

Why do we (Armenians) celebrate Christmas on January 6th

The answer to this question is not as plain nor as obvious as one might at first presume. Yes, while it's true that we really don't know when exactly Jesus was born, the fact remains that He was born, although God's self-revelation in human history makes the actual date of this glorious celebration moot and quite actually besides the point. In fact, during the very early years of the Christian church His birthday was not celebrated at all!! Many early church fathers omit it entirely from their lists of feasts.

Without going into the history of all the pagan window dressing associated with the modern yuletide season, the true celebrations, according to the ancient tradition of the church, was a culmination of events related to God's Incarnation. This was not called "Christmas" but rather Theophany which means "revelation of God," and was universally celebrated on January 6th by all Christendom, hi-lighted by the remembrance of Jesus' Baptism. Although, ironically today, Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' birthday, it wasn't until later that the Nativity was incorporated into the January 6th celebrations of the Theophany.

The question about dates must be answered in 2 parts. There are actually only 2 dates for the observance of Jesus' birth and not 4. They are December 25th and January 6th. The confusion of the other 2 dates, January 7th and 18th are due to the use of 2 calendars, the Gregorian and the Julian. While most of the known world, such as Canada, is on the Gregorian calendar (named after Pope Gregory of Rome), some Orthodox Christians maintain their liturgical calendars according to the ancient Julian calendar. Thus, the January 7th date actually corresponds with December 25th on the "old" Julian Calendar while January 19th corresponds to January 6th on the Gregorian calendar. Those who observe January 7th which is actually December 25th on the Julian calendar are referred to as "old calendarists." Despite the calendar usage, all these churches observe the Epiphany or the Baptism of Jesus 12 days following the Nativity.

Secondly, the Armenians, who observe the Gregorian calendar except in Jerusalem, maintain to this day the ancient date of January 6th as the dual celebration of Jesus' birth and baptism, where all the major events related to the Theophany are recalled, from the revelation of Jesus as the "Son of Man" the Incarnate Word, to His revelation as the "Son of God" the Prince of Peace and the King of Heaven. Therefore, this celebration includes everything from the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem, the visitation of the Magi who came to "witness" Him as the Divine Revelation, the infancy narrative...His naming, His presentation in the temple, His circumcision and finally the Epiphany or His Baptism in the River Jordan whereby His formal ministry of redemption was inaugurated by the opening of the heavens, the descent of God the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and the Voice of God the Father proclaiming that "This is my beloved Son." The dual Theophany/Epiphany was celebrated on January 6th until the 5th century when the Council of Chalcedon (451 ad) formally declared December 25th as the date for the celebration of "Christmas" separating the Nativity from the Baptism of Christ by the "12 days of Christmas" remembered today in the popular Carol.

Although there are many compelling theories as to the reason for moving the celebration of the Nativity to December 25th, suffice to say that it is generally believed that the date was changed in order to override and subdue pagan feasts and practices dedicated to The Winter Solstice, because at the time Christians also used to continue their observance of these pagan festivities. The pagans called this celebration Saturnalia, in honour of their god Saturn, a festival lasting from the 17th to the 25th of December culminating with the "Birth of the Unconquerable Sun," as the days began to lengthen, because among pagans it was generally believed that the sun who dies during the winter solstice rises from death thereafter. Since the date of the Epiphany or Baptism was more ancient, and was of primary importance as a liturgical feast, it was not possible to move it while the secondary and later addition of the nativity could be moved without great offence.

Armenia however, whose Christianity is of ancient Apostolic origins, did not adopt this change for the simple fact that there were no such pagan practices left in Armenia in the 5th century allowing them to remain faithful to the traditions of their forefathers. To this day, Armenians have continued to celebrate the Nativity on January 6th along with the Epiphany which is crowned, as with other Orthodox Church's, in the observance of Christ's Baptism, with a glorious "Blessing of the Waters" in whose climax a Cross is plunged into the water as a sign of God's Saving mystery in Christ's life from Womb to Tomb. The blessed water is offered to all as a sign of God's manifestation in the glorious waters of the Jordan from which the Savior was revealed and it becomes possible for humanity to be born again to new life.