

## When There Really Was a “War on Christmas”

At the age of 40, the Anglo-Irish philosopher, essayist, playwright, political theorist and activist, George Bernard Shaw, created an organization he dubbed the Society for the Abolition of Christmas. He appointed himself as its first President. Fifty years later at the age of 90, and as Christmas for the year 1946 approached, Dr. Shaw reported that the Society was indeed still in existence, that he indeed was still its first and only President, and that no new members had ever been added to it. (This begs a question: Does an organization consisting of one member constitute a "Society"?) Shaw was an atheist, or--if not quite an atheist--then a non-believer in any kind of traditional religious doctrine. His society was a personal protest against a Holiday for which he maintained there is scant historical evidence; and which he didn't much like anyway, history or not.

I don't know that Mr. Shaw's efforts to abolish Christmas garnered much attention in his day. I'll take my guess that those who knew him probably took it as yet another of his eccentricities.

But if Shaw were living in our day now he might actually be attracting some attention in certain quarters of our society. In fact, were he now amongst us, Mr. Shaw would most likely be regarded as a key figure in a widespread secular atheist conspiracy to get rid of Christmas.

For those who may not know such a conspiracy is going on, I exaggerate only slightly in pointing it out. It was just a few years ago that former Fox News commentator, John Gibson, sounded just such a warning when he published a book titled *The War on Christmas—How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday is Worse Than You Thought*. You know, there are some books you don't even have to read in order to grasp their content; just look at the title.

Even so, I did glean enough of Mr. Gibson's work to get the general idea, which is that the use of phrases like “Happy Holidays” or “Seasons Greetings” to a greater degree than the invoking of “Merry Christmas” is really part of a sinister secular scheme with a decidedly anti-Christian agenda. Gibson's target was not so much government, and whether or not crèches should be displayed on government property, and that whole issue (which by now has been largely settled—you can't do it); as it was about

merchants who wish their customers “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas;” and who refer more to Holidays than they do Christmas.

Those who have since taken up this torch generally weigh in about this time of year with what have become annual warnings and lamentations about a “War on Christmas”

I tend to see all this in more practical terms myself. Whatever language a business chooses to use at this time of year is, I assume, a business decision made for the purpose of doing a good business. My guess is that they’ll go with whatever phrase is most pleasing to the most customers. Looking for some kind of sinister liberal plot in all this strikes me as pretty silly. Personally it is of no great moment to me if a clerk wishes me a “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays” or “Seasons Greetings,” or anything else. I still hate shopping, and just want to get home and curl up with a good book or watch a football game.

I did catch an amusing take on this whole matter by way of a recent Facebook posting courtesy of an outfit called pics.onsizzle, about which I know very little. But I did get a kick out of the text which read: “Let me get this straight: Saying ‘Happy Holidays’ is a ‘War on Christmas?’ What if I were to tell you that from November 1 through January 15 the world’s major religions observe at least 29 different Holidays. [Christmas isn’t] the only one that counts.” I cannot attest to the accuracy of the “29 different Holidays” figure but the point is still well taken.

Be that as it may, there is a delightful irony I find whenever I hear the phrase “War on Christmas.” And that is that there really was such a “war” at one time. There once was a serious, and for a time successful, attempt to ban Christmas both on this continent and in England. And that attempt was made not by liberal secularists, but by Christians of a certain stripe.

Here’s a little history lesson for today: In the year 1649 Oliver Cromwell gained the power of the British throne, abolished the monarchy, and established a Puritan theocracy that lasted for 11 years until the monarchy was restored in 1660. And during that 11 year *interregnum*, as it came to be called, the celebration of Christmas was in fact banned in England. Cromwell’s ruling also carried over to the British colonies, Massachusetts in particular. Some of the early Christians who settled in this country, in the

New England area anyway, really did want to get rid of Christmas. Indeed, they are the only ones who ever actually waged a "War on Christmas" in America.

