Season’s Greetings:

The Evolution of the Christmas Holiday Season

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Abstract

Although many people still uphold the religious significance of Christmas, controversy has arisen regarding the spiritual and secular ways people celebrate the Christmas season (Levey, 2006). In recent decades, the Christmas season has evolved into a universal celebration, being recognized among more non-Christians and areas where Christians are the minority religion. The rise of commercialization has had the greatest impact on this holiday among Christians and non-Christians alike. Younger Christians are slowly abandoning the religious connotations of this holiday as they are affected most by the consumerism associated with Christmas (Moraru, 2013). Meanwhile, non-Christians have begun adapting their own Christmas traditions, whether as a means to compete with Christians or to be a part of the pop culture (Abramitzky, Einav & Rigbi, 2010; Li, 2011). Additionally, while government officials have attempted to include all cultures in the Christmas season by lighting ‘holiday trees’ and wishing their employees ‘Happy Holidays,’ debate still remains on how to ensure the Christmas season does not offend anyone.

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The Christmas season is commonly referred to as the most wonderful time of the year. Between all the joy and magic associated with this holiday, it seems almost impossible to be in a bad mood. However, the countdown until Christmas has turned into an annoyance for many who are bombarded by the continuous media built idea of what the celebration ought to be like (Levey, 2006; Shandler & Weintraub, 2007). Over the past several decades, there has been debate among various groups and organizations regarding its celebration. Marketers have made this time of year much about consumerism and satisfying one’s family and friends with gifts (Moraru, 2013). Leaders and officials have changed many Christmas celebrations to incorporate any and all cultures, whether by constructing a ‘holiday tree,’ or wishing people “Happy Holidays” as opposed to a “Merry Christmas” (Levey, 2006). It is this author’s position that as society continues to become increasingly diverse, it is unlikely that the controversy surrounding Christmas will diminish.

Oftentimes, one wonders about the invention of Santa Claus, as one of many hot topics surrounding the Christmas season. Santa Claus has developed into a worldwide phenomenon, being associated with ‘Cinderella Christmas1’ in Japan and the ‘Christmas games2’ of the Inuit (Hodkinson & Stronach, 2011). Santa Claus has also become the most emphasized Christmas symbol and has much to do with why many associate snowfall with this holiday (Moraru, 2013). With the help of Coca-Cola in the 1930’s, Santa Claus developed his visual appearance in society (Hodkinson & Stronach, 2011). Although he is the man most Christian children anxiously await for on Christmas Day, Santa Claus, as a symbol of the season, goes against much of what Christmas is all about; by embracing the holiday’s commercial aspects. Others argue that the idea behind Santa Claus is said to reenact the coming of Christ as he teaches
children the steps of childbirth by making them wait for the gifts they requested (Hodkinson & Stronach, 2011). Despite all the joy Santa Claus seems to bring to thousands of children each year, Santa Claus also brings his share of problems among non-Christian families. For instance, Jewish parents often feel like they must compete with Santa Claus by celebrating Hanukkah more intensely, so their children do not feel left out or ashamed of their culture (Abramitzky, Einav & Rigbi, 2010). With an intermarriage rate of over 40 percent in the Jewish community, Jewish parents fear their children may abandon their religion once they start their own families (Abramitzky, Einav & Rigbi, 2010).

It is no secret that marketers and advertisers have transformed Christmas into a more secular holiday. As opposed to limiting Christmas to those of Christian faith, companies have been pushing the idea that Christmas is a holiday for all to celebrate. Christmas has even evolved into a celebration in countries where Christianity is the minority religion. For example, in Japan, where 1.5 percent of the population identifies as Christian (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015), a statue of Kentucky ‘Colonel’ Harland dressed as Santa Claus can be seen during the Christmas season outside of select Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises (Hodkinson & Stronach, 2011). The way marketers have gone about portraying the Christmas season has appeared to vary widely. For example, some companies have rendered the Christmas season as a time to give gifts, while others show it as a time to get a good deal (Moraru, 2013). Additionally, other companies have represented Christmas as a time to show affection and emotion towards others and some companies characterize the Christmas season as a time to share the magic of the holiday. Finally, certain companies provide no religious connotations, simply referring to the Christmas season as a time to celebrate (Moraru, 2013).

What is particularly interesting about Christmas Day in the United States is that it is the
only federal holiday that is associated with a specific religion. As a result, while most Christians spend their day off celebrating the holiday, non-Christians are left with little to do as most businesses are closed. This has led other cultures within the United States to form their own unique Christmas traditions. Members of the Jewish community have started their own tradition of spending Christmas Day ordering and dining on Chinese food (Li, 2011). Although this seems like a random combination, the ideas behind these customs may actually be an effort for Jews to use Christmas Day to embrace their culture. What makes Chinese food particularly special for the Jewish community is that Chinese food is representative of traditional kosher food (Li, 2011). For instance, Li (2011) points out that the wontons served in traditional Chinese culture are similar to a food in the Jewish culture known as kreplach. By eating Chinese food on Christmas, many Jewish people feel as if it gives them their own distinct identity since Chinese food is not considered American. On the other hand, some Jewish families use Christmas as a day to volunteer or cover shifts at hospitals and police stations so their Christian colleagues can celebrate the holiday (Shandler & Weintraub, 2007). Additionally, many non-Christians have also used Christmas as a way to bring family together, since most people do not have work on this holiday (Li, 2011).

