

Christmas is a secular holiday

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People who would ban Christmas decorations and celebrations from public places are moved by the thought that to celebrate Christmas publicly is to privilege one tradition, and the constellation of values around it, over all the other traditions and constellations of values current in Canadian society. Celebrating Christmas, they think, disparages other holidays or traditions of celebration, and that, in turn, marginalizes or excludes everyone outside the Christian tradition.

One point we must keep in mind here, though, is that Christmas is not an exclusively Christian holiday. For at least a couple of generations, Christmas has been evolving into a secular holiday, a holiday that for many of us has no religious significance at all. Christmas is a celebration of good will, generosity, and peace among nations. It is a time to appreciate and enjoy the company of family and friends. Children are central to Christmas — partly because it is to them that the future belongs, mainly because they are strange and clever people of whom we are fond.

Now for the Christians among us, Christmas marks the birth of Jesus and, so, is also an occasion for worship. But it isn't any such occasion for the rest of us. And while the activities and symbols through which we honour and celebrate good will, generosity, peace, family, friends, and children derive from Christian traditions, they now have a life of their own independent of those traditions. They don't put us in mind of any values or doctrines specifically Christian.

Christmas then is, for many who celebrate it, an entirely secular holiday. So if public displays of Christmas trees or greetings of "Merry Christmas!" privilege or exclude, it is not in virtue of their privileging Christianity or excluding non-Christians. What we honour and celebrate at Christmas and through such things as Christmas trees, gift giving, and greetings of "Merry Christmas!" — good will, generosity, peace, family, friends, children — are important in many, if not all, traditions and ways of life current in Canada.

Still, though a secular holiday that honours values to which almost all of us subscribe, Christmas is someone's particular celebration of these values and, so, maybe not someone else's. And that fact brings us to the question what sort of multicultural society we would like ours to be.

In one sort of multicultural society, no celebrations or holidays are public celebrations or holidays. There are, perhaps, statutory holidays, or maybe each of us just gets a certain number of days off work each year to take when we choose. Each of us congregates with others of our group when, according to our traditions or authorities, it's time to honour something, and we do with members of our group whatever our traditions or authorities would have us do.

Some of us might invite outsiders to be with us on our celebration day; perhaps we have a fair that anyone can attend. Others of us might instead just have one of our elders write an article for the paper about who we are and what we are honouring. We might make use of public money or public facilities in conducting our event. But in this sort of society, no celebration is by everyone for everyone.

In another sort of multicultural society, some celebrations or holidays are public events — events funded and organized by or through civil authorities acting on mandates from the federal government. These holidays would, of course, have to honour values important to most people in the country and to honour them in ways the people find congenial, or else they would attract few participants. In this second sort of multicultural society, a few holidays, maybe only two or three a year, belong to all the people. They are times when everyone gets together to enjoy themselves and to enjoy each other.

The second sort of multicultural society is much more attractive than the first sort. The people in it enjoy whatever group identities they have and they are free and welcome to honour them. But they also see themselves as citizens of a country and view their neighbours as fellow citizens. In the first sort of multicultural society, people see themselves merely as residing among their neighbours, not as connected to them through projects of citizenship.

What might be a holiday that all of us can celebrate together simply as Canadians, a holiday whose values touch us all? An obvious candidate is the secular holiday known as Christmas. If we want to have a few holidays that belong to all of us and that all of us can enjoy, I say we make Christmas one of them.

Christmas has been evolving into a secular holiday for decades. Sadly, not everyone has received the news. Some people would have us say "Season's greetings" rather than "Merry Christmas" and not have us put Christmas trees in public areas, wrongly thinking that Christmas in Canada is a Christian affair. They would undo the good work people have been doing over the decades to transform Christmas into a celebration that's moving and fun for everyone. They would return Christmas to the Christians.

Willingly or not, these people are helping to make all celebrations in our country small, sectarian, private affairs. I say we instead take up the noble task of continuing to offer Christmas to all as a delightful secular holiday that we enjoy together and at which we honour values we all

cherish.

So let us say “Merry Christmas” to each other and to decorate Christmas trees in public places. And let us explain to anyone who worries our behaviour will offend or exclude someone that while Christmas does have its origins in Christian traditions, the Christmas we celebrate is not a Christian or a religious holiday.

Christmas now belongs to all of us, it privileges no particular religious or other tradition, and no one is excluded from it.

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