



Christmas spurned

by Patrick Wright

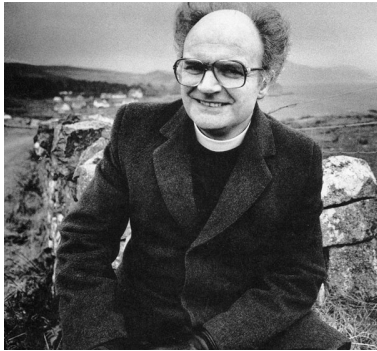
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Christmas would hardly be Christmas without the vicar railing against the secular excesses of the occasion. All over England, gentlemen of the cloth rise up to stress the true religious meaning of the festival and to distinguish it, with varying degrees of severity, from the God-forsaken binge that takes place in its name.

Objections take a very different form in Scotland, and especially in the Western Highlands and Islands, where Presbyterianism has its stronghold. Far from lamenting the way Christ has been taken out of Christmas, devout protesters here are outraged by the idea that the Son of God should ever have been dragged into this heathen ceremony in the first place.

In these parts, people still talk about the storm that blew up in the late Seventies over a Christmas tree at Evanton primary school, near Dingwall, north of Inverness. The headmaster, Ian MacDonald, a Free Presbyterian, removed a Christmas tree brought into his school by 'a certain group of people'. The next year, he recalls, the same parents and teachers demanded that carol-singing practice be held within school hours. Mr MacDonald forbade that too, at which point his director of education suspended him.

Similar trouble broke out only a couple of years ago on Waternish, one of the finger-like northern promontories of the Isle of Skye, where an innocent Canadian exchange teacher made the mistake of bringing a Christmas tree into her classroom. James Tallach, the Free Presbyterian minister on the nearby island of Raasay, says of the controversy that followed: 'She meant well, but she hit the cliff-face travelling at 100 miles an hour.'



Mr. James Tallach, the Free Presbyterian minister on Raasay

Scottish Presbyterians have long justified their rejection of Christmas in scriptural terms, but they could also claim history in support of it. Ben Pimlott, who completed his father J.A. R. Pimlott's study *The Englishman's Christmas*, confirms that the standard English vicar's line about 'putting Christ back into Christmas' is 'absolute tosh'. We are much closer to the origins of Christmas, he says, in our profane behaviour: the binge came first.

Christmas has certainly never been a purely Christian moment. It wasn't until the fourth century AD that the Nativity was established as a separate feast, and there is no evidence in the Gospels to support the identification of the birth of Christ with 25 December. Indeed, that was the date of the Roman winter solstice. The early Christian festival took shape against a pagan background and incorporated pagan features: feasting, the exchange of gifts, the display of excess at a sparse time of the year, the ceremonial use of evergreens (thought to have symbolised fertility), and the suspension of ordinary business.

The medieval Church refined the hybrid conventions of the festival. St Francis of Assisi used Christmas to convince simple people of the humanity of Christ. In 1223 he is reputed to have set up the first Christmas crib to illustrate his 'mellifluous words' about 'the Child of Bethlehem'.

For 17th-century Puritans, Christmas was an infernal affair and they condemned it for its popish origins and also for the gaming and general voluptuousness with which it was associated: they objected to the 'popish' mince pies, to the 'pagan' evergreens, to the very word 'Christmas' which, they pointed out, incorporated the Roman 'Mass'. At first, the Puritan Long Parliament insisted on extinguishing only what it considered

to be the worst excesses of the occasion. But pressure mounted from doctrinaire extremists, prominent among whom were the Scottish Presbyterians, who had long since secured a complete ban on Christmas in their own country, and England followed suit in 1644.

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But how does the modern - and commercialised - Christmas look to the heirs of Scottish puritans who managed to get the festival outlawed as a 'horrible abomination' in the 17th century? The Rev Donald Macleod is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free Church College in Edinburgh. He confirms that the Scottish response to Christmas originally consisted of a puritanical rejection of one more 'English popish ceremony'. There was no biblical warrant for it, says Macleod, so the day was not celebrated.

Since then the response has fragmented, along the fissiparous lines of Scottish church history. The Church of Scotland, the established presbyterian Church, which has some 800,000 confirmed members, softened its stand in the 19th century, and opted for conformity with the Anglican liturgy and calendar. But other Churches remain opposed to Christmas: the Free Church of Scotland, which broke away from the Church of Scotland in 1843, and now has 30,000 members; and also the much stricter Free Presbyterian Church, which split from the Free Church in 1892. The Free Presbyterians had a membership of about 6,000 - at least until May 1989, when the Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, was suspended from his position as an elder for attending Catholic - and therefore 'idolatrous and blasphemous' -Requiem Masses for deceased fellow judges. The Church then split again.

