

EASTER: BUNNIES AND EGGS

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(English Version)

A question that comes up often is if Jesus Christ died with so much pain on the Cross why is the day called 'Good Friday'? Some Christian traditions like the Germans actually call it Karfreitag or 'Sorrowful Friday' and in English the origin of the term 'good' is said to have come either from 'God's Friday' or from an archaic translation of the term 'Holy' or 'Pious'. This is among the main days of 'Easter' that reaches its peak on Sunday, when Jesus arose from his dead state and began his journey to heaven. The dates for Good Friday and the Easter season were not always agreed upon and initially they were linked to Spring Equinox of the 21st of March. Christianity was indeed a struggling movement till 313 AD, when Emperor Constantine of Byzantium (present day Istanbul) recognised it as one of the official religions of the Roman empire. Its early history is thus crowded in myths and legends. The death of Jesus was originally calculated to have been in AD 33 and 'Good Friday' was reckoned to be the 3rd of April: a remarkable coincidence with this year's celebration. Sir Isaac Newton, however, brought it to AD 34 with all his mathematical calculations of the differences between the conflicting calendars and the movements of the moon. The Western Churches follow the Gregorian calendar while the Eastern Churches abide by the Julian calendar, thus they differ on the dates of their celebrations but what are common are the special prayers and Masses that mark the period. The Easter season actually begins with 40 days of 'Lent' that precedes Easter Sunday and many actually observe fasts through so many days.

As a festival, however, Easter goes back well before Christ arrived. It was originally celebrated for a pagan goddess called Eostre or Ostara or even Astore. She was worshipped in Spring as the dead winter found fresh life through her and Norma Goodrich mentions in her book that ancient Saxon poets had found associations between India's dark goddess and this Eostre, as both followed the death and life cycle. The Easter Bunny is also older than Christianity because it was known as the companion or vahana of the goddess and was called the Moon-hare. The Germans said that this hare would lay golden eggs for good children on Easter Eve, and this belief has been explained in Claudia De Lys' book on superstitions. In fact, scholars like Homer Smith claim that the Christian festival was not even called 'Easter', until the late Middle Ages. Several nations like the Irish, however, kept Easter on a different date from that of the Roman Church, as the original date of the 'festival of Eostre', until the Roman calendar was imposed on them in 623 AD.

Eggs were always symbols of rebirth, which is why Easter eggs were usually coloured red, especially in Eastern Europe, to symbolise the blood of Christ. The Russians used to lay red Easter eggs on graves to serve as 'resurrection charms' and in the Czech republic, Christ was duly honoured on Easter Sunday, but his pagan rival was recalled on Easter Monday: which was the 'Moon-day' as opposed to the Sun-day. A curious 16th century Easter custom was known as "creeping to the cross with eggs and apples", which was a significant use of the ancient female symbols of birth and death. The older traditions used dyed chicken eggs, but now substitutes come in chocolate, or plastic eggs filled with candy such as jellybeans. Even so, many still insist on the tradition of colouring their hard-boiled eggs. In Poland and in the Slavic traditions of Eastern Europe, Easter eggs are a widely popular symbol of new life and a batik-like decorating process known as pisanka produces intricate, brilliantly-colored eggs. In Bulgaria, traditional egg

fighters are a rage and the winning egg is titled as the borak, the fighter. Germans and Swiss hang decorated eggs from branches or bushes and even the top of wells are dressed up for Easter as Osterbrunnen. The celebrated House of Faberge created exquisite jewelled eggs for the Russian Imperial Court that took this humble folk art to new heights.

Like the celebration of Christmas, many traditions of Easter were altered, censored or even abandoned altogether by various offshoots of Christianity, especially during the Protestant Reformation. The Lutherans, Methodists and Anglicans, however, chose to retain a large proportion of the old observances along with many of their associated traditions, even though the Presbyterian Puritans regarded such festivals as abominations. In today's world, Easter also has a commercial side, as evidenced by the mounds of chocolate eggs, jelly beans and marshmallow chicks that appear in shops each spring. Like Christmas, there is a thriving industry that runs on Easter eggs, bunnies and baskets of condiments, as this holy day continuously combined various folk customs, pagan traditions and current fads with religion and piety. The Easter Bunny has become a popular legendary Easter gift-giving character, somewhat analogous to Santa Claus in American culture and on Easter Monday, the President of the United States holds an annual Easter egg rolling event on the White House lawn for excited children.

Bermudans choose Easter to fly kites and hold colourful competitions, but all in the name of God, as priests say these celebrate Christ's ascent to heaven. Fish cakes are a favourite dish and Bengalis could well be attracted to this island for this delicacy. In Jamaica, the baking of buns with raisins becomes the main occupation from Good Friday onwards, and once their crusty tops are seared with two strokes of the knife, they become the famous 'Hot Cross Buns'. While some East Europeans prepare a special nut-cake called potica, the Polish prepare excellent white sausages for this season.

Easter is, however, not food and fun, for it also associated with the painful emulation of bodily tortures that were heaped upon Christ, called 'The Passion'. Filipinos and Mexicans go through Christ's last journey dragging heavy crosses on their shoulders and whip themselves till they bleed. Some also pierce their heads with crowns of prickly thorns. Formal religion has tried to stop men from such self flagellation, but they continue like this in Christianity and in Islam they appear in similar painful rites during Mohurram: very much like our Baanphors and swinging on poles with their backs pierced, as in Charak. Colourful processions carrying images and dolls depicting Biblical scenes are also a must in many Catholic countries, quite like Hindu celebrations, which is rather interesting.

The arrival of Spring often reminded people in cold Europe that it was time for a bath and in Hungary and countries that were formerly in Yugoslavia, buckets of cold water were poured on shivering humans. Men often wooed women with perfumes or scented water, but the most peculiar custom was followed in Czech and Slovak countries, as men literally spanked or whipped women with willow rods and coloured ribbons. So deep-rooted was this custom that women reportedly felt offended if they were not touched by this Easter whip. It is hoped that this tradition is now gone, but what can never go from mankind is its infinite capacity to use every religious occasion, however serious it be, to celebrate their very existence with excitement, cheer and warmth.