temporarily, made their arrangements for the coming year over the holiday. Southern newspapers during December carried large numbers of advertisements alluding to slaves available for hire. Many slaves, therefore, had to do their Christmas celebrating under the psychological cloud that New Year’s might see them elsewhere.³⁸

The Absence of Justice and Proposed Boycotts

The Illustrated News November 25, 1963 Page 2

SUPPORT CHRISTMAS BOYCOTT



The
Profoundest
Gift

We believe in Christmas, because it is the birthday of the Prince of Peace and Brotherhood; the birthday of the Christ who chased the money-changers from the temple; who said, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," who said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, for such is the Kingdom of Heaven." This is the Christ we will celebrate; the great Jewish carpenter-philosopher who was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

Thousands of atrocities committed against humanity and the Negro people from slavery to the present time, have gone unpunished. And now we are mocking the Prince of Peace; throwing bombs in the Holy Place of God; blasting the brains of His children against the high walls of His Tabernacle in Birmingham; turning His day of days into a sabbath ritual of blood and destruction. We are guilty. Not only those who planted the bomb, but those who condone injustice and segregation and thereby give it sanction; those who profit from it and those who do not work to eradicate it. We are all guilty.

And who among us can participate in life as usual, in business as usual, or even Christmas as usual?

Let us celebrate Christmas this year in a way that will bear witness to the life and love of Jesus. Let us recreate from His Life that image including all the Adams and Eves and their countless generations. Let us repent this most recent of our crimes against humanity and God; the murder of our tender six of Birmingham, with the fervent determination that it will never be sixty, or six hundred, six thousand, or another six million.

This year we will give our children the profoundest gift of all; the gift of truth, which is the gift of love. And we will have the duty to tell them that Santa will not come this year because he is mourning for the children of Birmingham, who will get no gifts this year or the next year or the next. And for the children too young to understand we will make gifts and toys with our hands from loaves and cans and string and last year's toys and paste and paint and wood and love.

To the sellers of trees and trains and pins and pianos, we urge you to understand and to pledge with us, that this Christmas shall come from our hearts and minds, not from our pocket-books. To the ones who must give something, notwithstanding, we urge you to give to the organizations and institutions working to build and strengthen the moral and religious fibre of our nation.

It is in this spirit that we ask all Americans of all colors, creeds and religions, to join us in this determination to put Christ back into Christmas and His Great Life back into moral and religious perspective.

JAMES BALDWIN
OSSIE DAVIS
RUBY DEE
OSNETTA GORDAN
JOHN O. KILLEEN
LOUIS LOMAX



Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century by Robert E. Weems

Although black consumers achieved a stunning victory in Birmingham during the spring of 1963, the national spotlight tragically returned to that city a few months later. On September 15, a powerful dynamite blast damaged the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four young black girls who were attending Sunday School. In addition, two black men were killed during disturbances following the bombing. These incidents, among other things, led to a call for a national black boycott during the Christmas season in late 1963.

The proposed Christmas boycott was the brainchild of an ad hoc organization known as "Actors and Writers for Justice." The members of this group included the author James Baldwin, the journalist Louis Lomax, and the husband-and-wife acting team of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. Baldwin, the apparent organizer of Actors and Writers for Justice, told one public rally that what occurred in Birmingham "cost this nation the right to be called Christian." Moreover, he declared: "We have got to bring the cat out of hiding, and where he is hiding is in the bank."

From the standpoint of American businesses, the call by the Actors and Writers for Justice for a national black boycott during Christmas could not have come at a worse time. Ten days after the Birmingham murders, the Center for Research in Marketing released the findings of a study that, among other things, examined African American attitudes concerning consumer boycotts. When asked the question "If a prominent Negro were to tell you to boycott against a store or brand, what would you likely do?" 89 per cent of the blacks interviewed replied that they would follow the suggestion.

Armed with the data from the Center for Research in Marketing, along with a fervent belief in the righteousness of their proposal, Actors and Writers for Justice sought the support of other black leaders for a national boycott during

the Christmas shopping season. To their disappointment, they received a lukewarm response. Of the six major civil rights organizations, only SCLC endorsed the proposed boycott. The other groups, most notably the NAACP, expressed doubt as to whether blacks could indeed carry out such a dramatic demonstration of economic retribution.

