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25th December 2004

**NSS President Dennis Cobell broadcast an alternative Christmas message on BBC London on 25 December 2004.**

Here is the (unedited) text of his address:

"Every year as a secularist I am asked if I celebrate Xmas: when I say 'yes', I am asked, 'why?' Since I am not a Christian, what right have I to join in? Obviously pious Christians celebrate Xmas because it marks the birth of a saviour - but the number of practising Christians is quite small, and much of the winter binge has little to do with 'Christ-Mass'. In addition, apart from Christians, there are other faiths at this time of the year with their festivities: Hindus have just had their Diwali with lights and fireworks, Jews their Hanukah, and this year Muslims have had Eid. For those of us secularists, with no faith, we can refer back to pagan winter-times which pre-date much of modern Xmas.

"Our Xmas festival is nothing but a continuation of the winter solstice festivity; for the ecclesiastical authorities saw fit, about the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century to transfer the date of Christ's nativity from January 6 to December 25", wrote Sir James Frazer in "The Golden Bough" - a book on Magic & Religion published in the early 20th century. The Eastern Orthodox churches still observe the January date. In earlier times the church took over much that passes for our modern Xmas: the two main ones were the Roman Saturnalia - a time of feasting and drinking, exchange of gifts, and when masters and slaves changed roles. In northern Europe there was the ancient Yuletide associated with the winter solstice.

"Thus it is entirely appropriate for secularists to join in: the yule-log was burnt to mark the return of the sun at the darkest time of the year. Many now speak of SAD - seasonal affective disorder. Having some fun, brightening up the cold days of shortest daylight, and a break from work has nothing to do with what Christians believe about the birth of Christ. Though it has to be said that the notion of a Virgin Birth - somewhat disregarded by many modern churchmen - has its roots in many other religions and folk tales from ancient Egypt and Greece. Both Buddha and Zoroaster are reputed to have come from virgin births according to some myths.

"What of our more modern customs? We decorate our homes with holly & ivy - evergreen plants staying green throughout the winter. Mistletoe is a revival from Celtic religion and was sacred to the Druids. The Xmas tree was made popular here when Prince Albert - Queen Victoria's consort - placed one outside Windsor Castle in 1841. Xmas cards, with some early examples displaying family rather than religious, scenes, really took off with the introduction of the - ah fond memories - penny post in 1840.

"As for eating and drinking - there was a time in the seventeenth-century when Puritan Christians

opposed the levity and licence this brought about. Such items as mince pies derive from consecrated pagan cakes. The Xmas pudding - the traditional round and flaming one - is a symbol of the rising of the sun from its winter lethargy and the optimism of rebirth- looking forward to the brighter days to come, and then on to Spring. All this is associated with the natural cycle of the seasons. Sun worshippers are part of this tradition; some are lucky enough to make an overseas escape. An entirely secular reason for celebrating at this time.

"Xmas is often spoken of as a time of 'peace & goodwill'; a quite inappropriate association with the war and strife caused by the zealots of faiths. Of course, as secularists we cannot believe in the truth of the nativity tale about Christ's birth; anyway, much of it is recognised as historically inaccurate by theologians. But so long as it is put alongside pantomimes - which parents & children enjoy at this time of year - I can see no reason for objecting to it. It is a fairy story - angels singing in the sky and wise men coming to see a baby Jesus; however, if David Blunkett's legacy of a Bill to outlaw Incitement to Religious Hatred goes on the statute book I may have to be careful what I say about this in the future!

"Secularists thus have plenty of reason for joining in, alongside those of faiths other than Christianity. As one 19th century - Ingersoll - secularist/freethinker said: "the time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here, but the way to be happy is to help others to be happy". So Season's Greetings or a 'Merry Christmas', one and all!"