

## **“Winter Holiday Perils and Possibilities”**

*Alliance Equity Salon facilitated by Matt Levin*

*Reading materials/excerpts*

### **From Celebration to Cancellation: How Juneteenth Became a Casualty of America’s Reactionary Turn**

The Progressive Magazine 6/17/25 – [link](#)

By 2021, more than half of all states had declared Juneteenth an official holiday or observance. That June, President Joe Biden signed legislation making it a federal holiday—an act supported overwhelmingly in Congress. Cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles hosted large-scale public celebrations. In smaller Illinois towns like Plano and Elgin, community organizers held block parties, history panels, and musical performances—efforts often led by Black community leaders working in tandem with local governments.

But today, five years later, that hopeful momentum in the movement for racial justice that initially spurred Juneteenth’s broader recognition has died. The promises of progress have been broken, and in many ways forgotten as any hopeful momentum has largely vanished. Instead of expansion, we are witnessing a quiet retreat—one driven by fear, political backlash, and a renewed commitment to forgetting.

Today, cities across the country have canceled or scaled back Juneteenth events, citing everything from logistical challenges to safety concerns to rising costs. The underlying reason, however, seems clear: Without will, there is no way. And in these trying times of racial revocation, the will to push something of this nature is just not there—especially with the current presidential administration introducing punitive measures for anything they deem to be anti-American.

The tide began to turn last year in Akron, Ohio, where Mayor Shammias Malik canceled all Juneteenth-related events on city property following a letter from eight council members who raised safety concerns around security after a shooting a couple weeks prior. Community leaders criticized the move as reactionary and dismissive of the holiday’s significance. While concerns around safety may have seemed legitimate, the lack of community engagement and efforts on saving the event speaks to the seeming insignificance of the day. It showed that Juneteenth was something that could be canceled seemingly on a whim.

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### **Orleans County senator resigns following leaked racist group chat**

VT Digger 10/17/25 – [link](#)

After Douglass made a comment about a peer’s Jewish colleague potentially making a procedural mistake, Douglass’ wife, a Young Republicans committee member, responded, stating, “you’re giving nationals to (sic) much credit and expecting the Jew to be honest.”

## Some Vermont schools mark Diwali as a school holiday for the 1st time

VT Digger 11/1/24 – [link](#)

“I think it helps broaden the community,” Singh said. “It creates inclusivity, and it also shows respect for the cultures and the religious practices of this diverse community in Burlington.”

In addition to Burlington, the Champlain Valley School District — which includes Charlotte, Hinesburg, Shelburne, St. George and Williston — announced in April the addition of Eid (celebrated by Muslims worldwide), Yom Kippur (the holiest day in the Jewish calendar) and Diwali as school holidays “to recognize our increasingly diverse communities and to help create consistency.”

Vermont isn’t the only place where school districts have moved to mark Diwali, which is celebrated by more than a billion in India and the diaspora beyond. New York City schools are also closed for the festival for the first time this year, the Gothamist reported, after “years of advocacy by the South Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities.”

The Winooski School District – Vermont’s most diverse – already recognizes Diwali, Eid and Yom Kippur, as well as some others. Nov. 1 is marked as a school holiday for both Diwali and Tihar – the Nepalese five-day festival of lights.

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<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 ones 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.

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<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](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.

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<https://duecast.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 ( $\pi$ ) 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...