

# A secular christmas: examining religion in dickens' a christmas carol



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While in Christianity Christmas maintains certain religious icons that help school boys and girls remember the story of the birth of Christ, had Tiny Tim attempted to recite the Christian myth he likely would have earned a swift stroke of the hickory stick for his ignorance. In a novel chronicling the conversion of a bourgeois capitalist during the calendar's most celebrated holiday, Charles Dickens tears the public anniversary from its Christian roots and establishes the season as a time of humanitarianism and communal charity in a secular world, where the actions bestowed in kindness hold more weight than the dogma from which they stem. Consequently, while such traditional religious acts as going to church, donating to charity, and prayer exist in Dickens' A Christmas Carol, they survive merely as religious, not Christian, actions. In this manner, Dickens successfully captures the philanthropic nature of the Christian holiday-the Christmas spirit-in order to denounce the materialistic world of capitalism while carefully avoiding preaching an Old World message of Christianity in a post-Darwinian society. The 1830s and 1840s saw a sudden shift in social thinking that not only radically altered the economic theory of the time, but also cracked the bedrock upon which the deific Church had ruled supreme two thousand years strong. Beginning in the 1830s, England found itself fostering sprouting industrial cities such as Leeds, Bradford, and Manchester, correctly described by the London People's Journal in 1847 as " the type of a new power on the earth." This rapid industrialization, coupled with the revolutionary thinking of Charles Darwin that put the fittest, most capable humans at the forefront of mankind's advancement, encouraged not only an economic growth and a drive for capital gain, but a digression from the classical religion of Christianity. No longer did the hoi polloi feel a divine

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oppression to conform to a Church-imposed social hierarchy, as evident by the movements to repeal the Corn Laws, thereby prompting a decrease in the cost of corn at the expense of the landowning aristocracy, as well as the 1832 Reform Act, which redistributed representation in Parliament out of the hands of the small corrupt boroughs of landowners and into those of the industrial cities of the north. Furthermore, Chartism-with its birth most recognizable in the People's Charter of 1838-showed a push for the idea of laissez-faire in the economy, most notably in the motion to introduce universal suffrage for all males over the age of 21. These reforming motions, combined with Darwin's survival of the fittest, ignited the tinder of the ever-ready quest for materialism, forging capitalism. It is in this newly flourishing blaze of capitalism that Dickens finds his voice to counter what he sees as a wildfire set to destroy humanity, choosing not to appeal to ecclesiastical values, but rather to the altruistic nature of man. Setting an early tone of fundamental benevolence, Dickens opens his *A Christmas Carol* with the call for an act of goodwill. The caring nature of Ebenezer Scrooge is plainly absent from the very outset of the novel. While the opening lines of Dickens' critique first identify the capitalist society that runs his London and the protagonist as a subscriber of that economic system, they also show the cold, unfeeling streak that runs through Scrooge. Dickens first reveals Scrooge's apathy toward his late friend and business partner, Jacob Marley, then his standoffish and gruff disposition toward his nephew, i. e. his family, and finally his attitude toward greater mankind. It is this third and final aspect of Scrooge's cold, businesslike manner that will run throughout the novel as a humanitarian motif, an attestation of Dickens' new philanthropic religion. Approached in his office by two gentlemen seeking donations for the <https://assignbuster.com/a-secular-christmas-examining-religion-in-dickens-a-christmas-carol/>

poor, Scrooge inquires as to the status of the laws meant to provide basic necessities and means of debt payment for the poor, then flaunts his true capitalist colors when he says ““ If they would rather die...they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population'” (p. 6). The reader only feels the full harshness of this line, however, because a page earlier one of the two altruistic gentlemen states that ““ at this festive season of the year...it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time'” (p. 5). This stark contrast against the cold nature of capitalism claims only a humanitarian mission-to help those who are in want, to spread joy to the joyless. Furthermore, the speaker here yields not to the hope of a selfless action mirroring the life of Christ, but rather to the notion of festivities and mirth. Spreading goodwill and happiness is of greater concern to these aid workers. With the memory of a similar kindness toward all, the Ghost of Christmas Past elicits a spark of humanity from the otherwise callous protagonist. In the second stave, the first of three Spirits visits Scrooge, allowing the old man to vividly relive memories from his past. In the third of these Scrooge finds himself at the business of a former employer on Christmas Eve, where before Scrooge's eyes he watches everyone employed by Fezziwig partake in the celebration, even his younger self. In accordance with this overhauled religion, Dickens herein shows a crowd of merry people of all levels of society (from shop owner down to the lowly boy from down the street) joining together to dance, eat, and drink their fill. The moral of the Spirit's tale does not lie within a biblical message of divine redemption, but salvation through community and merriment. This parallels a scene later presented by the Ghost of Christmas Present, who himself is a symbol of this

