

A Professor Looks at Christmas and Cramming

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In the annual cycle of the Earth's rotation, each day gets shorter and darker than the last until the point of maximum darkness is reached. That day is the winter solstice and it occurs around the time of Christmas. Thereafter the days gradually get longer, each day lighter than the last, until the point of maximum light is reached. That day is the summer solstice. And so it goes, year after year, an annual cycle of days marked by the gradual lengthening and shortening of light.

Not surprisingly, every religious and cultural tradition has a major celebration at the time of the winter solstice. The pagans of the ancient world celebrated a festival of the sun. Although there is no historical evidence for the precise day or even month of Jesus' birth, the early Church Fathers wisely placed it at the time of the Winter solstice. And what a perfect placement! At the darkest time of the year, when the light of the world seems close to being extinguished, the "light" of Christ is born into the world.

Of course, everywhere on the planet there continues to be a major celebration at the time of the winter solstice. Perhaps it is due to the global dominance of American media and cultural forms, but for whatever reason, Christmas, shorn of its purely religious connotations, has become the planet's default choice for a global holiday. In this spirit, "Merry Christmas" is often taken to mean not anything religious in a sectarian sense but just a general wish for a happy holiday. Indeed, in our country sometimes even Jews, Hindus, and atheists have Christmas trees. In so doing they celebrate the season of glad tidings and universal peace without necessarily meaning anything religious.

A backlash has begun, however, as, increasingly, there are calls during the holiday season to put the Christ back into Christmas. Christmas has become so completely decadent and commercialized, it is said, that it is time to put Christ back into Christmas. There is a lot to recommend this, of course, but one down side would be that, in the wrong hands, it runs the risk of turning an increasingly global, non-sectarian holiday into a more limited and merely sectarian celebration. This would cut so many people out of the holiday that the world would have to invent something else to function as the equivalent of a global celebration at the time of the winter solstice. Then, too, many around the world think it is more important to put Christ back into Christianity than to fuss about the secular popularity of Christmas.

Still, the charge that Christmas has become decadent carries some sting, and given the general perception that our way of life is becoming increasingly decadent, I want to take a moment to clarify just what it means to be decadent. To this end, I want to analyze a completely decadent practice on campus we are all familiar with—cramming for exams.


It is important to understand what is decadent about cramming. Cramming is not decadent because it is the worst possible way to learn, with the information crammed into short-term memory staying only for the shortest of visits. And cramming is not decadent because none of the truly important things—the deeper meaning of information, the ability to analyze and apply it, a living sense of its importance—can be crammed, so that cramming itself actually distorts learning. No, a thing only becomes decadent when

it loses its spirit. Cramming is decadent because there is no spirit and vitality to it. Indeed, it is decadence that makes learning seem like a boring and difficult chore and prevents it from being a wonderful fulfillment of our inner Being.

It is interesting to consider in this context what Aristotle said about fulfilling our inner Being. He said that the greatest good in life, the very substance of our happiness, is not, as it is commonly said to be, good health and success in business. These things are good, to be sure, but they are not the greatest good because you can have them and still be unhappy. The greatest good, Aristotle said, is a feeling of fullness of life. And he further said that this feeling comes from two main types of activities—from (1) seeking justice and from (2) pursuing truth. Now if we add to these two the feeling of fullness that comes from (3) appreciating beauty, then we have a complete trinity of learning—Truth (the best that can be thought), Beauty (the best that can be made), and Goodness (the best that can be done). Once again, cramming is decadent because it both lacks and sucks out the soul-fulfilling vitality of the love of truth, beauty, and goodness. It is dull and flat, not spirited and alive.

About 75 years ago a little known British philosopher, C.E.M. Joad, in his book, *Decadence*, pointed out that we often mistakenly describe as "decadent" the expression of great delight in the sensations of taste and the pleasures of the body. This exuberance in bodily pleasure may rightly be called pagan, he said, but it is manifestly not decadent. Properly understood, decadence is the opposite. To be decadent is to lack

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Full time professor of geography Don Gogniat is an administrator for the Commonwealth College for

International Programs at Penn State Mont Alto. He has been to sixty-five countries in his own travels and has completed three semesters at sea.

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You can contact Professor Gogniat at DAG1@psu.edu or Peggy Russo at U7K@email.psu.edu for additional information.