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## Respecting religious diversity during the holiday season

Are “Christian haters” and “professional atheists” engaged in an all-out war on Christmas, as FOX News’ anchor John Gibson claims? I don’t think so—unless one is prepared to say that President Bush and the First Lady are leading the effort. This year’s White House greeting card extends “best wishes for a holiday season of hope and happiness.” No mention of “Merry Christmas” from the First Family.

About a dozen holy days are observed by various religious groups between Thanksgiving and New Year’s. For decades we have been confronted by that “December dilemma” of how to acknowledge and celebrate winter religious holidays, usually in the context of the schools, in a way that is constitutional and culturally sensitive. People of good faith, including the Baptist Joint Committee, have worked long and hard to develop guidelines that comply with the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the First Amendment’s religion clauses, and respect the amazing religious diversity in this country.

There is widespread agreement that:

1. Holiday concerts in the public schools can and should include religious music along with the secular, as long as the sacred does not dominate.
2. Religious dramatic productions can be presented in the public schools as long as they do not involve worship and are part of an effort to use religious holidays as an occasion to teach about religion.
3. Free standing crèches, as thoroughly religious Christian symbols, should not be sponsored by government, but Christmas trees and menorahs are sufficiently secular to allow their display without a constitutional problem.

Having settled many of the legal issues, some are now bent on fighting battles in a culture war against an enemy that does not exist. Some on the religious and media right lament political correctness run amok by calling a Christmas tree a “holiday tree” and extending “seasons greetings” instead of “Merry Christmas.” In fact, they have threatened lawsuits to rectify such indiscretions and, in the private sector, encouraged a boycott of merchants that fail to use the right words.

What irony and how sad—to be picking a fight over what to call a season that for many celebrates the coming of the Prince of Peace. We would all do well to take a deep breath and exercise some common sense as we think and talk about this season.

Christmas is Christmas and a tree is a tree. There’s nothing wrong with calling it what it is: a Christmas tree. And it is perfectly appropriate to extend a specific holi-

day greeting such as my Jewish friends do when they wish me a “Merry Christmas,” and I return a “Happy Hanukkah.”

But often it’s quite appropriate to wish another “happy holidays” or “season’s greetings.” It’s just a matter of good manners and common courtesy. If I am talking to a person whose religious affiliation I do not know, I will employ the more general greeting. And the same goes for merchants who have advertised goods to Americans of many religious traditions who may or may not celebrate Christmas.

None of this disparages Christmas one iota or diminishes my enjoyment of it in the least.

Then why are these culture warriors bound to start a brouhaha in the midst of the love, joy, peace and hope of Advent?

It’s part of a concerted effort to affirm the mythical “Christian nation” status of the United States. (By the way, the Puritans and many other religious people well into the 19th century refused to celebrate Christmas because they thought it was unchristian and not supported by Scripture). So, in the words of the title of the Beatles song, “I, Me, Mine,” it’s all about ME and the brash assertion of MY supposed right to impose my religion on others. Moreover, and I hope it is not a too jaded thought, these bombastic diatribes about a war on Christmas attract publicity and make for good fund raising. (Truth be known, the Christmas spirit is threatened more by runaway commercialism—beginning just after Halloween!—than by any supposed cultural hostility to a holiday that more than 90 percent of our citizens celebrate.)

No, we do not need government promoting our religious holidays to the exclusion of others. Nor do we need a corps of purity police trying to dissuade our efforts to respect the religious diversity that is the hallmark of this country.

To all of our readers, then: Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, and a Joyous Kwanzaa, Martyrdom Day of Guru Tegh Bahadur, Bodhi Day, Maunajiyaras Day, Beginning of Masa’il, Nisf Sha’ban and Yalda Night, Yule and Shinto Winter Solstice, and Ramadan! Or, happy holidays!

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