

Happy Holidays to one and all! Isn't that much easier? To say "Happy Holidays?" If I were to say "Merry Christmas," I would have only wished for one day out of several to be merry, and only to a specific group of people. Just to be fair, I would have to say, "Merry Twelve Days of Christmas, Christmas Eve, New Year, New Year's Eve, Chanukah, Yalda, Kwanzaa, Yule, Boxing Day, Junkanoo, Irish Day of the Wren, Epiphany or Three Kings' Day, Cuban Liberation Day, Kakizome, Emancipation Proclamation Day, Holy Innocents' Day, Day of the Samoan Fire Dance, Winter Solstice, Rizal, Constitution Day in Taiwan, Oatmeal Muffin Day, Elvis Presley's Birthday, South African Goodwill Day, Wear-a-Plunger-On-Your-Head Day..." By the time I finished wishing people Happy Holidays, the holidays would be over!

I have heard many people talk about keeping "Christ" in "Christmas." Some suggest that Christmas has lost its true meaning over the years, and that the term "Xmas" is just one example of this. Commercialization on a religious day is another. People talk about how Christmas is the holiest and most sacred time of year. People start to talk about how much the holiday has changed and been corrupted since the way they remember it when they were children. To be honest, I can't believe how uninformed people can be regarding a subject they seem to be so passionate about.

Take the term "Xmas" for example. The letter X is not the Latin letter X which is used in algebra to denote an unknown or non-specific variable. The X is the Greek letter chi – used in Catholicism as one of many legitimate symbols for Christ. (This does not mean, however, that I approve of the way some people refer to Christians as "Xians." This term originated specifically from people meaning to be disrespectful. If its original purpose was to save on space by abbreviating, I'd have no problem with it. But the intention is to be insulting, and I ask anyone using this term to please try to be more considerate of other people and refer to the Christian religion by its proper term!)

Some activists believe that any store which says "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" should be boycotted. This is just plain stupid. It's ridiculous to base your holiday shopping around the fact that you didn't like the way that someone else *phrased* a nice greeting to wish you joy at this time of year. Furthermore, it's extremely arrogant to assume that all pious Christians are going to automatically take your side on an issue. The Pope is the leader of the Catholic faith. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the leader of the Episcopal faith. Disgruntled Wal-Mart shoppers are the leaders of nobody. To assume that the entire Christian belief system is somehow obligated to follow the lead of a few random individuals is a sign of egomania. What's more, it's an insult to the rest of the Christian population. Imagine how you would feel if a fellow Christian walked into your church one day with a crucifix tattooed on his face, and then told you that if you were a "real" Christian, you'd have done the same. You'd take objection to that, wouldn't you? So be kind and don't expect all "real" Christians to have the same views.

As for the commercialization of Christmas, one must keep in mind that the only reason Christmas has become such a major holiday is *because* of the commercialization. This is a holiday which was not introduced until the middle ages, and even then, was just an excuse for a twelve-day drinking binge. It wasn't until about the nineteenth century that

the day became commercialized. It was never a very holy day, unlike say, Easter or Good Friday.

So while you might remember Christmas as having had a different meaning when you were a child, you should keep in mind that the true meaning of Christmas has been organically developing throughout history, and it didn't start with your generation.

Chanukah now faces the same fate as Christmas. Even though Chanukah itself isn't nearly as important in the Jewish calendar as Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah or Passover, the fact that it falls right smack in the middle of the holiday shopping season makes it a prime target for commercial retailers – greeting card companies, for example. I predict that in a few decades, we'll see this holiday go from the remembering of a lamp not going out, to being one of the biggest celebrations of the year.

