



'Tis the Season to Embrace the Sacred in Our Celebrations

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The Season" is upon us. Depending on your level of layered political correctness, it is either a sacred season of high holy days, or it is simply "the holidays." Ironically, the days ahead bring a heightened sense of anxiety. For the schoolteacher: Which songs are permissible? For the office manager: What decorations are appropriate? For all of us: What greetings would provide the least offense? Inevitably, this can be a time of intellectual retreat from our religious traditions, of seeking the relative safety of a lower common denominator, of keeping our joy under wraps. We know that these are traditionally some of the most important days of the year, but we may be very cautious about how and with whom we share them.

How sad! We would run the risk of missing out on our signature religious events, of better understanding our core differences, of experiencing the richness of our collective religious heritage in this country. We would lose the opportunity to be more knowledgeable concerning our diversity -- a perishable knowledge whose loss brings with it the increased possibility of intolerance. Each faith, or lack thereof, becomes a category -- and our most important relationships, more than we would like to admit, are formed around those in "our" category.

BUT THERE is an alternative approach to this season, and that is a confident and intentional engagement with the diversity that surrounds us. The most successful methodology for such an exercise is relatively simple: probe the "others" with legitimate questions and listen to their answers with respect. That's right, talk about it! Drill down into each other's religious traditions, in a way that creates better understanding, and new knowledge, for both.

Certainly there are questions. Why, for example, was Jesus born at night, with only the night-shift shepherds given a front-row seat at this premier event? Ultimately this child would be arrested at night, tried at night, with a preternatural darkness covering his death, and with the first visitors to his tomb arriving "while it was still dark." Is there any great theological truth to this thematic connecting of the dots?

In the Jewish tradition, on the other hand, Hanukkah is a celebration of light. Candles are lit during eight days of celebration, commemorating the miracle of undeseccated oil. According to tradition, Antiochus IV, a persecutor of the Jews, defiled their temple by sacrificing pigs (a non-kosher animal) inside. When the Jews finally recovered their temple, there was very little undefiled oil left to light the menorah. Although only a one-day supply remained, it miraculously lasted for eight nights, the time necessary to create a fresh supply of oil.

Interestingly, it is this miracle that is celebrated, not the release from a persecuting government. Nor is it a rededication of Jewish life and identity, following the benevolent rule of Alexander the Great (Antiochus' predecessor), which unfortunately led to an assimilation of Hellenistic culture. Why?

Assimilation and persecution are critically important realities of Jewish history. For example, the negative assimilation during Abraham's stay in pagan Canaan is followed by a 430-year captivity in Egypt, where non-assimilation and persecution worked in tandem to essentially form the nation of Israel. Are there not additional important connections to be made in this eight-day festival called Hanukkah?

SIMILARLY, WE could ask questions of the Islamic festival of Eid ul Adha. This December holy day is a constant reminder of the historic link to the Prophet Abraham and, specifically, to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice all for God, even his own son. Submission, obedience, and sacrifice are lifted up. In the Islamic tradition, however, the son to be sacrificed is Ishmael. In Jewish/Christian tradition, it is Isaac. Why the difference, and does it make a difference? And while we can celebrate faithfulness and sacrifice, what are the theological restraints to this original event, regardless of the son involved?

Perhaps there are good answers to all these questions, or no answers at all. But if we spend this season avoiding the questions, in effect removing the potential for offense, we will stop learning. Respect will be harder to embrace. The rich tapestry of religion, and religious rites and rituals that mark our society, will be largely hidden from view. Knowledge will be diminished. Avoidance as a methodology, although well-meaning, is ultimately devoid of meaning. The awesomeness of this season demands so much more.

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