

The War on Christmas

Every year at the beginning of December some Americans engage in a ridiculous rhetorical ritual that recycles righteous arguments about whether people should say to one another Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas. This question is one skirmish in the broader cultural and political battle that come under the heavily laden frame of the 'war on Christmas.'

On one hand I feel that all of this is nonsense and not worth engaging at all. But, giving everyone the benefit of the doubt, it is true that our country is undergoing some profound changes in demographics. We are more religiously and culturally diverse than ever before and this diversity will automatically evoke some strong reactions. Plus, we have a rising population that does not feel affiliated with any religious tradition and this too contributes to the new cultural landscape. So, it is not surprising that those used to Christianity being the dominant religion in America feel unease in this new reality.

So, consider this a primer to help all of us 'just get along' during this 'holiday season.'

Let's start with the fact that there are several holidays that fall during December including Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Winter Solstice and the newly minted secular HumanLight. They all would like, and deserve to be acknowledged and respected.

So this brings us to the Merry Christmas vs Happy Holiday debate that is not complicated and is solved with basic etiquette. If you know someone is a Christian who is celebrating Christmas you should say to them 'Merry Christmas.' Likewise, say 'Happy Hanukkah' to a person you know is Jewish, etc.

For example, during the month of Ramadan I say to my Muslim friends 'Ramadan Mubarak' because it shows them that I acknowledge their tradition and wish them well as they observe the holy time in their calendar. This courtesy and respect should be part of what it means to live in a pluralistic society and it is easy for all of us to offer to those to whom we are close.

However, if you don't know the spiritual tradition of a co-worker, friend, or stranger in the elevator but wish to offer them a 'Season's greeting' -- a simple 'Happy Holiday' is not at all an insult or a denigration of Christmas, or any other tradition. It is an appropriate and inclusive salutation that recognizes that there

are many ways that people are observing the season and you don't know enough to be specific.

That is the very reason that many stores use Happy Holidays rather than Merry Christmas, because they want to be inclusive and welcome as many dollars, ahem, people, into their stores as possible. So, using Happy Holidays is not anti-Christmas, it is pro-business, and we don't want to be anti-business do we?

Next on the list is the Holiday Tree... ok, no more Holiday Tree. The governor of Rhode Island did the right thing recently. Just call it a Christmas Tree, because that is what it is. Again, this is just common sense, we don't call it a Holiday Menorah -- it is for Hanukkah, let's just call things what they are and then it isn't such a big deal.

The trickiest part of the whole 'war on Christmas' is what to do about holiday celebrations in public schools, and on public property. Here again, inclusion is the way to go. We are a nation that has continued to welcome people of all religious backgrounds and no religious backgrounds. Simultaneous religious inclusion with separation of church is part of America's complex yet wonderful religious DNA.

So, let a thousand flowers bloom -- let's have Christmas carols and Hanukkah songs; Kwanzaa lessons, HumanLight celebrations, and Pagan solstice rituals -- let's do it all. It's so much more fun to cast a wide net where all can celebrate our traditions together rather than strip everything away to protect the delicate sensibilities of some very prickly few.

And now a special note to my fellow Christians who talk so much about the war on Christmas. I get it, for a long, long time Christianity was dominant in the United States and represented the civic religion of the country. But America is about the people who are here now, and that is a much more diverse group. And that's good! It is time to stop insisting that everything revolves around us. Instead, let's join the wider circle of the many traditions that make up our country. Besides, any Christian knows that Christmas is not about displays in shopping malls, or capitols, or schools, it is about a spiritual event that we honor most in our families and our homes.

So, Merry Christmas, Christians; Happy Hanukkah, Jews; Super Solstice, Pagans; Hurray, Human Light Humanists; Joyous Kwanzaa to African Diaspora and to everyone all together -- Happy Holidays. See you at the party!