The October 17, 1963, edition of *Jet* magazine provided insight into the intracommunity debate concerning the feasibility of the Christmas boycott. An article that asked the question "Should Negroes boycott Santa Claus?" started by acknowledging the concerns of Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and other critics. Yet, after surveying recent developments regarding the behavior and growing power of black consumers, the essay's author asserted:

Bluntly put, available research, even that from white sources, scream loudly that Negroes, just like Congressman Adam Clayton Powell urges, are ready at a moment's notice to "withhold the dollar to make the white man holier."

Ironically, while the October 17, 1963, issue of *Jet* appeared to subtly support the proposed Christmas boycott, the magazine's publisher, John H. Johnson, staunchly opposed such an action. In an October 16, 1963, interview with *Advertising Age*, Johnson blasted the proposed boycott as a senseless endeavor proposed by a minuscule segment of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, he stated, children should not be denied the right to enjoy Christmas.

Johnson's aversion to the Christmas boycott may have been based on more than a concern about children. By 1963 corporate marketers increasingly viewed advertising in *Ebony* and *Jet* as an ideal means to reach the black consumer market. Thus, Johnson, pleased with rising advertising revenues, had a vested interest in promoting African American consumption (see chapter 4).

Because of the strength and influence of its opponents, the 1963 black consumer boycott of Christmas shopping never came about. Still, just the threat of this action had a profound effect on white American business. As study after study revealed the growing importance of African American consumers to the U.S. economy, U.S. companies actively sought to befriend, rather than antagonize, black shoppers. In fact, as the June 20, 1964, issue of *Business Week* noted, businessmen played an important role in smoothing the passage and the acceptance by whites of the monumental Civil Rights Act of 1964. Still, white business support of this watershed legislation appeared to have much more to do with potential profits than with altruism.

20c

SHOULD NEGROES
BOYCOTT
SANTA CLAUS?

OCT. 17, 1963

BARBARA TRENT

Pretty New Jersey
model helps showcase
newest styles in the
Ebony Fashion Fair

New
Fashion
Setters



SHOULD NEGROES BOYCOTT SANTA CLAUS?

