

# LA Canada Valley Sun

## In Theory: Merry Christmas, or Happy Holidays?

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*Q. According to a survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with the Religion News Service, Americans are split almost 50-50 what to say this holiday season — "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays." Some Christian leaders and conservative commentators have declared "Happy Holidays" as a secular war on Christmas and say the greeting secularizes what should be a religious celebration. Others say it's a non-exclusive phrase that is better suited to a multicultural and multi-religious society. Do you think this is true, or do you think either phrase is applicable in this day and age?*

Answer:

As I was walking through the public areas of a local mall recently, I was overwhelmed with the glitzy atmosphere of the place — decorated trees, sparkling lights, glittering garlands and elaborately designed ornaments of many kinds — all super-sized, of course. And there was Christmas music throughout the center, with each one of the stores having its own unique décor for the season, and sometimes its own holiday music. Then, in the center of the mall, surrounded by huge decorated trees, was Santa in a large armchair where children could come to share their wish lists and have their pictures made.

None of this atmosphere was, strictly speaking, religious, but there was no question about the holiday that was being celebrated — Christmas. And in stark contrast to this elaborate show was a lone menorah, still lighted long after the end of its significance for the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah. It was as though someone had placed it there to appease their understanding of political correctness, without any sense of reverence for the people or holiday it represented.

The United States today is a land of many people and an incredible diversity of religious traditions. And yet, some people seem to believe that we should only recognize one religious holiday in the month of December: Christmas. This year December includes Hanukkah, the Islamic New Year, the Winter Solstice and Kwanzaa, as well as Christmas. Given that, I believe that saying "Merry Christmas" to cover all those holidays is not only incorrect, but also disrespectful.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I am honored to wish all the people I meet a greeting that recognizes their unique religious holiday. When I do not know what their tradition is, I believe that the very least I can do is to wish them a "Happy Holiday Season," a greeting that belittles no one and includes all. For me, that is what it means to be a person of faith in these United States today.

**The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford**

Unitarian Universalist Church  
of the Verdugo Hills in La Crescenta

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I can understand retailers desiring to be inclusive in their season's greetings so as not to alienate any customers, but with 90% of Americans celebrating Christmas, it would seem silly to ignore the source of the lion's share of profit, acting as if the number-one reason for Black Friday and the countdown of shopping days doesn't all have to do with the vast-majority observance.

It does seem that this year has shown a bit more Yule awareness though, as checkers have wished me "Merry Christmas" frequently when I finished my purchases. Maybe it's just obvious what to say to someone leaving

with rolls of nativity wrapping paper. I'm guessing if buying frozen latkes, the Jewish-specific well-wish would then be forthcoming.

Hanukkah is actually mentioned in the New Testament with an adult Jesus apparently in attendance at its celebration (John 10:22), but a military victory with a miraculous legend attached doesn't compare with God actually showing up personally in the manger that first Christmas, splitting time between BC and AD.

And no black Christian I know celebrates Kwanzaa, which was invented in the 1960's by educator and black activist Dr. Maulana Karenga as a specifically African American holiday. Nonetheless, time has a way of blurring questionable beginnings of such things as Kwanzaa and making a mountain out of the previously subdued molehill of menorah lighting and dreidel spinning. But isn't that all so American.

The thing is, Christians, and Americans in general, celebrate the birth of Christ at this time of year. It's all-important, and all-inclusive, in that the Hebrew savior born in Bethlehem came for the whole world. When we wish anyone "Merry Christmas," we reveal our allegiance to God, and we desire the recipient to bask personally in his gracious Christmas blessing. Now the minority of you out there who think the insipid "Happy Holidays" is sufficient, then you go right ahead. As for me and my house, "Frohe Weihnachten, Feliz Navidad, Buon Natale, Joyeux Noël, and Merry Christmas!"

### **Rev. Bryan Griem**

Montrose Community Church

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I have no problem with saying "Happy Holidays" when I'm in a public setting or speaking with someone whose religion I'm unsure of. It's just good manners, in our multicultural, post-Christian setting, to recognize that not everyone celebrates the birth of Jesus, and that some are celebrating other religious holidays this month.

Actually, it's becoming this sort of rebel, underground thing, to mutter "Merry Christmas," with a quick exchange of twinkled eyes, to someone you know is Christian – like a secret handshake or a super-cool spy code. (I don't really get out that much; I have to take my rebel behavior where I can get it.)

So "Happy Holidays" is fine. What bothers me — really bothers me — is when people afraid to honor Christmas as a religious holiday try to change its meaning into something more secularly acceptable.