On the other hand, in these times of economic recession, anything that boosts the economy as much as the Christmas shopping season just *has* to be considered a miracle. From Black Friday (the day when the entries in the retailers' ledgers go from red to black) to the post-holiday toy-shopping season (the time when parents go out to buy the toy that they *promised* their children for Christmas, but couldn't find because the stores deliberately under-stocked them) the businesses make enough money to finance their operations for almost all of last fiscal year and get a good start on next year. But before you go calling this a "racket," just remember that if these big businesses crash, we all end up unemployed. How many of today's readers spend the year manufacturing Christmas cards all year long? If you saved money this Christmas by not buying any, you'd have a few dollars extra. But if *everyone* saved money this way, you'd have no income at all. Just remember that every time you run up a debt, some salesman working on commission is paying one off. And with that profit, the credit card companies can afford to offer more customer bonuses to you, the consumer, in order to stay ahead of their competition. This entire full-scale economic stimulus hitting all aspects of the economy at once sure sounds like a miracle to me!

Some people complain about the idea of Santa Claus. Some say it takes attention away from the true meaning of Christmas. Others say it fills children's heads with false hopes and dreams more than it does sugarplums – that children eventually become disillusioned and cynical when they finally learn the "truth." I could not disagree more. Santa Claus is just another name for Saint Nicholas, and what could be more Christian than invoking a Christian saint? I know that Saint Anthony died a long time ago, but I don't go around saying that he doesn't really exist. He's just a nice guy whom I never see, but he always seems to know where I left my car keys. Pious Christians – particularly Catholics – may call upon Saint Lucy to pray "help my eyesight," or pray to Saint Jude "help my child fight this terminal illness," or to Saint Francis of Assisi, "protect my dogs and my cats." What is so strange about praying to Saint Nicholas "help me find a video game at a reasonable price for my child?"

I think the reason that people have a hard time taking Santa Claus seriously is the way he's drawn. Whereas other Christian saints are made to look either Renaissance like the

angels painted by Michelangelo, or dark and macabre like the gothic images of the crucifixion painted during the romantic period; pictures of Santa Claus have always been cartoonish-looking. That fact combined with the elements of Germanic mythology surrounding him, such as the elves and the flying reindeer, make him a little hard for some people to take seriously. And since the stories of Santa's village at the North Pole aren't as deeply rooted in the psyche as stories of the Garden of Eden, they are less likely to survive education. We find ourselves still believing that a burning bush could talk or that a man could walk on water, but the thought of a gravity-defying caribou with a luminescent nose seems silly. I, on the other hand, think that dismissing a story that seems silly is not a sign of education, but just a sign of a severe lack of imagination.

So what exactly are children doing when they leave cookies and milk by the fireplace for Santa? Very simple. According to the rules of Catholicism, a Catholic may attend a shrine in a church, in the home or anywhere dedicated to any sanctified individual (publicly so long as the spirit in question is canonized). Put simply, it's a cult practice. Now, I know that the word "cult" has taken on certain negative connotations for having been associated with groups like Heaven's Gate or the Manson Family, but don't forget that the word "cult" also applies to legitimate religious groups such as church parishes. And since many of the Christian saints have been identified with Pagan icons such as gods or faeries, many of the same rules apply. (In St. Nicholas's case, by his association with the Pagans' Holly King.) By this reasoning, a child could be making a food offering to an ancient elf spirit on his altar over the hearth, but at the exact same time, be participating in the honoring of a saint dedicated to the Christian God. Furthermore, people who dress up as Santa Claus are no different than a shaman symbolically embodying an ancestral spirit. So if you look at it this way, the idea of "there is no Santa Claus" become overly simplistic at best, and at worst, just plain ignorant. (And by the way, haven't you ever seen "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus?")

Next, we come to one of my favorite pet peeves about people's attitudes about Christmas. I see buttons and stickers and wall plaques bearing the phrase "Jesus is the reason for the season." How do I feel about this? Well, let me put it this way. I like the fact that it rhymes.

The "reason for the season" is that the planet Earth is positioned at an angle where the most direct sunlight is heating up the Southern hemisphere as opposed to the North. This affects the weather. The weather affects the crops. And since most of our major holidays were created by farmers, almost all of the "old" holidays are in some way weather-related.

According to most experts, Jesus was born approximately sometime around six B.C. (give or take a few years). Birthdays were almost never recorded in those days and never celebrated. The only people whose birthdays were even kept on record were Roman Emperors or "important" people like that. The peasant son of an Israelite carpenter in a rural town wouldn't have received so much as a footnote. The only thing we can be sure of is that shepherds were not keeping watch over their flocks by night in the middle of winter. Nor would a wise man cross a desert this time of year in the middle of the night.