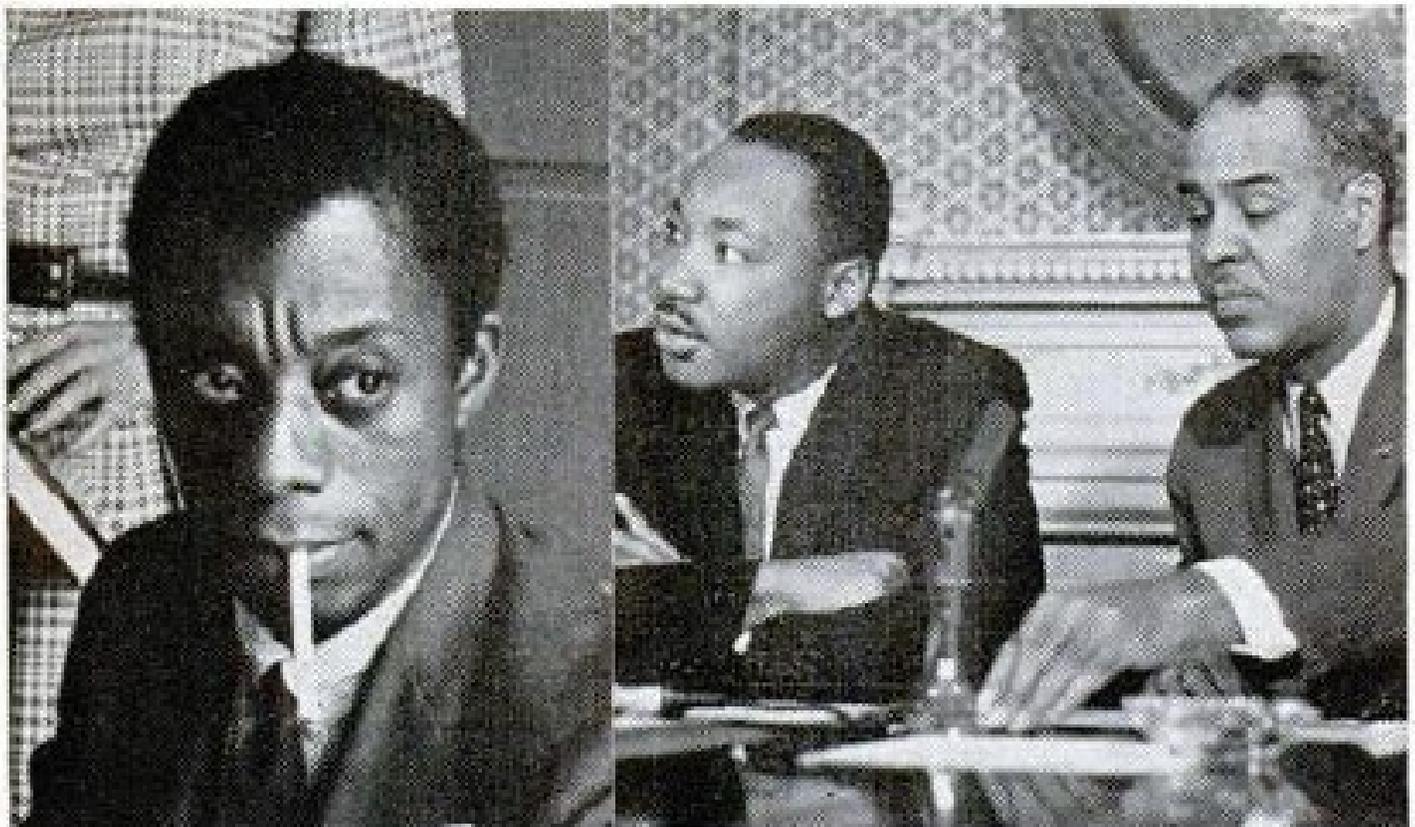
NEGROES READY TO GO FOR BROKE

By JOHN H. BRITTON

There are ghetto children, comedian Dick Gregory cracks, who don't believe in Santa Claus because they think no white man will dare come into their neighborhood after dark. The red-suited, bewhiskered old man may soon be the butt of some more barbs this year, but they won't be funny. On the eve of Christmas, 1963, will keyholes at Negroes' homes be stuffed with lead to keep out the jolly old gentleman? Will chimneys be filled to the brim with cement? Will fires be left burning in fireplaces to make it too hot for Santa to land? Will Negroes boycott Santa this Christmas?

The answers, and the method and scope of a boycott depends upon which leadership opinion prevails, or if leaders can agree on the matter.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., wants a "sacrificial Christmas," commemorating the deaths of six children killed in



Baldwin (l) and Dr. King agree on Xmas boycott, but approach it differently; but NAACP Wilkins won't lock out Santa.

AT THE 'WORD' FROM LEADERS



Gus Courts was pioneer fighter in Mississippi and knows power of money squeeze. Though he is a Santa, he hails boycott.

Birmingham; the ambush of Medgar Evers, and all others who died this year in the struggle for equality.

Roy Wilkins' NAACP steers clear of any "consumer strike," or boycott that is not organized well enough to guarantee successful impact. A sweeping boycott without the full resource and power of all civil rights groups behind it is "a dangerous risk," says Wilkins' top aide, Dr. John Morsell. "If," continued Dr. Morsell, "a merchant opens his cash register and finds that he made only \$11 less than he did before the boycott started, he obviously will not be impressed."

Civil rights leaders (especially CORE) are aiming at the big cities. Some, attempting to assure that Negro kids won't be punished by a sweeping national boycott, are designing boycott projects to carry out "constructive goals" (like merit employment demands) as well as to commemorate the death of the Birmingham bomb victims. Other groups say they favor selective buying campaigns at stores which

When Americans banned Christmas

The Week Staff

How did the first settlers celebrate Christmas?

