

A Short Socio-Economic Examination of the Historical Traditions of Easter

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Christmas, as I wrote a few months ago (McCabe, 2022), conjures up an array of emotions and, it must be acknowledged, anxiety for many about the cost of presents and food. Easter has no such commotion. For example, whilst pop singles are a regular feature of Christmas, this tradition does not occur at Easter.

Easter, falling at the beginning of spring in late March or April (see below), allows a break after the winter. Easter, like Christmas which replaced the pagan festival of mid-winter (solstice), though now being linked with the Christian celebration of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, also has pagan roots.

According to Christianity.com, Easter is believed to derive from *Eostre*, a Saxon word meaning the goddess in honour of whom sacrifices were offered (2023). Also suggested is a possible theory that Easter is derived from the Norse *eostur*, *eastur*, or *ostara*, meaning “the season of the growing sun” or “the season of new birth” which, given the time of year, is entirely logical.

Christians of all denominations tend to regard Easter to having as much, if not greater, significance than Christmas (Britannica, 2023). However, though Christmas has increased in popularity as a secular celebration through decorations and a tree at home, end of year parties, presents and what seems to be the dwindling tradition of sending cards, this is not the case for Easter.

Though the National Secular Society would hardly be expected to say otherwise, published on its website, is evidence from polls clearly indicating that only a minority of citizens (17%) believe Easter has any religious meaning or significance to them (2012). Given this article is over a decade old and the transition to non-secularism in the UK is increasing, it's certain a majority of people will not be attending religious services this weekend.

So, whilst a minority celebrate Easter as a religious festival, the majority will, provided they are not working, simply enjoy a very long weekend because of the two bank holidays ‘bookending’ it. Provided the weather is good, many will get out and about in a way not always possible or pleasant in the months since the beginning of the year.

However, one ‘tradition’ many will partake in is in consuming chocolate eggs. Easter eggs represent a valuable opportunity for chocolate producers to sell what they make (Bartleby, 2022). According to e-commerce email marketing agency Ecommerce Intelligence, we’ll collectively spend £978,802,048, a strangely precise figure, on seasonal confectionary associated with Easter.

As Ryan Turner, founder of Ecommerce Intelligence, claims, “Chocolate Easter eggs are often seen as an affordable luxury, allowing people to express their affection and celebrate the occasion without breaking the bank.”

As observers of what’s in the shops and online will attest, there is an Easter egg or alternative products intended to appeal to an extremely wide range of tastes and preferences (Shaw, 2022).

Comparison of Christmas and Easter, particularly the reason why the latter has gained apparent popularity in celebration by the masses whilst the latter has declined, is helpful in remembering one has a fixed date and the other does not.

Though some branches of Christianity deviate, across the world and in most cultures, Christmas is accepted as taking place on 25th December, exactly a week before New Year’s Day.

Easter does not enjoy the certainty of a fixed date each year.

The date on which Easter Sunday falls is based on what's known as the lunisolar calendar and is always that which falls following after the first full moon subsequent to the spring equinox.

As decreed by the 325AD Council of Nicea, the first council of the Christian Church, which was organised under Emperor Constantine, for the purpose of calculation, spring equinox is always deemed to be 21st March meaning that Easter Sunday can be as early as 22nd March though this last occurred in 1818. Easter can be well into April and in 2019 was 21st April.

However, some within the church had different views about what was appropriate which created confusion. As the BBC explain, Northumbrian King Oswy (612-670) who ruled from 655 to his death, decided to follow what had become accepted among Irish monks which resulted in him celebrating Easter on a different date to his Kentish wife who continued to respect the Roman tradition (2023).

The change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1582, named respectively after Roman Emperor Julius Caesar and Pope Gregory XIII, altered the date at which Easter occurs. By this point the reformation had taken place in Britain. Any decree emanating from Catholic Rome was never going to achieve immediate consent. It took almost two centuries for the British Parliament to decree adherence to the Gregorian calendar.

For around 1500 years, Easter was firmly based on the bible which includes accounts of what's known as 'The Passion of Christ' involving Jesus' arrest, trial, suffering (passion being the Latin translation), his execution by crucifixion and, crucially for all Christians, Resurrection three days later.

