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The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research

C. P. E. NOTHAFT

The article reviews recent and current developments in research on the origins of Christmas, which has traditionally crystallized around two competing approaches, known as the "History of Religions Theory" and the "Calculation Theory." This essay shall look at the history of these approaches and discuss their rationale and limitations, before turning to the challenges that have been brought against them by the recent work of Steven Hijmans and Hans Förster. It will be argued that their studies reveal the need for a more nuanced approach to the history of Christmas, which retains the aspect of inter-religious influence, but also pays some overdue attention to the importance of chronological thought in early Christian scholarship.

How did Christmas end up being celebrated in the middle of winter, on December 25? The fact that most of us find this question relevant—and perhaps even interesting—shows that liturgical tradition is no longer viewed as being connected to the underlying history in any reliable manner. This skepticism toward the ecclesiastical calendar is essentially a product of the sixteenth-century Reformation, which inspired some Protestant, and in particular Calvinist, scholars to attack the historical basis of feasts like Christmas in new and pathbreaking ways. As recent research has shown, it is in the context of these early modern inquiries into the history of the liturgical year, which were often permeated by inter-confessional polemic, that the two basic approaches to understanding Christmas's origins that continue to characterize twenty-first century debate on the subject first germinated.¹ For lack of more appropriate labels, these two approaches may be referred to as the "History of Religions Theory" (henceforth: HRT) and the "Calculation Theory" (CT). Roughly speaking, proponents of HRT interpret Christmas as a Christianized version or substitute for pagan celebrations that took place on the same date in the Roman calendar, the most widely cited example being the birthday of Sol Invictus on December 25. By contrast, adherents to CT find

¹C. P. E. Nothafft, "From Sukkot to Saturnalia: The Attack on Christmas in Sixteenth-Century Chronological Scholarship," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72 (2011): 503–22.

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evidence that the birthday of Christ was determined independently, by recourse to certain types of chronological speculation.²

The best-developed elaboration of CT to have been presented thus far is due to Thomas J. Talley and his 1986-monograph *Origins of the Liturgical Year*. Building on previous efforts by scholars such as Louis Duchesne (1889) and Hieronymus Engberding (1952),³ Talley essentially holds that Christmas on December 25 was derived from the day of Christ's Passion, for which commemorative dates in the Julian calendar had already been established in the late-second or early-third centuries. Assuming that Christ spent a perfect number of years in the flesh, Christian scholars established a chronological parallelism between the conception in Mary's womb (Annunciation) and his death on the cross, which were both assigned to March 25, the Roman date of the vernal equinox. In a further step, they added a schematically rounded number of nine months to the date of Jesus' conception to arrive at his birth on the day of the winter solstice, December 25. This process of chronological elaboration, Talley suggests, may already have come to an end by the beginning of the fourth century, since the Donatist sect, which split from the mainline Church in North Africa in circa 311, seems to have already acknowledged this nativity date in their liturgy.⁴

The attractiveness of CT lies in its simplicity, that is, in the way it presents the dating of the nativity as the natural outcome of an evolving process of thought about the chronology of Jesus' life and its interconnections with the cardinal points of the Julian calendar year. Its downside consists chiefly in the fact that it rests on presuppositions that find no direct confirmation from contemporary sources. The source critical problems facing CT are well-exemplified by the Latin treatise *On the Solstices and Equinoxes of the Conception and Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and John the Baptist*, which once falsely circulated among the sermons of John Chrysostom. The author of this text, a certain Pontius Maximus according to one twelfth-century

²For a general overview, see Susan K. Roll, "The Debate on the Origins of Christmas," *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 40 (1998): 1–16. See also Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Peeters, 1995). The word "theory" seems to capture the explanatory function of these views somewhat better than the often-used "history of religions hypothesis" (likewise "calculation hypothesis"), which over-emphasizes the uncertainty that is inherent to nearly all historical judgment.

³Louis Duchesne, *Origines du culte chrétien: Étude sur la liturgie latine avant Charlemagne* (Paris: Thorin, 1889), 247–54; Hieronymus Engberding, "Der 25. Dezember als Tag der Feier der Geburt des Herrn," *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 2 (1952): 25–43.