Yuletide traditions had been going on since long before the birth of Christ, and haven't changed that much. Loosely incorporating a few Christian elements into the iconic image of the rebirth of a Pagan sun god at the time of the winter solstice has had no effect on the many ancient traditions of mistletoe and holly and wreaths and candles and Yule logs (or a tree) which are still around today.

With the exception of going to mass, Christmas is a full-blooded all-out Pagan holiday. Every year, I see the people most strongly dedicated to the basic principles of Christianity – the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Amish – watch idly as the Christmas season comes and goes without so much as a star. At the same time of year, Wiccans and Pagans are busy decorating their homes with wreaths of holly and sprigs of mistletoe and lighting up either a tree or a log, and yes, occasionally having a nativity set. And if you still don't believe me when I say that Christmas isn't a Christian holiday, ask yourself this: Have you ever seen an atheist refuse to participate in drinking eggnog?

Don't get me wrong. I mean no disrespect to Jesus or to Christmas traditions. But saying that people are "forgetting that Christmas is Jesus' birthday," is a lot like saying that the true meaning of the Fourth of July is that it's Abraham Lincoln's birthday – a great man, and a great holiday, but they shouldn't be thrown together.

Finally, we come to the biggest gripe people have about the holidays – the holiday stress! People are rushing around to buy things and wrap things and decorate things and cook things and mail things and get it all done before that one major deadline. People go crazy to clean their entire houses from top to bottom, and then make a mess of it with pine needles and torn-up wrapping paper and tangled electrical wires and bits of scotch tape and receipts and empty boxes and bags, and then they have to clean it up *again!* People are on the edge of their seats waiting for holiday bonuses and credit card bills to see which of the two numbers is greater this year.

Well, to that I say, "What if we just skipped it this year?" I think we can all agree that the disappointment at not having the holiday cheer would far outweigh the relief from the stress. Christmas is that time of year when we smile and laugh and have fun and be with friends and family. It's also the only time of year when you get to eat candy out of your socks. The stress doesn't come from Christmas. It comes from the preparation. The actual day of Christmas (or even Christmas Eve according to the Polish traditions), is a day of joy and celebration. We become nicer, kinder, more generous, friendlier, more festive, and everything around us becomes a miracle. This is the time of year when people believe in magic and you don't even have to be a witch to make the magic happen. The magic is that we all act so much like adults right up until the moment of the holiday, and then suddenly, we become as children again. We laugh. We sing. We tell stories. We use our money to stimulate the economy, and we use our positive energy to enhance the world around us and within us. Put succinctly, we all turn into the people we wish the world was full of all year. I think that that's worth a little stressful preparation, don't you?

Now here's the joke. Nothing changes except our attitude. There's no human-sized elf forcing us all to be nicer to each other. We're doing that all on our own. We all wish

that we were better people all year long, but most of us can't help but say "you first." Yet for the simple reason of all the hype, when Christmas comes around, we can't wait to go first and be the best people we can be. Well, thank media for all the hype, because for once, it's working for us. The big corporate advertising machine acts on us like a pep rally for peace on Earth and goodwill toward men. Talk about win-win! So let me start a trend right here and hype the idea of being this way all year round.

So a Merry Xmas and Happy Holidays to one and all. It may not be as religiously important as Easter, Passover, Samhain or Ramadan, but it's important for all the other reasons. May the spirit of Saint Nicholas receive your ceremonial offerings of milk and cookies and bring you all that you wish for, may the holiday cheer outweigh the holiday stress, may the Dow Jones go as high as it can go for as long as it can, may your season be festive, may the skies above be filled with the glow of a deer's nose, may your wreath honor the Holly King, may your eggnog be potent, may your children be happy, may your new year be bright, and most importantly, may the magic of this season burn way longer than it's expected to (like the miracle oil of Chanukah), so much so that it lasts right on through into next holiday season. Happy Yuletide.

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