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Merry Christmas? No, Happy Holidays

BE OUR GUEST

BY EDWARD O'DONNELL

Here we go again. If it's Thanksgiving, then it's officially the beginning of that annual ritual established a few years ago — the month-long explosion of outrage on talk radio and cable TV over an alleged “War on Christmas” being waged by a cadre of secularists who employ the phrase, “Happy Holidays.”

Particularly galling to these self-appointed defenders of tradition are retailers who avoid the word “Christmas” in their advertising and in-store decorations. In recent years, groups like Focus on the Family and the Catholic League have launched a variety of offenses, including an “It's OK to Wish Me A Merry Christmas” button campaign and “watch lists” identifying “Christmas-unfriendly” retailers.

I must admit that the expression “Happy Holidays” once struck me as vapid — essentially the December version of the all-time vapid and meaningless phrase of modern times, “Have a nice day.”

But all this War on Christmas hysteria in recent years has led me to a new and heartfelt appreciation for the expression, for I see that it embodies both a fundamental American value and, strange as it may sound, one of Christmas' core religious ideals.

I should point out before wading any further into this mine field that I come to this contentious issue as a Christian who attends church weekly and even sings in the choir. In other words, an ax-grinding atheist or free-wheeling new age spiritualist I am not.

So why defend “Happy Holidays”? Let's begin by focusing on the profound republican virtue that lies at the heart of the phrase: respect for each and every citizen's right to their own religious beliefs (or nonbeliefs). As Americans, we take for granted the idea that people of different faith traditions can live together in harmony. But our remarkably successful experience with religious pluralism is the exception, not the rule.

Who can calculate the oceans of blood spilled over the centuries, from the Crusades to Darfur, in the name of religious zealotry? Indeed, American society was

once beset with religiously inspired violence. Scores died in anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon riots in the 1840s and 1850s.

It has taken several centuries to develop and enshrine America's much-cherished tradition of religious tolerance. It's a hard-won tradition, and we should remain ever vigilant in protecting it from any group that seeks to impose its orthodoxy on everyone else. The “Merry Christmas, or Else” zealots are not preaching violence, but they are promoting a dangerous, unwelcome and ultimately un-American form of religious intolerance.

Even more compelling, especially for those (like me) who consider Christmas a religious holiday, is the spiritual argument in defense of “Happy Holidays.” Has anyone seriously interested in the religious meaning and significance of Christmas stopped to contemplate the absurdity of a campaign demanding that retailers,

as Focus on the Family put it a few years ago, “put Christmas back in the holidays”?

Retailers? You mean the people leading the relentless charge to transform Christmas into a grotesque exhibition of materialist excess, are now responsible for upholding the true meaning of the holiday?

Would anyone take seriously a campaign that urged beer brewers to “put sobriety back into tailgating”? Or Las Vegas to “put commitment back into express weddings”?

Put simply, the angry charge against those who fail to say “Merry Christmas” is itself a very real assault on Christmas. After all, the holiday celebrates the birth of Jesus, an event the Bible tells us was hailed by a choir of angels singing, “Peace on Earth and goodwill toward men.” Raging against the inclusive, tolerant and ultimately harmless phrase “Happy Holidays” runs directly counter to this theme. Indeed, it's like making war on Christmas.

So here's wishing you Happy Holidays — and all that implies.

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Why the secular phrase is better