

"The War on Christmas, The Peace of Christmas"

a homily by Dan Lillie

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The Controversial Billboard

There is a billboard on northbound I-25, just before the Montgomery exit that is creating quite a bit of controversy. Next to a picture of the Nativity scene, it says, "Just skip church/ It's all fake news!" and under that in smaller print, "Happy Holidays from the American Atheists!"

It seems that every year, just after Thanksgiving, two things seem to signify the start of the winter holiday season: the suddenly unavoidable presence of Christmas music in every public space; and the declaration by religious conservatives that secular society is waging a "War on Christmas." The weapon of choice in this annual assault is the phrase "Happy Holidays!" How offensive!

This phrase, religious conservatives argue, is being used with the explicit intent to replace the phrase, "Merry Christmas!" Certainly we must beware the slippery slope: if Merry Christmas gets phased out, then it is only a matter of time before Christianity becomes outlawed and Christians are rounded up and jailed. Well, that is the argument anyway.

This, of course, is ridiculous. With over 90% of Congress identifying as Christian¹, I doubt that any laws are going to get through anytime in the foreseeable future that bans Christianity in the public arena.

I think most people understand that saying Happy Holidays merely recognizes that there are, in fact, quite a few holidays observed by various cultural, religious, and faith traditions during the same winter season, and "Happy Holidays" is an inclusive way to offer someone warm regards without making assumptions as to which tradition or traditions an individual might observe. The use of "Happy Holidays," doesn't mean that "Merry Christmas" is no longer allowed, it just means it's not the only option.

However, when I drive past the controversial billboard on I-25, I have to wonder: although it may not be a full-on declaration of war, it does at least appear to be a shot fired across the bow. I can certainly understand why Christians would be upset. "Just skip church/ It's all fake news!" seems to imply

¹ "The religious makeup of the 115th Congress" by W. Scott Lamb. *The Washington Times*. Jan 2017:
<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jan/3/religious-makeup-of-115th-congress/>

that Christianity (or any religious tradition that meets in a church) has nothing true or valuable to offer.

We meet in a church; do any of you find the billboard offensive?

While I'm pretty sure that our creedless community makes us something of an exception, if I thought that billboard was talking about our church, then, yeah, I'd be offended. I think there is plenty of value to be found in attending this church on a regular basis. I think there is a lot of value in belonging to a beloved community that can help us become spiritually grounded as we work toward justice.

Whether or not you personally find the billboard offensive, I find it problematic that it seems designed specifically to antagonize, and gives the "War on Christmas" proponents something to point to that supports their case.

Privileged Distress

The claim of a "War on Christmas" is a prime example of what Unitarian Universalist columnist Doug Muder calls Privileged Distress, which he describes as occurring when "society progresses towards justice, [and] favored groups start losing some of their privileges."² To members of these groups, the loss of privilege can feel like oppression.

When this happens, it is common for members of the now-slightly-less-privileged group to want to return to a time when their privilege went unquestioned. Make America Great Again is a blatant example of this sentiment playing out in our country right now.

(As a side note: Maybe we can take it as a small consolation that, as hateful and harmful as this ideology may be, it arose in response to social and moral progress?)

But I digress – back to Privileged Distress. As this nostalgic sentiment applies to the "War on Christmas" folks, I have to wonder if they would be so quick to want to return to the Good Ol Days of Christmas if they knew the history of Christmas.

A Brief History of Christmas

In fact, if you go back far enough, you'll find that *Christians* were the ones declaring a War on Christmas. In the 1600's, the Puritans in New England were outspoken opponents of the holiday, calling Christmas "nothing more than a pagan festival with a Christian veneer."³

² "Political empathy" by Doug Muder. *UU World*. Oct 2013:
<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/political-empathy>

³ *The Battle for Christmas* by Stephen Nissenbaum, Vintage Books, 1996. (p 5)

And they were right. There is no evidence, biblical or otherwise, suggesting that Jesus's birth occurred on, or near December 25. In fact, most evidence suggests he wasn't even born in winter. However, in its first few centuries of formation and development, Christianity officially came to recognize December 25 as the birthday of Jesus because of its proximity to pagan holidays, the idea being that it would be easier to convert pagans if they could just transfer the coinciding celebrations to be about Jesus instead of Yule and Solstice. With this came the mixing of pagan traditions into Christian Christmas that have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus; things like the Christmas tree, the Yule log, candles, mistletoe and holly.

By the time of the Puritans, Christmas would evolve, or more accurately, devolve, into a holiday more like a Mardi Gras festival than a pious day of religious observance. Marked by debauchery and rabbleroxing, one Anglican priest noted that "Men dishonor Christ more in the twelve days of Christmas, than in all the twelve months besides."⁴

Common practices included heavy drinking and then going door-to-door to the wealthiest homes and demanding to be served the best food and drink in the house. This was often accompanied by threats of violence and vandalism if their demands were not granted.

Is this the Christmas that modern-day Christians who claim there is a War on Christmas want to return to?

As it turns out, maybe aggressive panhandlers and street-side windshield cleaners have a better sense of the "true" Christmas spirit than the folks with fancy Christmas light displays and inflatable yard decorations.

Looking at the history of Christmas, it would appear that there is no single "pure" version of Christmas to return to. It has always been a blending of cultures and traditions.

It seems to me that more accurate than a War *on* Christmas, what we are seeing, and a part of, is a war *for* Christmas. The war is about who gets to claim it, define it, and decide its future.

What does (or even better, what *should*) Christmas mean to us, here and now?

For some it's about the divinity of Jesus. For some it's about the music and carols. For some it's about the presents.

⁴ *The Battle for Christmas* by Stephen Nissenbaum, Vintage Books, 1996. (p 7)

The Peace of Christmas

But for all of our differences, the talk about a War on Christmas seems to miss the spirit of what Christmas at its best is about: Peace.

Peace on Earth, Goodwill to all! Christmas is an opportunity to embrace peace. It's a reminder to work for a better world, to treat each other respectfully, and assume the best about others. Isn't that what goodwill means?

Peace on Earth, and mercy mild! Reconciliation! Christmas is an opportunity to embrace peace. May it be a reminder to be with family and seek out loved ones. To amend and forgive, and make peace in our homes.

If I have any claim to Christmas, may it be a season of peace. I wave the white flag of surrender in the war on Christmas. I don't want to fight.

Around this time every year, Emily and I receive cards, photos, and letters from many of our friends who live near and far. I read about their lives; about new jobs, new pets, new kids, new homes; promotions, adventures, travels, hardships, challenges, lost jobs, health problems, and lost loved ones. And at the bottom, they sign their letters Merry Christmas. And Happy Holidays. And Peace, Joy, and Love. And Warm Wishes.

And it doesn't matter how they sign it, because the message is clear. There is not even the slightest hint of War in their words. There is only the true, deep peace of Christmas.

I'd like to close with a poem called *The Essence* by G.M. Caple:

Discard the myths and legends for
 what they are:
Strip away the accretions of the
 centuries;
Abandon the traditional half-pagan
 observances,
The feasting and drinking,
The spurious goodwill,
The alcoholic bonhomie;
End the materialism,

The commercialism,
The whole whirl of meaningless
activity.

And what will remain?

With unimagined clarity
There will be experienced
An intermission,
A quietness,
A stillness of the spirit.
A strange awareness
Of the infiltration of human life
By some divine essence.
Bringing with it
An indescribable peace
Which is at once the mystery
And the reality
That is called Christmas.