⁴Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Pueblo, 1991), 79–155. A parallel explanation is offered for the date of Epiphany (January 6), which was considered the nativity date by many Eastern communities during late antiquity and would have been derived from a Passion date on April 6. See now also Talley, "Afterthoughts on *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*," in *Western Plainchant in the First Millennium: Studies in the Medieval Liturgy and Its Music*, ed. Sean Gallagher et al. (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2003), 1–10.

manuscript, assigns the conception and birth of Jesus to the vernal equinox and winter solstice (March 25 and December 25) based on the historical-chronological assumption that John the Baptist was conceived on the day of the autumnal equinox (September 24). While this is in line with the kind of speculation that gave rise to the Christmas date according to CT, the uncertain time (third to fifth century) and place of origin (probably Syria) of this text make it difficult to dispel doubts that it merely offers a *post-hoc* rationalization of a date that had been originally chosen for different reasons.⁵

Talley's take on CT has found a fair measure of recognition among students of liturgical history and theology, especially in the anglophone world,⁶ but outside this relatively restricted circle its influence has been quite limited. Continental scholars and those who approach the subject of Christmas from the disciplinary view points of ancient history and comparative religion—but also the general public—continue to favor the aforementioned “History of Religions Theory,” whose modern formulation is to a large extent owed to the German philologist Hermann Usener (1834–1905), who was incidentally one of the pioneers in the modern academic study of religion.⁷ Usener regarded the institution of Christmas as a particularly significant example for how certain elements of Christianity originally developed out of an ancient pagan context. According to his view, the celebration of Christ's birth in midwinter was essentially the heritage of a syncretistic sun cult, which already bore traces of an incipient “pagan” monotheism. The central turning point in this story comes with the year 274 CE, when the emperor Aurelian allegedly elevated the oriental sun god Sol Invictus to the supreme deity of the Roman empire and established his cult on December 25. Threatened by the persistent popularity of these rituals among newly baptized Christians, the early Church was moved to incorporate traces of the cult into its own liturgy and thus re-interpreted the annual “birth” of the sun at the winter solstice as the birth festival of Christ. This affinity between Christmas and pagan solar worship is seemingly reflected by the pervasive solar symbolism

⁵The text was edited by Bernard Botte, *Les origines de la Noël et de l'Épiphanie: Étude historique* (Louvain: Abbaye du Mont César, 1932), 93–105, and again in *Patrologiae Latinae Supplementum*, ed. Adalbert-Gauthier Hamman, 5 vols. (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1958–74), 1:557–67. On its chronological argument, see now Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 250–57.

⁶See, for example, Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 187–89; Joseph F. Kelly, *The Origins of Christmas* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), 58–63; Frank C. Senn, *The People's Work: A Social History of the Liturgy* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006), 71–73.

⁷Hermann Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest*, 3rd ed. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1969). The work first appeared in 1889. On its content and impact, see Fausto Parente, “Das Weihnachtsfest,” in *Aspetti di Hermann Usener, filologo della religione*, ed. G. Arrighetti et al. (Pisa: Giardini, 1982), 181–211.

in late antique Christian art and literature, where Jesus Christ is sometimes referred to as the “true sun” or associated with “the sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2 [KJV]).⁸

Usener’s thesis has enjoyed widespread acclaim ever since its publication in 1889, with the result that many later scholars have tended to rather uncritically embrace its basic conclusions. As is often the case in the divulgence of scholarly theories, nuances that were still present in the original studies have been gradually put aside, while carefully argued conjecture was allowed to ossify into blunt statement of fact. Among the more popular, but also less credible, claims that have subsequently been associated with HRT is the idea that the transformation of the *Dies natalis solis invicti* into Christmas was decreed by Constantine the Great as part of his general program of elevating Christianity to the main religion of the Roman empire, while fusing it with his own solar piety. Aside from the lack of source evidence, this thesis completely fails to account for the fact that Constantinople, the city inaugurated by Constantine himself in 330 as the new capital of his empire, had to wait until 380 for the actual introduction of this feast.⁹

That studies emphasizing the “pagan” roots of Christmas have been fraught with a certain tendency towards confirmation bias, has recently been argued by Steven Hijmans, whose research into the iconography of the sun in Roman religion has paved the way for a critical re-evaluation of HRT. Using numismatic, archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence from the second to fourth centuries, Hijmans is able to show that the idea of Christmas being preceded by a popular and important feast dedicated to the sun god is to a considerable extent founded on anachronisms and a view of Roman religion that rests on nineteenth-century constructs rather than hard facts. His skeptical and revisionist conclusions also demolish the thesis that “Sol Invictus” was a new and distinct deity, whose cult was imported from the East in the third century and became the occasion of a major festival on December 25.¹⁰

The central piece of evidence that has led scholars such as Usener to postulate a connection between the latter festival and Christmas is the so-

⁸On the subject of Christian solar symbolism, see now Martin Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol: Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001), who discusses Christmas, 174–95.

