

‘XMAS’ IS NOT BLASPHEMY

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12 December 2007

I expect it was a school teacher who impressed upon my once malleable little mind that the use of *Xmas* was not allowed and that I should always write the word *Christmas* in full so as not to cause offence. I have remembered and kept that rule for fifty years, though in recent times, not without question. This dogma came from the same source as my erroneous notion that the word *present* had two spellings: *present* for a gift and *prestant* (apparently with a silent ‘t’) meaning now. I have no idea how I concocted this little boy’s private interpretation of what Mrs Kearney taught us, but it stuck for years in my subconscious. Such early programming is common and I’m sure we can all identify similar misapprehensions picked up when we were young.

Anyhow, I have always heeded my teacher’s authoritative instruction not to use *Xmas*, so as not to offend the faithful. It is time to do away with a silly convention of respect now I have arrived at what ought to be a universally acceptable explanation.

Xmas isn’t Ex-mass! It’s the word Christmas with Christ – or rather the Greek Christos [Χριστός] – abbreviated to its initial letter Chi [X].¹ That has been the convention for centuries, as the symbol for Jesus Christ, the first two letters of his ‘surname’ Chi-Rho [Χρ in which X = Ch, as in the Scottish Loch, and ρ = r].



4th century Roman coin

When I was researching the history of York’s town band, the waits, I came across many unfamiliar abbreviations and learned to interpret them. Frequently used words were often reduced to a single letter plus a brief underscored superscript,² but one that had no superscript, had me puzzled for a long time: *Xpofer*. It was obviously a man’s name, and I knew from concordances that it was Christopher, but what could it signify? I mentally registered ‘Ex-po-fer’. Who was *Xpofer Girdler fil. J^{no} Girdler*³? When the penny dropped it led me on to further understandings, such as the use of *Xmas*.

Xpofer is Chi-Rho plus –opher = Christopher. It is spelt with an ‘f’ instead of ‘ph’ because the suffix –*fer* (meaning to carry, as in St Christopher who, it is written, carried Jesus) is Latin. If it were Greek (as is the prefix Christ) it would contain the English equivalent of Phi [Φ], ‘ph’. Therefore, in relatively modern times, we have ‘Greeked’ a Latin suffix! [This is complicated, and I might have got bits of this wrong. I am – as always – amenable to correction.]

Now I understand the term *Xpenmesse* I also read in ancient York manuscripts (pronounced by my, at that time, unenlightened mind ‘Ex-pen-mess’). It too begins with Χρ: Christenmesse. Renaissance scribes must have been thinking Christmas not Χρmas as they wrote, augmenting the word in the colourful spelling of the time.

So, when we wish each other A Merry Xmas, all we have to do (silently, in our mind) is pronounce it Christmas and not Ex-mas, and no offence should be taken (for none is meant). I suppose it should be written Χρmas (or, Englished, *Xrmas*) but how would we say it? Christmas, of course.

¹ This is not X (ex) which in Greek would be Ξ, as in ΤΑΞΙ.

² e.g. that became t^u, Ricardus R^{ic} and William W^m.

³ This abbreviation of John (J^{no}) is something I have yet to understand. Anyone out there able to help me?