

“Winter Holiday Perils and Possibilities”

Alliance Equity Salon facilitated by Matt Levin

Reading materials/excerpts

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jews-christmas/>

For the majority of Americans, December 25 is a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but for Jews it is a time to consider one's relationship to the wider society. Some Jews have chosen to adopt the Yuletide festivities. Some have emphatically rejected the rituals and symbols of Christmas. Still others have sought ways to meld Christmas and Hanukkah.

Christmas, in effect, has become a prism through which Jews can view how living in this land of freedom has shaped our religion, culture, and identity.

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<https://www.jewfaq.org/xmas.htm>

Enjoy the holiday to your heart's content; just allow us to refrain if we choose to.

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<https://browngirlmagazine.com/2018/12/why-i-celebrate-christmas-as-a-hindu/>

Today, I am often asked why my family, a Hindu family, celebrates Christmas with such grandiosity. The answer is simple: Not only is the season magical and completely captivating with such joyous spirit, but it's also almost impossible to not want to participate in the festivities. Regardless of the holiday cheer that is nearly contagious, it has become a tradition now that has been engrained within my family for more than 60 years. Christmas became a tradition among many West Indians at a time when celebrating Diwali or any Hindu holiday was not overly encouraged. Many would say that the British suppressed many of the Indian traditions and holidays as a way of “controlling” the people; this was not uncommon as a part of colonization.

Now, when I reflect on the meaning of Christmas and its teachings, it makes me only enjoy the holiday and its essence more. Too often we think that we cannot appreciate another culture, tradition or religion because it is not our own. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus and one of the greatest controversies around this holiday is how Hallmark has taken that meaning away. Some believe that by non-Christians celebrating, it only adds to the secularization of the holiday. Although I have not been raised as a Christian, I can still value the holiday and its meaning.

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/21/please-dont-wish-me-merry-christmas/>

Despite its celebration of a Christian god, it is everywhere, for over a month, in a way no other holiday is – not even Easter. If you're not a part of the festivities, even its sparkling aesthetic can wear you down. When you are from a minority religion, you're used to the fact that cabdrivers don't wish you an easy fast on Yom Kippur. But it's harder to get used to the oppressive ubiquity of a holiday like Christmas. “This is always the time of year I feel most excluded from society,” one Jewish friend told me. Another told me it made him feel “un-American.”

To say it's off-putting to be wished a merry holiday you don't celebrate – like someone randomly wishing you a happy birthday when the actual date is months away – is not to say you hate Christmas. It is simply to say that, to me, Julia Ioffe, it is alienating and weird, even though I know that is not intended.

<https://theweek.com/articles/884660/no-christmas-not-secular>

But it also says a lot about privilege in the U.S.: who's granted it under what conditions, and how people react when we feel our privilege slipping away.

The very nature of privilege is that it's invisible to those who have it. When your identity and experiences are treated as the cultural and societal default, it's natural to assume that everyone else experiences the world the way you do. For those who grew up celebrating Christmas, it can be hard to conceive of decorated evergreen trees, Santa suits, "All I Want for Christmas is You" on the radio, as anything other than neutral symbols of the "magic" of the season....

Let me be clear: There is nothing wrong with celebrating Christmas, or with finding deep personal joy in the Christmas season. Celebrating Christmas does not necessarily make one complicit in oppression. But expecting others to do the same, to erase our own experiences for the sake of preserving the magic of the season, is oppressive. Though many Americans can happily compartmentalize religious Christian observance and secularized Christmas cheer, not all of us have the luxury of doing so.

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<https://www.npr.org/2015/12/23/460726559/what-american-muslims-do-on-christmas-new-traditions-emerge>

Zahra Noorbakhsh co-hosts the "Good Muslim Bad Muslim" podcast along with Tanzila "Taz" Ahmed. Noorbakhsh's Persian-American family now celebrates Christmas, but Noorbakhsh had never heard of it when she arrived from Iran as a kindergartner in the 1980s.

"This little girl asked me if I believed in Santa, and I said, 'What does he look like?'," Noorbakhsh recalls. When the girl replied that he was a kindly old man with a big white beard who loves children, Noorbakhsh immediately remembered a few textbooks she'd seen back home: "These textbooks were issued by the theocratic government of Iran for kids, and they had these pictures of Khomeini kissing babies and playing with kids and he had a big white beard," she says.

So it was with great pride she informed the girl – that's the Ayatollah Khomeini! The little girl replied, "Well, we call him Santa Claus." Noorbakhsh couldn't wait to get home to share the news. "I was so excited," she says. "I said, 'Dad! Everyone in kindergarten is Muslim — they know about Imam Khomeini but they call him Santa!' "

Her dad then explained that the former Supreme Leader of Iran was not a jolly sleigh-driving figure from European folklore.

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https://www.huffpost.com/entry/13-things-not-to-say-to-a-jewish-person-around-christmas_b_6272714

Many Americans believe that saying "Merry Christmas" means nothing except "Goodbye," or "Happy Holidays," or even "Good Wishes." Although not everyone would agree, to many recipients (Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, etc.), this often smacks of religious bias and is another indicator that the masses still believe that nearly all Americans are Christian. Very few Jews would exit saying, "Happy Chanukah" except to other Jews.

<https://dueeast.org/its-that-time-of-year-again-focusing-equity-within-holiday-celebrations-at-school/>

If we want to have an academic study of a diversity of cultures, religions, history, celebrations etc. Sure... absolutely! Incorporate that learning. These are important ideas and foundational information to learn about ourselves and each other. But guess what? The unit/lesson does not have to conveniently happen in December... as a cover for the Christmas celebrations we really want to have. What I am recommending is an elimination of these traditional, whiteness- and Christian-normative holiday celebrations in our schools altogether.

Public schools are a primary learning space for the vast majority of children and should be an affirming space for all students. Of course, celebrating together is fun. And learning should be fun. Celebrating is great for connecting and building community. But... as we plan our celebrations, please consider that there are many different subjects and achievements we can celebrate throughout the year. Celebrations that include everyone. We can celebrate our school community, health, nature, kindness, science, justice, curiosity, family, FOOD... hmm... and now I am thinking of all the fun Pie (π) Day celebrations we had in my math classes as I was growing up... oops, got distracted.

But, point made, there are many things we can celebrate as a community of learners without elevating some family and community traditions while marginalizing others. We can do better... we can celebrate learning and knowledge. So, go ahead, celebrate the science, culture, renewal and wonders of winter! Just please, do not do it with a December Christmas cookie bake off...