They were Puritans, remember, who—as their name indicates—wanted to “purify” Christianity of any corrupting influences. And in order to keep Christianity pure, any non-Christian, any pagan, intrusions into the purity of the Christian faith had to be done away with.

So, they reasoned, December 25<sup>th</sup> (or an approximation thereof) is actually the date of a Roman pagan feast to the Sun God Mithra, and was a celebration of the gradual return of the sunlight following the winter solstice, and bears no connection at all to the date of Jesus’ birth. This meant that the date for the celebration of Christmas had to go, along with any festive celebrations on that day. Decorating trees and burning logs are updated versions of the tree hugging practices of the ancient Druids—so that lets out the Christmas tree and the Yule log. Greenery, too, was a pagan symbol for the persistence of life in the face of the seeming death of the earth during the winter—so no hanging of the greens for our Puritan ancestors either; and so on down the line.

There was even a fine levied at this time in New England for celebrating Christmas. It was something like 5 or 6 shillings. How such an edict was enforced has long remained a point of curiosity for me. Did the local authorities go around peeking in windows to see if anyone was having a Christmas dinner and exchanging presents? Did they break down the door and make arrests if they were? We are only left to speculate.

So, as I say, the greatest irony in the Christian Right's bemoaning of how secularists and liberals are trying to get rid of Christmas is that the only people in this country who ever managed to successfully do that, albeit for only a sort period of time, were conservative Christians, the Puritans of some three and a half centuries ago.

The compound irony here is that the Puritans were absolutely right in their reasons for their War on Christmas. When it came to there being any historical basis for what is called the celebration of Christmas, the Puritans were on the very same page as an unbeliever like George Bernard Shaw. Many of the celebrations and observances we associate with Christmas do

have little, if any, bearing at all upon the birth of Jesus, and derive instead from celebrations, traditions, and customs that well pre-date the Christian era. The celebration of Christmas at this time of year is really one of the more later additions, an add-on if you will, to the celebrations and festivities that have long taken place at this time of year in our northern hemisphere.

But the Puritans, along with those of Mr. Shaw's persuasion, offer a classic example of how you can be right on one level, and completely miss the point on another. They missed bigger picture about the universality of this Holiday season. And it is that bigger picture to which I'd now like to turn for the remainder of this sermon, having now said pretty much all I feel I need to say about a War on Christmas.

The bigger picture is that the observances of this season cannot be contained in any one religious tradition. They cannot, in fact, be contained at all. They cannot be contained because they speak to certain fundamental human needs and desires and yearnings that we all experience in the depths of our being--in our hearts and minds and souls, whether we identify with any one faith tradition or not. And I think that the four themes of the Christian Advent Season, which began last Sunday, speak well to those universal longings. I find in them a good example of how the particularities of one faith transcend that very same faith and go up into the realm of the universal.

The four Advent themes are: Joy, Hope, Peace, and Love. Once we have taken care of what the late Doctor Abraham Maslow identified as our basic human survival needs, I'd say these four things speak well to what Maslow, while using different terminology, called our higher level of needs: Needs which can be expressed as Joy, Hope, Peace, and Love. And while these terms find their expression at this time of year within the Christian tradition, they are, as I say, basic and universal human needs. So, we'll take a quick trip around these four bases for the next few minutes.

Joy. I spoke to this last Sunday as we took note of the first Sunday in Advent. To revisit: Knowing joy is not the same this as having fun or being amused or entertained. Don't get me wrong; I like fun and entertainment and amusing diversions. And joy may include all of these things. But joy goes beyond this. Finding joy in living is really about appreciating the life you have and the world in which you have to live it, even with all those times that life and the world have let you down or wounded or hurt you deeply.

Then there's hope, our Advent theme for today. Hope is not quite the same thing as optimism. Living with hope does not mean you always believe that everything is always going to turn out OK. We know it doesn't.