A local college ends its holiday concert with Santa coming out on stage to say, "The real meaning of Christmas is love!" No, the real meaning of Christmas is the birth of Christ. Celebrate it; don't celebrate it; whatever. But don't take it over, erase that inconvenient baby Jesus, and stick a more marketable label on it.

I swear to God I've heard on the radio this year a version of "Joy to the World" that changes the line, "He rules the world with truth and grace" — 'he' meaning Jesus, actually — to "Peace rules the world, with truth and grace." What, there's not enough songs about reindeer and snow and Santa, you have to write Jesus out of his own songs, too?

If all this month means to you is family and fun and gifts and parties, then wallow in them, by all means. Go crazy; have a ball. But there's plenty of material out there with which you can do that without taking over the religious stuff. Leave that alone, please, so that those of us who do celebrate the Nativity of Christ can have our secret super-spy Merry Christmas.

### **The Rev. Amy Pringle**

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada

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Let me say from the outset that there is no war on Christianity from those who claim that the greeting “Happy Holidays,” instead of “Merry Christmas,” is really a plot to undermine our sacred Christmas celebration. Let's face it: The celebration of Christmas has become a cultural holiday. True, even the word “holiday” comes from the words “holy day”, and the word “Christmas” is a contraction of “Christ Mass.”

So the holiday does have religious underpinnings. But it has become a commercial and cultural event, and wishing somebody “Season's Greetings,” or “Happy Holidays,” is not anathema to me. In fact, I think it's neat that our pluralistic nation can all celebrate “the holidays,” whether we say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Chanukah” or “Joyous Festivus,” which, if you're an aficionado of “Seinfeld,” you'll know is “a holiday for the rest of us.”

Noted commentator, actor and pitchman Ben Stein has said that as a Jew, he is not offended if someone says to him, “Merry Christmas.” In fact, he kind of likes to be greeted that way during the holiday season.

To speak religiously for a moment, Nobody knows when Jesus was actually born, so to ascribe December 25th as his birthday is a 365-1 shot in the dark. And speaking of dark, the pre-Christian pagans had a winter festival around the winter solstice, so the early church essentially chose Dec. 25 as Jesus' birthday. That way, anybody who converted to Christianity wouldn't have to miss out on a mid-winter party. Happy Holidays, everybody, and may God bless us every one!

**The Rev. C. L. “Skip” Lindeman**

La Cañada Congregational Church

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During this season of religious holidays, I feel that Christians should be greeted with “Merry Christmas” and Jews with “Happy Chanukah” — just as people of other faiths should be greeted appropriately during their religious holidays.

I strongly believe that the strength of our nation lies in our ability to unite as a people despite our cultural differences. America's tolerant embrace of diversity is a tremendous asset, and so long as we all recognize our many common bonds, we don't need to weaken our various cultural traditions.

This country was founded upon the core principle of religious freedom, and as such, every citizen should be encouraged to celebrate their holidays as they see fit. Being proud of our religious beliefs and expressing them — even in public — does not weaken the multicultural aspects of our society. On the contrary, it strengthens our combined identity as Americans who share the key values of humanity enshrined in our Constitution.

I would not go so far as to claim that there is a “secular war on Christmas” (or Chanukah, for that matter) being waged in this country.

Many of those who seek to do away with religious phrases in favor of more generic well-wishes may have good intentions, but are either misguided or unaware of the positive impact spirituality has on our society. After all, religious principles encourage people to be charitable, to help others, and to involve themselves in improving their communities. At this time when so many of our fellow citizens are in dire need of basic assistance, it is more important than ever to encourage religious pride and promote its values of charity, caring, and brotherly love.

**Rabbi Simcha Backman**

Chabad Jewish Center

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Personally, if I were asked the survey question, I would answer that it is better to use “Happy Holidays” than “Merry Christmas.”

However, I need to put my response in perspective.

First, although I view Christmas itself as an important Christian religious holiday, it is surrounded by other events, such as Hanukkah, New Year’s and Kwanzaa, which together represent the holiday season.

Second, the season has become very commercialized and day-to-day interactions at stores are more secular in nature than religious.

Third, I think it is important to be mindful of other people’s views, although I generally believe that political correctness has gone too far in many instances.

Fourth, if one looks critically at the historical underpinnings of Christmas, there are many non-Christian aspects to it. For example, the prevalent thought is that Christ was born in the spring, rather than in the winter, and that December 25th is actually the date of a non-Christian holiday that was adopted by early Christianity as a day to celebrate Christ’s birth.

Fifth, although I do believe that there is an ongoing attack on Christmas, as well as religion itself, I don’t think that a battle should be fought over “Happy Holidays” vs. “Merry Christmas”.

