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Who was Against Christmas?
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Picture the following scenario. Crowds of Americans rioting in the streets. Two opposing groups shout loudly, vying to have their messages heard and heeded. The groups meet. Confrontation ensues. Fistfights break out. Church windows are smashed. What are these rioters fighting about? Christmas. One group favors celebrating Christmas, the other opposes all Christmas observances. This isn't an imaginary event, it is history. It happened in Boston on Christmas day in 1706.

In America's increasing love-affair with Christmas (both the Christian and commercial versions), we have forgotten that there was a time when much of European and American Christianity thought that Christmas should not be celebrated. In the riot described previously, the anti-Christmas group consisted largely of Congregationalists (Puritan descendants), Baptists, and Presbyterians, while the pro-Christmas group comprised mostly Anglicans (Episcopalians). The notion that Christians of any stripe should not want to celebrate Christmas is so foreign to our present concept of the holiday, that we need to review some history to understand it.

Prior to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, Roman Catholicism celebrated the "Christ Mass." It was one of many special masses and feasts of the Catholic Church celebrating key events in Jesus' life or the birthdays of saints. The three main Protestant movements that ultimately came to America had three different reactions to this situation.

First, although the Anglican Church developed a Protestant theology, it kept much of Catholic liturgy, including festivals celebrating aspects of Christ's life and the feast days of many saints. It gave special emphasis to the celebration of Christmas.

Second, after Martin Luther nailed his "95 Theses" to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517, special liturgical observances began to be frowned upon. The Lutherans thought that the celebrations of saints' days were too much and so cancelled them. But they still emphasized observing events in Jesus' life, and so continued with joyous Christmas festivities.

Third, the Calvinists in Switzerland banned all Christian holy days not mentioned in Scripture. That approach meant that the Sabbath was acceptable, but nothing else. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and other celebrations were to be treated as normal days with nothing special about them.

The Calvinist position came to be quite influential in Great Britain, even though it never altered the position of the

Anglican Church. John Knox brought Calvinism to Scotland as Presbyterianism where Christmas was banned in 1583, while the Puritans brought Calvinism into England, where it became influential in circles both within and outside of the Anglican Church. During the Civil War in 1647, Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan followers outlawed Christmas observance. It was brought back in 1660 at the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II.

From England, both sides brought their Christmas beliefs to America. The Puritans (later becoming the Congregationalists) were joined by Presbyterians, Quakers, Methodists (despite their founders' pro-Christmas predilections), and Baptists on the anti-Christmas side, while the Anglicans dominated the pro-Christmas side, and were later joined by the Lutherans and the Dutch Reformed.

In Boston, the Puritans outlawed Christmas in 1659. Although the ban was lifted in 1681 when the British government took control of the colony, an armed guard had to protect the governor on his way to church on Christmas of 1686. When the colony reverted to local control in 1689, Christmas again fell out of favor.

The objection to Christmas by Americans was two-fold. First, for Calvinist theology, it reflected the pagan character of Catholic worship. Christmas was not a biblical holiday and had not even become a Christian festival before the late 300s; it was a creation of the church, not of Christ. Second, the holiday was accompanied by extensive reveling. Celebrations were not primarily worshipful, but involved feasting, game playing, heavy drinking, shooting, and gambling. For the over-indulgents, it brought out the worst of their excesses. Since the holiday celebrated the Savior's birth, such immoral behavior was seen as sacrilegious.

During the 18th century, Christmas observance began to be more accepted. Church-goers turned their attention to purifying the holiday of its excesses, rather than rejecting it altogether. By the 1750s, even New England hymn books contained Christmas carols. By the early 1800s, Christmas was observed with an emphasis on family and children.

In 1836, Alabama became the first state to make Christmas a legal holiday. Other states followed suit; even Massachusetts legalized Christmas in 1856, almost 200 years after its ban. But the last state, Oklahoma, did not join in until 1907. So next Christmas, 2007, will be the centenary of Christmas being the first religious holiday whose celebration across the United States is sanctioned by law.