

# Q Notes

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## SEASON OF LIGHT

Old World religions & spiritualities provide basis for winter holiday comforts

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas — and Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Yule and Solstice. And I'll bet you didn't know there are many more holidays just like those.

It's true — the holidays are upon us. No matter how long you've tried to put off shopping or visiting that aunt you love oh so dearly, but can only stand to be around for half an hour, you'll soon find yourself in the thick of it, if you haven't already. Come the end of December you'll be making merry with friends, family and loved ones. For billions of people around the world — at least in the North Hemisphere, that is — the winter holidays represent a time of new birth, light, life and renewal.

To really understand Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and a host of other modern traditions, why not just go back to the beginning? Most Americans associate the winter holidays with Christmas trees, candles, wreaths and warm and friendly fires. Most of these traditions — in fact, almost all of our modern Western traditions — are based on Old World spiritual beliefs from way back Germanic and Scandinavian natives. Whether you even realized it or not, we're all Pagans and Heathens this time of year.

For millennia, people in the Northern Hemisphere have looked eagerly toward the Winter Solstice — the real world, astronomical event that occurs every year around Dec. 21 — the time when the days stop growing shorter, start getting longer and when the sun returns.

With the sun comes light and warmth. Spring and the rebirth of the earth and all its fruits aren't too far off. For the traditional spiritualities of indigenous Europeans — especially those who faced the harshest of winters in such northerly corners of the world as Scandinavia — the Winter Solstice was more than just the shortest night of the year; it was the promise of a new day, a new year and the guarantee that warmth and good weather would once again allow them to feed their families, keep livestock and survive.

Traditions of rebirth and the reawakening of the sun and light can be traced as far back as ancient periods in Egypt. Even in Japan and other Asian cultures, the Winter Solstice has been celebrated and adored. If you take just a minute to think about it, you realize that almost every civilization, culture and religion in the Northern Hemisphere has some sort of celebration of light and life during the winter. Even Judaism, a religion with Middle Eastern roots, celebrates its own winter holiday — Hannakuh, the "festival of lights."

Jim Henck, an openly gay Christian who lives in Charlotte, says he finds comfort in celebrating traditional Pagan holidays like the Winter Solstice.

"The reason I entertain the Winter Solstice is because Christmas has become such a big commercial event," he says. "Christmas is nowhere near as traditional as it used to be. Winter Solstice, for me, leads me back to a more traditional and spiritual meaning, instead of the commercial end of it."

Henck says he's never felt out of place celebrating both Christmas and Solstice with his Pagan and Wiccan friends, as well as others who come from traditional Old World and alternative faith traditions.

And unlike many of his queer brothers and sisters, Henck has never had to worry about how friends and loved ones will react to his sexual

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by Matt Comer . Q-Notes staff

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