Various traditions still play out including 'Maundy money' involving the giving of money to the needy by the monarch on the Thursday immediately prior to Easter. Believed to date back to 600AD 'special coins' were designed in 1670 which are still minted today. This year will be the first time King Charles III will engage in giving twenty-six men and women twenty-six pence of Maundy money (Saqib, 2023).

Given the significance attached to the crucifixion and resurrection by the Church, it's hardly unsurprising that a great deal of art is dedicated to the events of Christ's death. Leonardo Da Vinci's painted The Last Supper, a mural on the wall of the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, completed between 1495–1498.

Intriguingly, the staircase from the palace of the man who oversaw the trial of Christ in Jerusalem, and which led to his death, Pontius Pilate, is now located in Rome. The Scala Sancta, meaning Holy Stairs, consisting of 28 white marble steps, is located in a building next to the Archbasilica of Saint John in Laterano and reputed to have been brought to Rome in 326 by Saint Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine.

So, the question may be asked, what do chocolate eggs, bunnies, hot cross buns and lamb have to do with Easter?

Lent, commencing on 'Ash Wednesday', is the 40 day period traditionally observed to commemorate the time Christ fasted in the desert before commencing his ministry. Like other religions, Christians abstaining from food and pleasure is viewed as a worthy endeavour. As such, not drinking alcohol or eating certain foods is common during Lent. The celebration of Easter provides an opportunity to once again indulge in the pleasure sacrificed over the previous six and a half weeks.

The making of cake would have been extremely welcome; the last time sweet food was consumed being Shrove Tuesday (immediately before Ash Wednesday). It's believed that the 'Alban Bun', created by Brother Thomas Roccliffe, a 14th Century Monk at St Albans Abbey in 1361, is the basis of for what's the hot cross bun (St Albans Cathedral, 2023).

By giving freshly baked (hot) spicy buns with a cross on the top to the poor, this food represents the the crucifixion of Christ and involved charity central to Christian ideology during Lent and more particularly at Easter (Stamm and Goodpaster, 2020).

As Quinn, writing in *The Conversation* explains, eggs, which were frequently given up during Lent, were regarded as a symbol of rebirth and renewal which made them "perfect to commemorate the story of Jesus' resurrection as well as the arrival of spring" (2023). Lambs and rabbits are also perceived as having similar symbolism.

In the past, lamb and rabbit provided an abundance of meat for the agrarian society which existed in Europe before the industrial revolution caused the massive shift in society leading to urbanisation.

Painted eggs, Quinn continues, believed to date back to medieval times, held a special place in celebration of Easter. This created an opportunity for chocolate makers. Though something of an indulgence, due to the relatively high cost, the first chocolate Easter egg was made by Fry's (now part of Cadbury) in 1873.

Other producers of chocolate, including Cadbury, followed Fry's lead in producing eggs made of their product which were purchased only by those who had ample funds to afford what was a luxury product. However, as production methods improved in the post war period, particularly the 1950s, chocolate could be produced far more cheaply.

Cheaper chocolate meant Easter eggs would be offered to the masses, most especially children who tend to possess a voracious appetite for confectionary (Wilson, 2022). For children growing up in the 1960s, a wide array of eggs from a number of producers was available. Frequently such eggs can with free gifts such as cups or toys.

If any obvious commercialisation of Easter can be identified, it's through the way in which chocolate eggs are now commonly associated with this holiday.

Thomas believes that last year we were predicted to spend over £1.7 billion at Easter, mainly on food and drink (2022). Given that chocolate Easter eggs contribute well over half this figure, it can be seen that, provided the weather is conducive, the extra-long weekend offers a fillip through tourism and activities which offset any reduction in gross domestic product caused by loss of production.

Easter, therefore, seems to have developed into a celebration which divides the minority who are committed to religious observance from the vast majority who have little or no interest in any connection to events supposed to have occurred two millennia ago.

Notably, in her provocative *Vox* article 'Why Easter never became a big secular holiday like Christmas', Burton states that though "the mystery of Easter remains strange, profound, and — for some — off-putting [...] it's nice to have one holiday, at least, where the meaning is clear" (2018).

However, you spend the bank holiday weekend, I sincerely hope you get to spend time with those you love and enjoying teats which, in moderation, provides distraction and joy in contrast to the all too incessant negative news and anxiety induced by events.

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