

ANTI-CHRISTIAN BACKLASH: Truth or Fiction?

Dec. 21, 2004 -- Embracing reason during the season, it's time to dissect the mythology of the so-called "war on Christianity" in America.

By Brian Willoughby | *Managing Editor, Tolerance.org*

Christmas is a national holiday.

The Jewish Hanukkah, the African American Kwanzaa, the Islamic Ramadan, the Buddhist Bodhi Day, the Hindu Diwali, the multifaceted Winter Solstice, the day marking the death of the prophet Zarathustra and other non-Christian holy days are not.

Between 75% and 80% of Americans consider themselves Christian.

Christmas trees, Christmas cards, Christmas pageants, Christmas specials, Christmas *everything* abound, starting as early as October and running through post-Christmas retail sales.

So what's all the fuss when an inclusive-minded person -- acknowledging the 20% to 25% of us who aren't Christian -- chooses "Happy Holidays" over "Merry Christmas"?

"There's a widespread mythology that there is a war against Christianity in this country," Barry Lynn told Tolerance.org. Lynn is executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"If that's so, the anti-Christian forces must be buying their armaments from (Secretary of Defense) Donald Rumsfeld, because it's not very successful," Lynn said. "You cannot pass a single gas station or mini-mart in America without seeing it festooned with Christmas decorations."

Lynn said claims of anti-Christianity are common each holiday season, but this post-election season is especially heated.

"It's certainly been a more aggressive attack by religious right legal groups to demand inclusion of religious symbols in otherwise secular events and displays," Lynn said. "It's becoming a forced inclusion of Christian symbols."

Whose Merry Christmas?

Consider a laundry list of examples:

- In Louisiana, some residents petitioned to add "Merry Christmas" to a governmental "Season's Greetings" sign. They sold yard signs that read, "We believe in God. Merry Christmas."
- When Target banned Salvation Army bell-ringers from its stores -- as it does all solicitors -- some groups launched boycotts claiming the retailer was being anti-Christian.
- When other major department stores urged employees to address customers with more inclusive "Season's Greetings" or "Happy Holidays," some Christian groups claimed the stores were being non-Christian.
- In North Carolina, a church paid \$7,600 for a full-page newspaper ad urging Christians to boycott businesses that don't include the phrase "Merry Christmas" in their holiday displays.
- Complaints arose when the mayor of New York referred to the city's evergreen as a "holiday" tree rather than a Christmas tree. The same happened in Wichita, Kan., when organizers called their evergreen a "community tree."

The list goes on -- from Colorado to California, on a number of websites targeting "secular enemies," and on FOX News and the mainstream press. In the words of one San Diego newspaper columnist, "the atheist minority is waging an unholy war against God ... in communities throughout our once fair land."

More prominently, syndicated columnist Cal Thomas expressed the perception of anti-Christian sentiment this way: "In malls everywhere, store clerks are instructed to say 'Happy Holidays' to customers. You never know when a Kwanzaa shopper, a Hanukkah observer or an atheist might hear a greeting that does not reflect the sentiments of their 'holiday.'" Such commentary -- with denigrating quotation marks for other people's holy days -- sounds more anti-non-Christian than simply pro-Christian.

"The issue is, are we going to give respect to the diversity we have in America?" asked Lynn of Americans United. "Are we willing to accept the fact that everyone is not a Christian and some people do not feel welcomed by a 'Merry Christmas' greeting because they don't celebrate it?"

Regarding Wichita's inclusively named "community tree," Peter Grant, who is Jewish, welcomes the lack of religious specificity. "I'm not against Christmas," he told *The Wichita Eagle*. "I just want them to respect everybody, not just certain groups."

Or this, from atheist Rob Sherman as quoted in the suburban Chicago *Daily Herald*: "It's OK for an individual to engage in religious advocacy, but it's not OK for government officials to lead such celebrations. If you're Jewish or an atheist, Christmas is about as big of a deal as the Chinese New Year is to Christians."