

## C.S. Lewis on “X-Mas and Christmas”

Advent is a wonderful season. We anticipate with hope the coming of our Savior, and this can only fill us with joy.

Advent is also rather sobering, however, because each year the season seems to bring more, and more jarring, reminders that the surrounding culture is not very interested in Christmas as the celebration of the Incarnation. The dominant preparations for Christmas — shopping, etc. — paradoxically remind us that ours seems to be less and less a Christian culture. This dechristianization is even evident in some well-intentioned criticisms of Christmas commercialism. These exhort us to recover the “true meaning” of Christmas, but then present that supposed “true meaning” as some kind of smarmy, sentimental humanitarianism that has no reference to Jesus.

This problem is older and more deeply rooted than one might at first think. Many of the most famous popular Christmas songs are utterly secular in character. I have nothing against those songs, and in fact I like some of them very much (like this [one](#), for example). But many of them were written generations ago, in some cases before World War II. And it is striking and sad that a culture that still considered itself Christian at that time could produce art that celebrated the trappings of Christmas with no reference to the Christ child himself.

This problem was already evident to C.S. Lewis many years ago, and he probed it with far greater wit and originality than I could ever hope to muster in his memorable piece “X-Mas and Christmas: A Lost Chapter from Herodotus.” As the title suggests, he presents a mock historical account of an island called “Niatirb” — which, the observant will note, is “Britain” spelled backward. Most of the inhabitants, the historian notes, suffer greatly from their efforts to conform to a winter celebration known as X-Mas. Their customs require them to buy cards and gifts for each other, with the following effects:

*But having bought as many [cards] as they suppose to be sufficient, they return to their houses and find there the like cards which others have sent to them. And when they find cards from any to whom they also have sent cards, they throw them away and give thanks to the gods that this labour at least is over for another year. But when they find cards from any to whom they have not sent, then they beat their breasts and wail and utter curses against the sender; and, having sufficiently lamented their misfortune, they put on their boots again and go out into the fog and rain and buy a card for him also. And let this account suffice about Exmas-cards.*

*They also send gifts to one another, suffering the same things about the gifts as about the cards, or even worse. For every citizen has to guess the value of the gift which every friend will send to him so that he may send one of equal value, whether he can afford it or not. And they buy as gifts for one another such things as no man ever bought for himself. For the sellers, understanding the custom, put forth all kinds of trumpery, and whatever, being useless and ridiculous, they have been unable to sell throughout the year they now sell as an Exmas gift.*

The preparations for X-Mas are so exhausting, we are informed, that the citizens sleep until noon on the day of the festival. Then they become drunk and eat five times as much as on any other day. The account continues that, strangely enough, there are among the inhabitants of Niatirb a minority that celebrate their own sacred feast, called Crissmas, on the same day as X-Mas.

*And those who keep Crissmas, doing the opposite to the majority of the Niatirbians, rise early on that day with shining faces and go before sunrise to certain temples where they partake of a sacred feast. And in most of the temples they set out images of a fair woman with a new-*



| *born Child on her knees and certain animals and shepherds adoring the Child.*

What is strange about this, Lewis's chronicler reports, is that some among the Niatiribians contend that X-Mas and Crissmas *are in fact the same celebration* — a view that he rejects as utterly incredible, since they seem to have nothing to do with each other.

The whole wonderful piece, which is very much worth reading, can be found in the collection of Lewis essays [\*God in the Dock\*](#), but is also available various places on the web (as [here](#)).