⁹Thomas J. Talley, “Constantine and Christmas,” *Studia Liturgica* 17 (1987): 191–97.

¹⁰Steven Hijmans, “Usener’s *Christmas*: A Contribution to the Modern Construct of Late Antique Solar Syncretism,” in *Hermann Usener und die Metamorphosen der Philologie*, eds. Michel Espagne and Pascale Rabault-Ferrière (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 139–51. See further Hijmans, “Sol Invictus, the Winter Solstice, and the Origins of Christmas,” *Museion* ser. 3, 3 (2003): 377–98; Hijmans, “Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome” (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2009), 583–95, <http://dissertations.ub.rug.nl/faculties/arts/2009/s.e.hijmans>.

called *Chronograph of 354*, a unique late Roman collection of chronological texts, which includes a civil calendar documenting some of the Roman festivals that were celebrated in the middle of the fourth century. The entry for December 25 reads “N[atalis] Invicti C[ircenses] M[issus] XXX” (“Birthday of Invictus, 30 chariot races”). This has been generally interpreted as a feast in honor of Sol, despite the fact that the epithet “invictus” is by no means exclusive to the sun god. If a connection between the cult of Sol Invictus and Christmas has nevertheless been drawn, this is chiefly because the same *Chronograph* also contains a register of Christian martyrs, ordered according to their date of burial, which is headed by the birth of Christ in Bethlehem on December 25. Since this so-called *depositio martirum* is attached to a similar list of Roman bishops (*depositio episcoporum*), whose original version seems to date from 336, this year has been often cited as the *terminus ad quem* for the institution of Christmas.¹¹

As Hijman rightly points out, this is not sufficient evidence to ground the hypothesis that the celebration of Christ’s birthday on December 25 arose out of a previous pagan festival on that day. Instead, the other remaining sources regarding the cult of Sol indicate that none of the festivals traditionally celebrated in this god’s honour took place on the day of the winter solstice. What the records instead show, are dates of little astronomical significance such as August 8/9, August 28, October 19/22, and December 11. As it happens, the calendar in the *Chronograph of 354* is our earliest source for a corresponding festival on December 25 and it is perhaps significant that the practice of having chariot races rather than sacrifices on major festivals, which is noted in the “invictus”-entry above, was itself not older than the 320s.¹²

To complicate matters further, the *Chronograph* is only transmitted in relatively late copies (ninth century and later), which casts a shadow of suspicion on its entries regarding Christmas.¹³ This suspicion, however, can

¹¹For editions of the relevant passages, see Theodor Mommsen, ed., *Chronica minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII.*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892), 56, 71–72, and Mommsen, ed., *Inscriptiones Latinae Antiquissimae*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1893), 278.

¹²Hijmans, “Usener’s Christmas,” 147–50.

¹³See most recently Hans Förster, “Die beiden angeblich ‘ältesten Zeugen’ des Weihnachtsfestes,” *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 42 (2000): 29–40; Wolfgang Wischmeyer, “Die christlichen Texte im sogenannten Filocalus-Kalender,” in *Textsorten und Textkritik*, ed. Adolf Primmer, Kurt Smolak, and Dorothea Weber (Vienna: Österr. Akad. d. Wiss., 2002), 45–57; Claudio Gianotto, “L’origine de la fête de Noël au IV^e siècle,” in *La Nativité et le temps de Noël: Antiquité et Moyen Âge*, ed. Jean-Paul Boyer and Gilles Dorival (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 2003), 65–79 (67–68). Arguments in defense of authenticity are made by Józef Naumowicz, “Le Calendrier de 354 et la fête de Noël,” *Palamedes* 2 (2007): 173–88; Wallraff, *Christus versus Sol*, 180n26; Alexander Zerfass, *Mysterium mirabile: Poesie, Theologie und Liturgie in den Hymnen des Ambrosius von Mailand zu den Christustagen des Kirchenjahres* (Tübingen: Franke, 2008), 62–63n286. Without the