Professor Macleod grew up in the heart of Free Church country on the Hebridean island of Lewis, and he recalls that elements of Christmas were always there, albeit only in the home. Christmas trees are certainly not unknown, and parents no longer refuse to hear mention of Father Christmas. Professor Macleod accepts this, but is not uncritical of Christmas. He shares his Church's aversion to images of Christ and is repelled by the whole 'cult of babyhood' that comes with Christmas. Indeed, some Free Church members still express outrage at 'Away in a Manger', the carol which they see as reducing the awesome Saviour to a little baby whose meekness was summed up in the line, 'No crying he

makes'. As one young minister, Iain Campbell of Snizort, on Skye, explains, the Christmas cult 'keeps the Saviour in a cradle, where he is a harmless babe and can't influence or touch or break into people's lives'. The point, these objectors stress, is not that Christ was born, but that he died for our sins.

Christmas, says Macleod, brings 'acute pains of conscience' for members of his Church, but he suspects that it might have become inescapable. Peer-group pressure is enormous, he says, and the running is made not by any church but by the big stores, the advertising agencies and the secular media, which have targeted children and built up terrible pressure on devout parents at the very point where their religion makes them most susceptible. The Free Church has its reservations, but it is considering giving ground to the advancing English Christmas. The festival may lack a scriptural basis, but it inclines the secular population towards the Church like no other event of the year, and people have begun to wonder whether it isn't a foolhardy Church that keeps its doors closed for the occasion.

Professor Macleod suggests a possible precedent, too. There is no scriptural mandate for funeral services, but we hold them, so why not an additional service at Christmas as well? Speaking for himself, Professor Macleod could easily imagine preferring Father Christmas as an idea of the deity to the mere abstraction that is left once liberal theologians have done their work: 'At least Santa Claus suggests a personal God.'

The Free Presbyterians, meanwhile, continue to hold out. Situated between Skye and the mainland, the remote island of Raasay has long been known as a bastion of hard-line Free Presbyterianism and, in the words of a disapproving mid-19th-century visitor, 'the purest spiritual pessimism'. The Free Presbyterian church stands above the village, white and unadorned except for the uncompromising words of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans: 'The wages of sin is Death; but the gift of God is Eternal Life.' The Rev James Tallach has a congregation of 80 on an island where the population has dwindled to about 150. Mr Tallach, a qualified medical doctor, came to Raasay in the early Eighties having spent 13 years at a mission hospital in Zimbabwe. Neither the Free Church nor the Church of Scotland manages to maintain a full service on the island, but Mr Tallach soldiers on.

Sitting in the manse next to his church, Mr Tallach explains that the Free Presbyterians seek to base their worship and practice on the Bible; they ask what is legitimate or right or profitable to do in the worship of God. Less rigorous Churches may follow the convenient principle that you can do whatever seems suitable so long as the scriptures do not explicitly forbid it.

But that would never do for the Free Presbyterians, says Mr Tallach, adding that the confused state of the Church of England only goes to show what happens when vicars prefer to engage in 'dialogue' rather than preach the Word of God. Mr Tallach feels no such reluctance. He preaches the Bible, and this does indeed mean preaching hell as well as heaven. But Mr Tallach is a kind man who hates sin rather than sinners, and he will also talk about 'the power of the keys' with which the truly repentant may unlock the gates of heaven. His services, which are quite without trimmings or ritual, last for two hours. There is a psalm, prayers and some reading from the Bible, but the sermon is at the centre, and Mr Tallach customarily preaches for little short of an hour.

Mr Tallach deplores Christmas as 'sheerly a heathen festival' which was allowed into the Church at a low point, when attempts were being made to spread the gospel by 'sweetening' and 'ameliorating' its message. He knows that Christmas receives no mention from any of the Apostles, and that it had no place in the early Church. As for the story of the Nativity, this is a decadent confection that simply doesn't add up: it is surely obvious, for example, that shepherds wouldn't be out in winter. The whole event is 'deeply offensive', 'encouraging sheer superstition' and transgressing the Second Commandment which forbids 'graven images'.