Christmas is a special time of the year, and for Christians, it is an important time to celebrate the birth of our lord and savior Jesus Christ and to remember his great gift to mankind – the Atonement.

At this time of the year, it is more important to be a Christian than to act like one. We should reach out and touch the lives of our fellow beings. When someone wishes us “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas,” we should kindly thank them and wish them the same.

With that, “Happy Holidays” to all!

### **Rick Callister**

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, La Cañada II Ward

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I think that anyone with enough human feeling as to offer a greeting of the season, or any greeting, for that matter, deserves to have it accepted in the spirit in which it is given, with an open heart, without criticism or obsessively searching for hidden meanings.

I also think that “Happy Holidays” and “Season's Greetings” are friendly, inclusive shorthand, useful at a time of year when holidays abound and we may not know what a person celebrates exactly, but we want to (or are told by an employer to) greet them anyway. What can be the harm, except apparently to the terminally Scrooge-like?

What I think even more strongly is that it is a big non-issue.

Looking at the full questionnaire, I see that respondents were given two choices, or could refuse to answer. “It doesn't really make a whole lot of difference to me,” or “In a world full of serious trouble and pain, you want to ask me about this? Give me a break!” weren't there. Let's run the survey again with these choices offered.

And mostly, I think using the word “war” to describe an imaginary assault, a problem wholly manufactured by politically-motivated fringe elements waging a cultural struggle against non-existent opponents, is itself an affront to those all over the world enduring the real sacrifices, hardship and suffering that war brings.

### **Roberta Medford**

Atheist

Montrose

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Having grown up in a society where “Merry Christmas” was the usual greeting at this time of year, the increasingly-heard “Happy Holidays” still sounds awkward to my ear. While the sentiment of those who prefer a strictly multicultural and multireligious greeting is understandable, it’s not clear why that should be necessary in this instance.

The subject is beautifully (and humorously) addressed by an opinion piece in the Dec. 17 edition of The Christian Science Monitor, written by Walter Rodgers, a former senior international correspondent for CNN who spent years serving outside of the U.S. The title of his article is “Why the Taliban gave me a Christmas tree.”

He makes the point that Christmas has become very much an international celebration that is essentially both religious and secular, “transcending cultures, politics, and religion,” that many people of non-Christian cultures love celebrating Christmas with carols, dancing, and decoration, and that the hesitancy to wish people a merry Christmas is largely a phenomenon of English-speaking America.

Among the multiple anecdotes that he relates is one from December 2001 in Afghanistan, where a group of Taliban fighters, all devout Muslims, emerged from their hideout in the mountains, dragging a Christmas tree as a gift for the Western journalists.

Of course, Christmas does have a Christian aspect for many of us. It’s the perfect annual opportunity to rejoice in God’s love for us all, no matter what our circumstances or background. The baby Jesus, with his spiritual origin and humble beginnings, brought a new light to humanity that shines to this day. From an early age, he promoted the significance of God’s ever-present good.

Walter Rodgers concluded that if people of other cultures can partake of the Christmas spirit, “Why can’t I wish you a Merry Christmas?” His readers can comfortably conclude that it’s simply not necessary to discourage Merry Christmas.

Merry Christmas to you all!

### **Graham Bothwell**

First Church of Christ, Scientist  
La Cañada Flintridge

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As a Christian, I celebrate, and greet with “Merry Christmas,” those I am fairly certain celebrate the holiday. There may have been a day when I was pastoring full-time that I would have been rigid in to sticking to this particular phrase. But as I have gone into a second career as a psychotherapist, albeit a psychotherapist who is a Christian, I share time with patients who are from all faiths and ethnicities.

I have great respect for other cultures and the religions they serve. If you put me in the appropriate situation, I may share Christ with them. But as a therapist, I cannot unless they bring that up as part of their faith and want to incorporate that into their therapy.

With that said, “Happy Holidays” has been added to my vocabulary for those whose religious orientation is not known to me, or is known to be other than Christian. This year, I have been so focused on the nativity story that I accidentally said, “Merry Christmas” to a new patient. She very cheerfully replied, “Happy Holidays to you too, Kimberlie.” There was nothing in the way she said it to correct me. But it was a wake-up call to me that I had accidentally made a mistake that could have offended her belief system.

So I do not believe that, “Happy Holidays” is a form of secular war on Christmas, but a respectful way to greet those from different or uncertain religions. However, “Merry Christmas” and “Jesus is the reason for the season” adequately demonstrate my own core beliefs. And personally, I am bit saddened that it has been taken from our schools and other arenas.

### **The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian**

La Vie Counseling Center