



Newsletter nr 24

December 2010

Contact : info@aepl.eu

Christmas or diversity of traditions

Christmas is celebrated on 25th December. It is a very coveted date in history and not only for the Christian churches. According to tradition Jesus of Nazareth was born on that day. But tradition is one thing and natural phenomena another.

The pagan living in the northern hemisphere used to celebrate the return of light on...25th December. Our early ancestors were frightened by the fact that, around 25th December, the days were growing shorter and shorter. They feared that darkness would settle for ever, the earth would turn sterile since deprived of light, and that they would die of hunger.

In fact, daylight shortens until the winter solstice on 22nd December, and then it remains more or less stable for three days. And to the relief of us all, the sun resumes its ascension on 25th December. This return of light was the occasion of grand pagan celebrations. It is no coincidence if we still celebrate Christmas with a profusion of lights and candles. It is also interesting to note that the German word for Christmas is Weihnachten, meaning the sacred nights i.e. the nights between 22nd and 25th December.

The 25th December is fascinating for many people: in the IVth century, a monk named Denis the Shorter, attempted to calculate Christ's date of birth. Did he just make a random guess by picking the 25th? However, according to several historians, Jesus was possibly born around Easter, which is an important Jewish date. This might explain why Mary and Joseph could not find accommodation since so many people were visiting Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Denis the Shorter was not the only one to pick that date! Indeed, a long time before him, the Romans worshipped Mithra, born on... 25th December.

Later on, in the beginning of the XIXth century, Americans gradually created their own version of St. Nicolas. One thing leading to another, through poems and illustrations, they transformed St. Nicholas, originally introduced by Belgian, Dutch and German immigrants and celebrated on 6th December, into Santa Claus.

They found St. Nicholas too "Catholic" with his mitre, crook and robe. They thus shortened the robe and gave him a jacket and a pair of trousers, substituted a cap for the mitre, got rid of the crook and gratified him with boots and a sledge pulled by flying reindeer. His feast day was moved from...6th to 25th December.

Gradually, the name Saint Nicolas was changed into Sankt Nicholas and finally Santa Claus. The Americanisation of the European Saint Nicolas was quite a success.

During the First World War, the American troops introduce their American version into Europe. This was also a great success in spite of the resistance of some French and German priests or vicars who had consistently claimed that the presents to the children at Christmas were so many gifts from little Jesus. In Europe Santa Claus became Père Noël in French and was given similar names in other countries.

.....

The supporters of the EAFT belong to a variety of European traditions. But beyond the different beliefs we may hold, whether we celebrate the return of light, Chanukah or Christian Christmas, we all share a common and symbolic search for the Light to overcome Darkness.

The members of the Board of Management of the EAFT wish you the very best for 2011. May this coming year be filled with happiness.

The Board of Management of EAFT-EU

(Author TVDH)