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post-Darwinian reformation of religion. Stave III presents the reader with the most tangible of the three Spirits, and indeed the scene as Dickens describes it is nearly palpable. Entering a room adjacent to his bedchamber, Scrooge finds a giant sitting in a well-lit-which counters the single candle Scrooge had burning himself-and festively decorated hall which furthermore had "heaped upon the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters..." (p. 32) and numerous other delectable foods. The giant himself is attired in a style reminiscent of the Greeks or Romans: a simple green tunic bordered in fur, barefoot, and wearing a holly wreath upon his brow jeweled with icicles. Dickens undoubtedly intends for the image of a crown of thorns to present itself to the reader here, as this character can be interpreted as a pagan Christ figure. The seemingly endless hoard of food-which Scrooge notes before the Spirit himself-suggests the Spirit as a sort of divine caregiver, supported more so in that he likens it to a throne. A few pages later, Scrooge and the Spirit are present on the streets to watch the masses flock to Church, but not before turning their Christmas dinners over to the bakers. In Dickens' world of general satisfaction, the Church falls second to that which causes true happiness on Christmas-a good meal and the festivities surrounding it. Scrooge observes as shop-goers jostle how the Spirit sprinkles water from his torch, likened to the horn of Plenty, thereby pacifying all and maintaining the Christmas spirit of goodwill. Right after this scene the Spirit takes Scrooge to the Cratchit household, wherein the family enjoys a poor, yet contented Christmas dinner. Never does the transition between the streets of London and the humble home of Bob Cratchit stray to the pews of the Church or the <https://assignbuster.com/a-secular-christmas-examining-religion-in-dickens-a-christmas-carol/>

message delivered before them. Dickens mentions the Church as the destination of the masses, as well as the place from which Bob and Tiny Tim arrive, but never as more. This limitation on the Christian aspect of the holiday nonetheless provides a fleeting glimpse of religion, thereby offering a sacred ambiance without an overtly doctrinal implication. The resulting pagan theme is reflected in the Ghost of Christmas Present, the Fezziwig party, and even the Christmas party of Fred, Scrooge's nephew. Just as in the previous Christmas party at Fezziwig's, the one thrown by Fred, though modest in comparison, nevertheless champions pagan ideals in lieu of Christian values. In Fred's party Dickens stresses the importance of friends during the festivities of the season, as well as emphasizing the rakish nature of youth in such games as blind man's bluff and the merriment of mixed company. Topper's shameless pursuit of one maiden over the others, as well as his "necessary" groping when blind in her direction (p. 46) underscores this bawdy atmosphere and further detracts from the religious nature of the holiday. Yet the final departure from Christianity comes in the form of the novel's ultimate redeeming figure, Tiny Tim. The epitome of the poor and a potential casualty in Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest, Bob Cratchit's young crippled son is the savior of mankind in *A Christmas Carol*. While the second spirit shows a pagan mirror image of Christ, Tiny Tim can be likened to Christ in the redemption that he [inadvertently] offers. At the end of Stave III, the Spirit draws back his robe to reveal the forms of Want and Ignorance at his feet, two symbols Dickens uses to show the impending doom of mankind at the hands of capitalists like Ebenezer Scrooge. This damnation, however, will only occur if those champions of selflessness and timeless joy-represented in the figure of Tiny Time-are destroyed by an unfeeling, greedy

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capitalism. The world dies with the death of Tiny Tim in Dickens' novel because he has spent the better part of the five staves showing how no man is his neighbor's better. Conversely, if Tiny Tim lives, so too does mankind, and in this way does the destitute invalid offer the world salvation as a secular Christ. This religious (though not Christian) worldview in A Christmas Carol argues against capitalism and social Darwinism, as well as the materialism it advocates. Dickens' stance is plainly in opposition to materialism; from the weights that burden Marley in the afterlife (p. 11) to the minute profit granted the robbers of Scrooge's possessions upon his death (p. 55) Dickens shows the futility of stockpiling monetary wealth. Instead, with an emphasis on family and community relations, he paints a warm and cheery picture of life in moderation, yet without want. In a society jaded by a Church too lost in its own doctrine to fulfill its founder's teachings, Dickens strays from the beaten path of Christianity in favor of a spiritual, perhaps pagan religious tone in A Christmas Carol in order to emphasize philanthropy and community while minimizing the dogma of a stale faith.