

**CHRISTMAS EVE: A
DIALOGUE ON
THE CELEBRATION OF
CHRISTMAS**

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Christmas Eve: A Dialogue on the Celebration of Christmas by Schleiermacher . & W. Haste

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SCHLEIERMACHER . & W. HASTE

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*A DIALOGUE ON THE CELEBRATION OF
CHRISTMAS.*

BY

SCHLEIERMACHER.

From the German

BY

W. HASTIE, B.D.

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MDCCXC.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.



THE Nativity of Christ, as the visible incarnation of the Redeemer, has always been recognised as the distinctive starting-point of the Christian life in time. Around it as a living centre in the stream of history, all Christian experience has turned; and it has thus been accepted in Christendom as dividing the whole life of mankind into its two great periods of the old and the new, the natural and the spiritual, the physical and the regenerated. When the Church was beginning to constitute itself and to realize the full significance of its mission in the world, it could not but attain to a more definite consciousness of its relations to the natural changes and spiritual transitions of the life which it embodied and diffused. The historical development of this consciousness was mainly determined by reference to the cardinal manifestations of the Divine life in its Founder, and the necessity of an orderly spiritualization of the living humanity it absorbed and unfolded. It was thus that the great Festivals of the Christian Church took their rise; and

they became spontaneously authenticated by the responsive recognition of the whole Christian community.

It was therefore most natural that the commemoration of the Nativity should take the form it did in the Christian festival of Christmas, and that it should at once assume a primary place both in the ritualistic celebrations of the Church and in the purified affections of the people. Chrysostom already extolled it as 'the most venerable festival of all,' and, by a characteristic metaphor, as 'the *metropolis* of all the Festivals.' In the Western Church it was definitely fixed during the fourth century as a regulating point in the golden circle of the Christian year. The religious mood which it consecrated was one of universal joy, and the relations it represented were of the deepest and most suggestive kind. Having been fixed at the winter solstice, the solar turning-point of the natural year,—'the Birthday of the unconquered Sun,'—it became vividly symbolical of the mystery of the life revolving in nature, and readily receptive of the expressions of the deepest aspiration of the natural Religions. Amid the shortest and darkest days when 'Nature had doff'd her gaudy trim,' it typified the arrest of decay and mortality, and the return of brightness and warmth to renew the whole round of animated existence; and so it superseded the old Saturnalia of the heathen world, and the Brumalian festival of the

Sum. As a Christian observance it was specially based upon the tenderest and loveliest page in the Gospel History, and on what is most touching and fascinating in human life. Its essential purity, its higher symbolism, and its universal significance, invested it with a charm, a freedom, and a simplicity all its own. It accordingly gave full scope for all that is brightest and most joyous in religious celebration: and it increasingly gathered around it the fairest and gayest forms of art.

The Festival of Christmas has thus come to be celebrated in every clime of the globe, and by all the means of artistic representation and adornment, through the course of the Christian ages. The grandest cathedrals of Christendom have vied with each other in the splendour and elaboration of its celebration. The great host of Christian preachers from Chrysostom in the East and Leo the Great in the West, down to the thousands and thousands who proclaim its message to-day, have poured forth their highest eloquence on this most attractive theme. The tenderest hymn-writers of the mediæval and modern Church, have embodied its feeling of exultation and adoration in undying strains; and the most melodious poets of the reflective Protestant world, have echoed them in mellifluous verse. Music has added the charm of her delicate resources in accompanying carol and chime, and all the varied outflow of quaint and

picturesque harmony in tone. The greatest Christian artists have exhausted their skill in visible representations of the Divine Child in the manger, with the worshipping shepherds, and the adoring 'star-led wizards,' and all the simple surroundings of the scene, watched over by 'the spangled host of bright harnessed angels,' and lit up by the irradiation of a new heavenly glory. Even the lower forms of art have asserted the claim to elevate their broad and boisterous hilarity, by making it subservient to the universal joy; and they have been borne with, from the very gentleness of their intent, to the utmost verge of Unreason and Misrule.

But it has been above all by the domestic hearth that the dear delightful festival has showed its subtlest power; and its crowning glory was reached not so truly in high altar service, or in gay representation, as in its consecration of the sweet sanctities of home. Here it mastered and formed the rude life of new races to gentler ways. And from the royal palace and the spacious baronial hall, with the Yule log ablaze on the hearth, and all the robust and tumultuous festivities of the time, crowned by the natural evergreen of the holly and ivy and mystic mistletoe, down to the squalor and bareness of the rustic hovel, and the dim and cold cell in the forest, it shed its humanizing and unifying influence with deepening feeling once a year. It became above all