They didn't. The Pilgrims who came to America in 1620 were strict Puritans, with firm views on religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Scripture did not name any holiday except the Sabbath, they argued, and the very concept of "holy days" implied that some days were not holy. "They for whom all days are holy can have no holiday," was a common Puritan maxim. Puritans were particularly contemptuous of Christmas, nicknaming it "Foolstide" and banning their flock from any celebration of it throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. On the first Dec. 25 the settlers spent in Plymouth Colony, they worked in the fields as they would on any other day. The next year, a group of non-Puritan workmen caught celebrating Christmas with a game of "stoole-ball" — an early precursor of baseball — were punished by Gov. William Bradford. "My conscience cannot let you play while everybody else is out working," he told them.

Why didn't Puritans like Christmas?

They had several reasons, including the fact that it did not originate as a Christian holiday. The upper classes in ancient Rome celebrated Dec. 25 as the birthday of the sun god Mithra. The date fell right in the middle of Saturnalia, a monthlong holiday dedicated to food, drink, and revelry, and Pope Julius I is said to have chosen that day to celebrate Christ's birth as a way of co-opting the pagan rituals. Beyond that, the Puritans considered it historically inaccurate to place the Messiah's arrival on Dec. 25. They thought Jesus had been born sometime in September.

So their objections were theological?

Not exclusively. The main reason Puritans didn't like Christmas was that it was a raucously popular holiday in late medieval England. Each year, rich landowners would throw open their doors to the poor and give them food and drink as an act of charity. The poorest man in the parish was named the "Lord of Misrule," and the rich would wait upon him at feasts that often descended into bawdy drunkenness. Such decadence never impressed religious purists. "Men dishonor Christ more in the 12 days of Christmas," wrote the 16th-century clergyman Hugh Latimer, "than in all the 12 months besides."

When did that view win out?

Puritans in the English Parliament eliminated Christmas as a national holiday in 1645, amid widespread anti-Christmas sentiment. Settlers in New England went even further, outlawing Christmas celebrations entirely in 1659. Anyone caught shirking their work duties or feasting was forced to pay a significant penalty of five shillings. Christmas returned to England in 1660, but in New England it remained banned until the 1680s, when the Crown managed to exert greater control over its subjects in Massachusetts. In 1686, the royal governor of the colony, Sir Edmund Andros, sponsored a Christmas Day service at the Boston Town House. Fearing a violent backlash from Puritan settlers, Andros was flanked by redcoats as he prayed and sang Christmas hymns.

Did the Puritans finally relent?

Not at all. They kept up their boycott of Christmas in Massachusetts for decades. Cotton Mather, New England's most influential religious leader, told his flock in 1712 that "the feast of Christ's nativity is spent in reveling, dicing, carding, masking, and in all licentious liberty...by mad mirth, by long eating, by hard drinking, by lewd gaming, by rude reveling!" European settlers in other American colonies continued to celebrate it, however, as both a pious holiday and a time for revelry. In his *Poor Richard's Almanac* of 1739, Philadelphian Benjamin Franklin wrote of Christmas: "O blessed Season! Lov'd by Saints and Sinners / For long Devotions, or for longer Dinners."

So Christmas was finally accepted at that time?

No. Anti-Christmas sentiment flared up again around the time of the American Revolution. Colonial New Englanders began to associate Christmas with royal officialdom, and refused to mark it as a holiday. Even after the U.S. Constitution came into effect, the Senate assembled on Christmas Day in 1797, as did the House in 1802. It was only in the following decades that disdain for the holiday slowly ebbed away. Clement Clarke Moore's poem "A Visit From St. Nicholas" — aka "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" — was published in New York in 1823 to enormous success. In 1836, Alabama became the first state to declare Christmas a public holiday, and other states soon followed suit. But New England remained defiantly Scrooge-like; as late as 1850, schools and markets remained open on Christmas Day. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow finally noted a "transition state about Christmas" in New England in 1856. "The old Puritan feeling prevents it from being a cheerful, hearty holiday; though every year makes it more so," he wrote. Christmas Day was formally declared a federal holiday by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1870.