I must interject my favorite “difference between optimists and pessimists line” here: Optimists believe we are living in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimists are afraid the optimists just might be right.

I try to be as much of an optimist as I can, while also knowing that hope is bigger than optimism. To live with hope is to believe that we human beings, if we live with conviction and compassion, can still affect positive change whether we see the full fruits of our efforts or not. Living in hope is about holding onto the bedrock assumption or affirmation that the future remains open, that the past does not have to fully define the present or the future.

Hope is believing that life continues to be worth the journey, with all of its knowns and unknowns, and however bleak it may be at any one time. The best expression of hope that I have found comes from the writings of one of the 20th century's best known humanists and atheists, Albert Camus, whose novel, *The Stranger*, I cited in a sermon a few weeks ago. In one of his essays Camus wrote: "In the midst of winter I discovered that there was within me and invincible spring." That line is part of my personal sacred scripture. To live in hope is to tend to and nurture your own invincible spring that you carry somewhere within you. It is to believe in that spring through whatever winters of the spirit you may have to weather.

We turn now to peace. Peace, of course, is more than the absence of war--as good a thing as the absence of war is. Peace is the presence of what we in our Unitarian Universalist principles call "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." If there is ever to be such a thing as peace on earth it will come when all the peoples of this earth feel that they have some reasonable stake in, and share of, its bounty and its resources; and that there is indeed enough to go around if we will but seek ways to make it happen. None of us are going to make that happen in our lifetimes, most likely I afraid. But, reflective of what I just said about hope, we need to believe that the investment of some portion of our lives here and now is a worthy and necessary contribution to the greater goal of peace on earth.

Finally, there's love. Romantic love, and love of a sentimental nature are all well and good and wonderful and delightful. In no way would I dismiss or belittle such love as this. I can even handle Barry Manilow in certain measured doses. But the love I want to point to here, as we touch this fourth base of Advent, is about feeling a deep sense of identification with, and a connection to, the life the surges all around us--and caring deeply and passionately about that life. It is this kind of love that lets us know that we do not live for ourselves alone; but that we are a part of a larger life, a larger chain of being, that needs our energy, and our efforts, and our human good will.

Whether it is love for another person, for a family, or a community, or for the world at large, what this kind of love means is that your life is also a part of all those other lives; and what happens to another life or lives is also happening to you. The Christian legend or myth of the Incarnation holds that God chose to embody, to incarnate, the full meaning of love by appearing on earth as a human being. One need not, I feel, be fully identified with that particular faith tradition in order to appreciate its meaning--which is that we, too, in our lives are called to be incarnations of love in the deepest and truest sense of the term.

I try to use these four themes or attributes as a way of celebrating the universality and the holiness of this Season, and to make of it a true holiday. As most of you, I am sure, know the term "Holiday" is a contracted form of two words: Holy and Day. To wish someone a Happy Holiday, or Happy Holy Day, is hardly a denigration of any of the particular celebrations of this blessed season. It is instead a recognition that no one observance, and no one single faith tradition, can contain the many expressions of joy, hope, peace, and love that this season evokes. This is a Holiday and a Holy Time for all persons who seek these things--both in their personal lives and in the world in which our lives are lived.

These are Holidays and Holy Times for all persons of faith--faith in the largest and best sense of the term, that is: Faith that the blessings of life are stronger than even death itself; faith that life, and our lives, can be renewed, even as the earth will in time renew itself; faith that persons of good will who walk a myriad of religious and spiritual paths can also walk on the common ground of a common humanity.

So celebrate this season in whatever ways are meaningful to you; and speak to it whatever ways and with whatever language best conveys the stirrings of your own heart.

As a human community and as a liberal religious community we should rightfully celebrate the presence of joy, hope, peace, and love in our midst; and seek to extend the blessings of each and all of these things in whatever ways are available to us. In doing so we will honor the many meanings of these Blessed and Holy Days.

Stephen Edington  
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