

Celebrating Christmas without religion

“Is There Room at the Inn? Religious Celebration in Secular Settings,” a panel discussion, The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs, 6 December 2012, Sobey Building, Saint Mary’s University

Ottawa *Citizen*, 7 December 2012

On-line at

<http://www.canada.com/life/theholidayguide12/Celebrating+Christmas+without+religion/7662780/story.html>

Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary’s University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

Religion is a horrid thing. Not just the institutions of organized religion. They, certainly, are horrid. But I mean as well religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

There are at least three ways in which religious beliefs and attitudes are horrid. First, because a person can have no good reason of evidence or argument for holding a religious belief, a person cannot hold religious beliefs except on faith, that is, in violation of his or her standards of belief worthiness. Religion is horrid, then, because it depends on and encourages self-deception, wishful believing, and contempt for evidence.

Second, religion involves, perhaps necessarily involves, self-abasement. In worshipping something, a person assumes an attitude of inferiority to the object of worship—not just inferiority of talents, but inferiority in worth, inferiority as a person.

Third, religion involves the attitude that all is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds. (This must be the best possible world, as it is God’s handiwork.) Thus, everything happens for a reason, including suffering and sorrow, and is ultimately justified by its reason. But to take this attitude (again, against the evidence one has) is to be contemptuous of actual suffering and sorrow.

Now one might defend religious belief on the grounds that it answers a deep human need for meaning and purpose. But people can certainly find meaning and purpose outside religion. What religion tries to answer is a need for *transcendent* meaning and purpose. That need isn’t deep, though, for it has been instilled in those who feel it by religion itself. Religion, then, is the cause of the disease that religion seeks to cure.

Because religion is horrid, we should all be doing what we can to promote atheism and secularity.

Now we must, of course, act well and fairly in promoting atheism and secularity. That is, we must not violate or advocate violating anyone’s civil liberties. Among the civil liberties we must respect are freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, and equal access to state and other social resources.

And so we come to that perennial topic of the Christmas season, the public celebration of religion in a multicultural society.

Religious people and religious groups should not be prevented from celebrating or observing their religion publicly. Public resources available to other people or groups should be available to them as well. If veterans or gays may parade down the streets, so, too, Christians or Muslims must be permitted to parade down the streets.

Of course, religious groups should neither expect nor receive from us deference to their ways. That something is a religious something gives it no more claim on us or on social resources than anything else has. Moreover, we should be free with our criticism of whatever it is religious groups are getting up to. Our criticism might occasionally be harsh and mocking, but religious people must accept that fact or else seek to violate our civil liberties.

Private individuals and groups should be free publicly to celebrate and promote, or propagandize for, their religion to their hearts' content. Secular institutions, on the other hand, should not off their own bat celebrate religion. Municipal governments, for one, should not themselves be sponsoring religion.

One of my chief concerns as a Canadian academic is the strange deference to religion one still finds at quite a few universities. University administrators everywhere seem to think well of religion and to want to subsidize it. Some universities, for instance, offer prayer rooms for Muslim students when they wouldn't offer similar digs for a card-playing or movie-watching club. Just about every university accepts student excuses of religious need though they don't accept student excuses of, say, sporting or romantic need. Universities also always accept excuses of medical need, but a religion isn't (at least it isn't in this context) like an illness.

Sadly, Saint Mary's University, my own institution, is a university marked by a very high level of deference to religion and religious attitudes. Such deference even seems part of its overseas recruitment strategy.

Two quick examples: 1) We at Saint Mary's have to endure a prayer of invocation at commencement. 2) Each Christmas, we erect, on our own initiative, not following the request of a student group, a nativity scene on the front lawn of our main building.

While secular institutions should grant space and resources to religious groups who ask for them (so long as the institution is equally good to every other group), they should not themselves sponsor religion.

This is especially true of universities, for religion is contrary to the ethos and mission of a university. A university is a place of intellectuals and other dispassionate inquirers. We are not, as academics, people of faith. To the contrary: we value reason and autonomy of mind. As a community of people who value reason and autonomy, we cannot but be disdainful of faith. For us to celebrate a religion is for us to deny to ourselves our own best values.

Now it shouldn't sound paradoxical for me to say that we at Saint Mary's, and people at other universities, both ought not to celebrate religion and should indeed have university-sponsored Christmas celebrations. It shouldn't sound paradoxical, for Christmas isn't a religious holiday. Or, better, there are two Christmases, one that only Christians celebrate, another that everyone, including Christians, can cherish.

Christ was taken out of Christmas years ago, and what a wonderful holiday his removal created! A holiday of good will and cheer, of generosity, of children. These are fine things to celebrate and promote.

Unfortunately, misguided partisans of multiculturalism failed to note that Christmas had evolved into a secular holiday for all. Now they're trying to take it away from us. They want only the celebration of Christian myth to remain.

That's too bad, because a society, especially a multicultural one, needs common days of celebration. We shouldn't be condemned to a balkanized holiday season, with various religious groups going about their different observances and nothing happening that belongs to all of us. Secular Christmas is a great idea, one that our time needs.

Why not a nativity scene on the university's lawn, then? Because the nativity scene is pure mythology, no element of which is agreeable to reason.