

Christmas symbols are in the eye of the beholder

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(RNS) When is a candy cane not just a candy cane?

For some people, its red and white stripes might signify the sacrifice and purity of Jesus, or maybe just a 19th-century candy-maker's twist intended to dazzle his grandchildren. Both stories are alive and well on the Internet.

Is Santa Claus the imagined incarnation of the fourth-century St. Nicholas of Myra, the vision of a 19th-century poet or the carefully rendered creation of a 20th-century ad man?

And there's the tree. Is it a powerful, pre-Christian sign of enduring life? Or what remains of Martin Luther's Reformation teaching moment? Perhaps a natural reminder of renewal and hope, or a spiritual testament to resurrection?

Christmas has become a hybrid holiday, a mix of sacred and secular, depending on who is celebrating it. For some, the holiday is a religious occasion recalling the birth of Jesus. For others, Christmas signals the end of winter's darkness and the promise of returning light. Christmas may be a day devoted to family and memories of a shared past, or an opportunity to exchange gifts, even an opportunity to boost the struggling U.S. economy.

If Christmas has come to mean different things to different people, then it's not surprising that some familiar Christmas symbols bear the weight of more than one interpretation.

"Everything is open to interpretation," said Sharon Sherman, a professor of folklore at the University of Oregon. When folklorists study holidays, they look at the origins of symbols, how their interpretations have changed over the years and what purpose they serve in a given culture.

But Christmas poses a special challenge, she added. "The great majority of Christmas tradition has nothing to do with the birth of Jesus," she said.

The Confraternity of Penitents, a private Roman Catholic group centered in Middletown, R.I., might disagree. Their website offers "the Christian meaning" behind 44 common Christmas symbols. Gingerbread men, according to the site, are like human beings; they do not create themselves but are created.

"Spices, reminiscent of those mentioned in the Old Testament, make the gingerbread man the color of earth (Adam was created from the dust of the earth)," the site continues. "Like us, gingerbread people are not immortal. They are destined to be eaten and thus to unite with their creators."

The Internet is home to many theological theories and secular interpretations of holiday symbols, many of which can't be proven one way or another, according to Sherman.

"There's how something functions for you and how it functions for someone else," she said, arguing that it's less a matter of who is right and who is wrong.

Folklorists recognize that symbols function in different ways. Simon J. Bronner, a professor of American studies and folklore at Penn State Harrisburg and author of "Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture," said symbols offer a way to deal with nostalgia, express inner anxieties or conflicts and encourage more intimate connections between human beings.

Christmas symbols function all three ways: as links to a shared past (either real or imagined), expressions of deeply held values (sacred or secular) and as signs that others agree with one's own beliefs.

Arguments about the meaning of Christmas symbols are as old as the celebration itself. But practically speaking, does it matter if a candy cane is a religious symbol or simply a sweet and sometimes sticky treat? Or whether Santa Claus is selfless as a saint or "a right jolly old elf," as Clement Moore described him in "A Visit from St. Nicholas"?

For some people, it does matter. They find the answers they seek and circulate them to those who share their views. But for many others, it doesn't matter, Sherman said.

"What's important in most people's minds is how a given symbol or tradition is explained within his or her own family," whether it's their biological family or a more intentional grouping. It's family that pulls us all "home" for Christmas, she added, across the miles or in our hearts. And Christmas, whether one assigns it religious significance or not, is, after all, all about traditions, she said.

"Whether we're spiritual or not," she said, "traditions hold us together."