also extend to the “invictus”-entry, which, as Hijmans has noted, is not fully consistent with the form of the other festivals recorded there.¹⁴ In any case, since the *Chronograph of 354* remains our earliest quotable source for both “invictus” and the birth of Christ being celebrated on this particular date, it must be admitted that the question of which of these festivals preceded or influenced the other cannot be answered on its basis. Indeed, it is altogether possible to turn the tables on Usener and assume that a “supposedly ancient festival of Sol was ‘rediscovered’ by pagan authorities in response to the appropriation of the winter solstice by Christianity.”¹⁵ In Hijman’s carefully argued view, the general cosmic symbolism that was attached to the solstice date and which led the Roman Church to adopt December 25 for its nativity festival must be kept separate from the cult of the Sun as a pagan deity, which had no immediate influence on Christmas.¹⁶

Another admirable effort to break out of the traditional framework of HRT was made in 2007 by the Austrian papyrologist Hans Förster, whose book *Die Anfänge von Weihnachten und Epiphaniäs* constitutes the most extensive and complete survey that has thus far been undertaken on the subject.¹⁷ Covering a vast range of sources that shed light on the early history of nativity celebrations in the entire *orbis Christianus*, from Egypt to Ireland, Förster does a very effective job in undermining certain elements of the traditional narratives about Christmas’s origins. To name just one example: past adherents of HRT have often thought to find corroboration for their view in the parallel history of Epiphany (January 6), which commemorates Jesus’ baptism, the turning of water into wine at Cana, and the adoration of the Magi, but also used to be the date of the nativity in parts of the Roman East (and remains so to this day in Armenia). Based on some remarks by Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315–403), who is one of the early witnesses to this feast, they have argued that Epiphany originated in Egypt and was

testimony of the *Chronograph*, the earliest attestation of Christmas would be pushed to ca. 361–63, when the date was mentioned in a sermon held by the North African bishop Optatus of Milevis. See André Wilmart, “Un sermon de Saint Optat pour la fête de Noël,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 2 (1922): 271–302.

¹⁴See Hijmans, “Usener’s *Christmas*,” 149, who argues against authenticity on the basis of the number of races.

¹⁵Hijmans, “Usener’s *Christmas*,” 150. This reversed line of influence is also defended by Anselme Davril, “L’origine de la fête de Noël,” *Renaissance de Fleury: La revue des moines de Saint-Benoît* 160 (1991): 9–14.

¹⁶Hijmans, “Sol Invictus,” 395–97.

¹⁷Hans Förster, *Die Anfänge von Weihnachten und Epiphaniäs: Eine Anfrage an die Entstehungshypothesen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). As a preparatory study for this *magnum opus*, Förster previously published *Die Feier der Geburt Christi in der Alten Kirche: Beiträge zur Erforschung der Anfänge des Epiphanie- und Weihnachtsfestes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

derived from one or several pagan predecessors such as the birth-feast of the god Aion (on the night of January 5/6) or an annual drawing of water from the Nile (*Panarion* 51.22.9, 30.3).

Förster argues, quite convincingly, that these interpretations put more weight on Epiphanius's account than it can sustain and that local Egyptian practices fail to properly explain the fast and universal spread of the Christian feast, which was celebrated as far away from the banks of the Nile as Gaul.¹⁸ According to Förster's own theory, which he presents as an explicit alternative to both CT and HRT, the roots of Christmas can be found in fourth-century Palestine, where a new trend of Holy Land pilgrimages created a "historicizing" tendency to celebrate the main christological feasts at the correct place and at the appropriate time. Of particular importance in this regard was an annual celebration of Christ's birth at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which was later incorporated into the liturgies of other churches as a result of pilgrims bringing the practices they witnessed in the Holy Land back to their home communities. Since it is known that nativity celebrations in Jerusalem and Bethlehem took place on January 6 until the sixth century, Förster naturally assumes that this was the original "Christmas" date, which was then exported to Rome and changed to December 25 under the influence of the solstice. As for the original choice of January 6, Förster suggests that this may simply have been the date of the Church of the Nativity's consecration.¹⁹