Although, many non-Christian cultures refuse to celebrate Christmas, the evolution of Christmas has continued to alter their traditions and perceptions. Since the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah falls so close to Christmas, the traditions of Hanukkah have appeared to change in American culture. In a study regarding the perceived importance of Jewish holidays, 68.3 percent of American Jews believed Hanukkah was one of the three most important Jewish holidays, whereas only 38.1 percent of Israeli Jews gave the same answer (Abramitzky, Einav & Rigbi, 2010). Even the United States government has emphasized Hanukkah’s importance, as it
was the first non-Christian holiday recognized by the United States Postal Service with a postage stamp (Shandler & Weintraub, 2007). In addition, as Christmas has become more widespread, people of non-Christian faiths have started putting up Christmas trees in their homes (Li, 2011). Some officials who wish to display a Christmas tree in a public space have even gone as far as to change the name of the Christmas tree to something more accepting, such as a “holiday tree” or “multicultural tree” (Levey, 2006). As a result, the cultural symbols of Christmas have become diminished and blended with holidays that have their own unique significance (Shandler & Weintraub, 2007). This phenomenon occurred during the 1980’s in Japan, when Christmas had evolved into a ‘Eurokitsch’ holiday (Hodkinson & Stronach, 2011). The Japanese have come to view this holiday as one of entertainment that reminds people the importance of family and togetherness.

Not only has the Christmas season had an effect on non-Christians, but Christians have also come to adapt different perceptions of this holiday. However, the way the younger generations have come to view Christmas is quite different from middle-aged adults. Younger Christians and non-Christians have begun celebrating Christmas more widely by taking part in a variety of Christmas traditions such as giving presents and decorating Christmas trees (Li, 2011). Furthermore, younger generations seem to enjoy the aspects of commercialism and making Christmas a worldwide celebration, whereas the middle-aged are more likely to hold onto their religious roots and engage in traditional religious celebrations within the church (Moraru, 2013). An example of the inclusiveness of Christmas among today’s youth can be seen on popular e-card websites such as bluemountain.com, where one in ten holiday cards sent in 1999 were considered “interfaith” (Shandler & Weintraub, 2007).

In conclusion, even though the intentions of Christmas are to celebrate the birth of Christ,
Christmas has evolved into a holiday that looks to extend into non-Christian cultures. The weeks leading up to Christmas have evolved into a worldwide celebration thanks in part to the rise of commercialization associated with this holiday. Marketers and advertisers have a drastic effect on the perceptions of this holiday, particularly among the younger generations as well as non-Christians (Moraru, 2013). Non-Christians have even formed their own versions of Christmas by having alternative celebrations on Christmas Day. Some have adopted Christmas as an opportunity to engage in larger celebrations during this season (Li, 2011). Furthermore, Santa Claus has become the most emphasized symbol for this holiday, and although he makes the holiday fun for Christian youth, he appears to be irritating those who are non-Christian or wish to showcase the more religious aspects of the Christmas season (Hodkinson & Stronach, 2011).

The author believes that Christmas should be a holiday where we take the time to be with our families while in the spirit of the true meaning of Christmas—Christ’s birth. The rise in the commercialization of this holiday has done nothing but make this time of year more stressful than it needs to be. After spending our entire year full of responsibilities and angst, the Christmas season, as celebrated now fails to be a reprieve from all this. Additionally, the author believes non-Christians should feel free to celebrate this holiday; but they should in no way feel pressured to celebrate as has been reported (Abramitzky, Einav & Rigbi, 2010). As society continues to become more diverse, it is imperative that officials are mindful when holding public Christmas celebrations. Since it seems like a mundane task to acknowledge each and every culture during the holiday season, perhaps it may be best to simply celebrate the end of another year. Rather than argue on the best way to celebrate the Christmas season, this time of year ought to be about setting aside our cultural differences and coming together as one to end the
year in a stress-free and relaxed environment. Christmas as a holiday should continue to hold its full meaning and value in the Christian faith.
References


Footnotes

1 'Cinderella Christmas’ is a concept coined by Brian Moeran and Lise Skov that is used to describe the modern interpretations of Christmas in Japan. Similar to many other cultures, the media in Japan has put its own spin on Christmas, thus altering people’s cultural identities and changing how Christmas was once celebrated (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997).

2 The Christmas games of the Inuit consist of community get-togethers with dancing and entertainment. In many Inuit communities, Christmas celebrations last through New Year’s Day, often beginning at dawn and concluding well into the night. One of the games played by the Inuit is referred to as “Airplane,” where three people must lift a person by the wrists and ankles and carry them as far as possible until the person’s body begins to sag (Stern, 2010).

3 Kreplach are square or triangular shaped dumplings commonly prepared by members of the Jewish culture. They are typically filled with ground meat or cheeses, served in soup, and are either boiled or fried.

4 ‘Eurokitsch’ is a term used by Brian Moeran and Lise Skov to describe how Christmas in Japan has conformed to the popular culture in Europe (Hodkinson & Stronach, 2011).