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Rescuing Christmas!

Christmas is in trouble. It is a holiday that is suffering from its own popularity and success and it is losing its identity. It needs to be rescued, and soon.

The problem is that it started, at least in our context and in the most recent configuration, as a religious celebration. Not a universal religious celebration, but a decidedly partisan one—that is as a Christian celebration of the birth Jesus.

Christianity teaches that God chose to participate directly in the human condition and that he made his grand entrance as the baby Jesus, supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary and born in a Bethlehem stable. It is this birth that is celebrated at Christmas.

In a culture that was permeated by Christian institutions and ideals, Christmas was at one time nearly universally recognized and celebrated leading to its becoming a national holiday. The commercial opportunity that this holiday has afforded has been fruitfully exploited by every retail and service sector of our economy. Today, Christmas is largely about economics, not Jesus

The transfer of its importance from the spiritual to the economic has led to some pretty absurd proposals in recent days. Symbols of Christmas are either rejected outright or are relabeled and the Christmas holiday is divested of its substance through convoluted and emasculated greetings absenting the word “Christmas.”

Christmas cannot survive only as an economic holiday. Divorcing the holiday from its religious and spiritual foundations will eventually lead to its demise since its economic viability rests in the ability to tap into the deeper spiritual and religious substance that legitimates the celebration for millions of people. Christmas without Christ is merely a cheap retail extravaganza.

The deeper substance of Christmas is Christ. It is the holiday of the Christian faith. Other religions also celebrate holidays, but other religions do not have the universal appeal of Christianity. I don't know whether Christianity was the first truly universal religion, but it certainly is the most successful. In Christianity age, race, gender, vocation, economic status, national identity, language and skin colour, among other things, are properly abolished. Other religions do not offer this, at least not in the same measure. Most others are ethnically or nationally oriented, or have a specialized vocational establishment. Not so with Christianity.

This universal appeal of Christianity has made it possible for Christmas to be both a religious and a secular holiday at the same time. Both non-Christians and irreligious persons are able to celebrate it without offence. Christmas trees do not offend the masses neither do Christmas greetings, contrary to the fuss created by retailers and

public servants.

If the current trend dissing Christmas continues it will culturally disappear as its substance is exiled to the private sphere of home and church. With its exile the motivation to shop will dissolve and the retail sector will be rewarded for its attempts to declassify the holiday and secularize its meaning. Denial by retailers will lead to self-destruction.

To rescue Christmas it is necessary to remember that it is what it is: a Christian religious celebration. To recognize this and to celebrate this is okay. Politically it is a substantial part of our heritage; it defines part of our intangible and yet indispensable identity and we deny it to our peril. Celebrating Christmas is not a denial of other perspectives nor is it an imposition of the dominant upon the lesser even when recognized in our public spaces with crèche and tree.

Wishing a merry Christmas to those who do not celebrate it is courtesy not compulsion. It is a genuine desire that what is meaningful and joyous for us would be no less rewarding for others. It is an invitation to share our happiness even if only through the spilling over of own joy upon them. If our happiness can make others happy who would begrudge that?

Culturally speaking most of us still identify ourselves as Christians. If we as a substantive majority stopped celebrating the retail-economic side of this equation and only participated in a reduced spiritual celebration privately at home and in our religious communities the nonsense about what to call the holiday and its symbols would soon abate. There simply would no longer be a cultural reason for the holiday and it would cease to exist. Pluralism is not fostered by the destruction of particulars nor does denying its parts enrich culture, even if those parts are majority portions.

The loss of Christmas, whether religiously and spiritual or in its spill over cultural by-products is a loss too great to contemplate. Christmas is a good that benefits us all and by honouring and preserving its ubiquitous uniqueness the good is strengthened and preserved and we are better for it. Let's quite the foolishness and embrace Christmas and in so doing, rescue it and ourselves from our own foolishness.

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