The scenario constructed by Förster is not implausible, but its lack of direct evidence is by no means less (and perhaps even more) troubling than in the case of earlier theories. In addition, it may be asked if he perhaps goes too far in dismissing previous explanations. While there is good reason to agree that too much weight has been put on possible inter-religious influences, this does not mean that we should discount them altogether as a factor. It is worth pointing out that accepting certain lines of influence between the rites and feasts of Christians and their non-Christian environment is not necessarily the same as claiming that a feast like Christmas was modeled in a wholly conscious way, by decree of the Church leadership, after a parallel pagan feast. An alternative way of looking at things was suggested by Martin Wallraff in his study on Christian solar symbolism, where he argues that it is no longer helpful to view the introduction of Christmas as the one-sided reaction to a pre-existing pagan tradition. "Much rather, they apparently were parallel phenomena, different outgrowths, so to speak, of the same *Zeitgeist*."²⁰

¹⁸Förster, *Die Anfänge*, 51–55, 93–97, 106–20.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 307.

²⁰Wallraff, *Christus versus Sol*, 194: "Vielmehr handelt es sich offenbar um parallele Erscheinungen, gewissermaßen unterschiedliche Ausflüsse der gleichen Strömung des Zeitgeistes." See also Wallraff's review of Förster, *Die Anfänge*, in *Gnomon* 82 (2010), 339–44.

Even more worrying is Förster's outright dismissal of the "Calculation Theory," which in his mind imputes "breathhtaking mental acrobatics" on early Christians and is therefore devoid of credibility.²¹ Simply put, the problem with this stance is that it gives too little credit to the chronological inquisitiveness of early Christians. While direct evidence for the date of Christmas being the result of a straightforward calculation is as thin on the ground as it is for contending theories, proponents of CT can in fact point to the existence of a rich and varied tradition of chronological speculation that dates back at least to the beginning of the third century. Thanks to the meticulous studies of Venance Grumel, August Strobel and others, there can be no doubt that chronographers and computists from this period repeatedly attempted to construct overarching chronological systems that agreed with the data provided by lunisolar calendar cycles (used to calculate the date of Easter), while also suiting their assumptions about the temporal dimensions of the history of salvation. The latter, of course, was pivoted on the advent of Jesus Christ, whose incarnation, birth, death, and resurrection obtained particular importance in the eyes of those who speculated about these questions.²²

Historians writing on the origins of Christmas, Förster included, have generally made too little effort to understand the methods and assumptions that drove the construction of these chronological systems. It is therefore worth pondering if an integration of the expanding research on early Christian chronology into the study of liturgy can shed further light on the issue or even instill new life into the seemingly moribund "Calculation Theory."²³ Regardless of how this approach will turn out, however, it will no longer do to simply juxtapose HRT and CT as sharp alternatives. Indeed, one of the most encouraging trends in recent research on Christmas's history is its critical stance towards sweeping narratives and a readiness to consider

²¹Förster, *Die Anfänge*, 6: "Es ist eine Tatsache, daß die Berechnungshypothese aufgrund der fast schon atemberaubende Geistesakrobatik, die ihr zugrunde liegt, berechnigte Zweifel an ihrer Tragfähigkeit erweckt."

²²Venance Grumel, *La chronologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958); August Strobel, *Ursprung und Geschichte des frühchristlichen Osterkalenders* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1977); Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See now also C. P. E. Nothaft, *Dating the Passion: The Life of Jesus and the Emergence of Scientific Chronology (200–1600)* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011).

²³One worthwhile task for future studies could be to re-examine the chronological data in the early-third century works of Julius Africanus and Hippolytus, which have both been upheld in the past as early witnesses to Jesus' birth on December 25. This has been rejected by contemporary scholarship, but the question is perhaps yet to be fully resolved. A case for December 25 in Julius Africanus will be made in C. P. E. Nothaft, "Early Christian Chronology and the Origins of the Christmas Date: In the Defense of the 'Calculation Theory,'" (unpublished manuscript).

explanations that are more multi-faceted and to accept a more diverse range of factors than has previously been the case. Whether we will eventually be treated to a definitive account on this basis, ultimately depends on the ability of future scholars to order the existing tangle of terse and often conflicting sources in new and creative ways.