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The egg predates Christianity as a religious symbol of renewed life. To witness a new, live creature emerge from an egg shell was a startling event to the ancient Indo-Europeans. There is a record of the giving eggs as gifts at the spring equinox in the Persian empire. In early Christian times, the egg became the symbol of the rock tomb out of which Christ emerged into resurrected life.

There was also a practical reason for making the egg a special sign of Easter joy, since it was one of those foods forbidden during the Lenten fast. In Russia, Ukraine, Poland and other Eastern European countries, after the Lenten fast, Christians begin their first Easter meal with a blessed egg.

Decorated eggs, however, are the Christian evolution of

religious folk art. From about the twelfth century, the faithful painted Easter eggs in bright colors, had them blessed by their pastor, and gave them to friends, and especially to children as Easter gifts. One record has that Edward I of England (1307) had four hundred and fifty eggs boiled, dyed and covered with gold leaf for distribution on Easter Day.

The decoration of the Easter eggs depends on local traditions. In parts of Germany, hollow colored eggs are still suspended from shrubs and trees during Easter week and this custom has become popular in the United States. In Greece, the eggs are often stained crimson to symbolize the blood of Christ. Slavic peoples make special patterns of gold and silver on their eggs. In Austria,

eggs are designed to show a white pattern after the eggs are boiled. Eastern Europeans are particularly original and artistic about the design of the eggs. The Armenians, for example, decorate empty eggs with pictures of the risen Christ or other religious designs. Egg hunting has been a nearly universal Christian custom for many centuries.

The custom of distributing Easter eggs as part of the liturgy developed among the nations of northern Europe and Asia Minor soon after the conversion of these peoples to Christianity. The custom never developed in the southern hemispheres. Eggs decorated with Christian symbols are still distributed during the Easter liturgy in Orthodox congregations.