Mr Tallach declares himself unimpressed by the way southerners allow themselves to be 'awash with sentimentality for one day in the year', and then happily plunge back into the materialist way of life in which all that matters is 'grabbing what you can'. The English Christmas only serves to confirm the people's rejection of God: 'Even the plastercast Jesus on the mantelpiece doesn't delay them much,' he says, with a contemptuous shudder at the thought of such tawdry idolatry.

Free Presbyterianism may have thrived on the isolation of places like Raasay, but the world is catching up fast. Nowadays, the village shop even stocks *The Independent*, although the shopkeeper is said to be convinced that

the paper is a weekly, so irregularly does the copy ordered by the Raasay Outdoor Centre turn up. Mr Tallach himself has a television set, which he watches in a guarded and selective way.

He turned it on one recent evening to watch an 'Aids Update' and there, at the push of a button, was Ruby Wax. Glossy-lipped and lascivious, she leaned forward into Raasay's manse to advocate 'safe sex' and condoms all round. She was, so Mr Tallach judged, 'treating us like animals' and addressing children as if they were 'alley cats' rather than moral creatures. Faced with a catastrophe like Aids, he says, all our culture can offer is 'mechanical Advice'. 'What a counsel of despair,' concludes Mr Tallach, drawing on his medical knowledge to point out that condoms don't always work. Even at the mechanical level, 'safe sex is highly unsafe - a better name for it would be Russian Roulette.'

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Raasay primary school is a bright and cheerful place. Sandra Smith, the teacher, has eight pupils of different ages and from different denominational backgrounds. She herself was raised in the Church of Scotland, but she's aware of the sensitivities that attach to Christmas on Raasay, and certainly doesn't want to step on anyone's toes. She won't dwell on the Nativity and there is certainly no question of there being a crib in the school, but Christmas would be celebrated nevertheless.

There would be a Christmas tree, and a Christmas party with presents given out by Santa Claus. Inclined to play down the religious side, Mrs Smith treats the festival as an opportunity to demonstrate the value of caring and sharing. She was preparing a 'Christmas entertainment' for the end of term, with the children singing songs, both Gaelic and English, and performing a little play in which Pooh Bear will fall out of Santa's sleigh and get picked up to demonstrate what friends are for.

Mr Tallach knows the school well. It stands only a hundred yards down the brae from his church and, as school chaplain, he goes down regularly to talk to the children - always recognising, he says, that some of the children are not Free Presbyterians. However, he had no plans to attend on the evening of Friday 13 December. He knew what was coming. 'It's called a Christmas party,' he said: 'I don't have anything to do with it myself.'

The winter nights fall early in Raasay, but the uncrossed stretch of darkness that will have stood between his manse and the celebrations in the little school can hardly have been as thick as the endless night that was said to stretch over Skye and Raasay before the religious revivals of the 19th century. 'Darkness covered the land, and gross darkness the people,' the less than impartial historian the Rev Alexander MacRae wrote nearly 90 years ago. 'Drunken and riotous excesses abounded . . . they were practised in connection with the most sacred events. At funerals great quantities of ardent spirits were consumed before lifting the body . . . The most outrageous orgies were indulged in: bagpipes were played, songs sung, filthy tales and jests recounted.' Nothing like that would be going on at the gentle entertainment provided for parents at Raasay school. Mr Tallach, however, would still keep his distance.

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Across the water in Portree, on the Isle of Skye, the more elderly Free Presbyterian minister Fraser MacDonald preaches against the follies of Christmas with the same vehement commitment that he has always turned against every kind of 'Sabbath desecration'. The Church of Scotland in Portree customarily puts a Christmas tree on display. And Mr MacDonald customarily preaches against the 'idolatry' it represents: 'They don't see it for what it is, namely the thin end of the wedge, and a step towards Rome.'

Down at the harbourside Pier Hotel, Portree's long-suffering drinkers take their revenge on the kirk by spinning out comic stories about Free Presbyterianism and its oppressive influence on the Western Isles. On Lewis, a minister is said to have insisted that a box be put over a cockerel on the Sabbath, to stop it getting at the hens on the Lord's Day. Then there was the minister on Uist in the Hebrides who spent the Sabbath spying on his congregation with binoculars, only to be trumped by a cunning fellow who, on being accused of showing slides to his family on the Sabbath, retorted that the slides were only pictures of his holiday in the Holy Land. As for the youth from Raasay, they are well known, and not just in this public bar, for their tendency to run wild as soon as they get off the island and find that the air is not actually thick with the thunderbolts of divine retribution.



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