

CHRISTMAS THROUGH NON-CHRISTIAN EYES

BOB ZASLAVSKY

Since the winter solstice with its density of holidays is upon us again, we can anticipate the annual explosions of righteous Christian indignation at institutions or persons who substitute a generic greeting like “happy holidays” or “season’s greetings” for “Merry Christmas.” Such indignation is nothing more than bad manners and bigotry based on erroneous history masquerading as principle and piety grounded in tradition.

I do not say this on behalf of myself as an adult. In my mature apostasy (now of half a century’s duration), I have become comfortable with a variety of religions and their expressions. In particular, I can relish the beauty of the Christian liturgy (especially the Catholic mass intoned in Latin) and the glories of Christian-inspired art (especially the music). I, even I, feel an awe and chill when I hear and (yes) sing along with traditional Christmas carols.

Therefore, as an adult, I am comfortable both with my apostasy and with my appreciation of the sentiments of true believers.

However—and this is the true root of my antipathy toward those religious bullies who violate both the founding tenets of their own faith and the ruling principles of common decency and etiquette—when I remember myself as a still-believing child raised Jewish, I cannot forget the discomfort that even the most benevolent public expressions of Christian belief caused me.

I recall the needless conflict ignited in me by the thoughtless imposition of Christian lore and practice on me. In my public schools, that lore and practice found expression in the implicitly mandatory singing of Christmas carols during holiday assemblies in the auditorium. My religion told me that I should sit silently during these exercises, but authority and peer pressure told me that I must participate. However, when I succumbed to the social pressure and sang along, even enjoying the music as I did so, my enjoyment was poisoned by my inability to bring myself to utter the words “Jesus Christ” or “Christ the Lord.” Jesus was neither my Christos (anointed one, messiah) nor any part of my Lord. In Judaism, it is forbidden ever to utter the name even of the genuine Lord of hosts. To exalt the name of what a believing Jew would regard as a false god was blasphemous idolatry.

Such feelings were not restricted to schools. As difficult as it may be for many of us, we should try to understand the perplexity that the display of a crèche in a public space can cause in a Jewish child.

A Christian who cannot understand—and feel compassion for—such a child is, to my mind, a questionable Christian.

After all, it is Judaism that—from its very founding—is the quintessentially militant and parochial religion, while Christianity is founded as the quintessentially pacifist and catholic (in the literal sense) religion. Jews are destined to live in a permanent state of circling the wagons, but Christians are meant to live in a radically open door and open-arms world.

The paradox of the Christian crusader in arms striving to eradicate non-Christian infidels has been with us for a long time. However, in a secular humanist society like ours—a society colonized out of a quest for religious freedom and founded on principles of religious enlightenment—there should be no place for such a crusader.

Whether the children of Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, or any others feel the same discomfort that I did, I cannot say with certainty, but I suspect that they do.

Moreover, if they do, the rest of us need to allow them the youthful safety and warmth of their parochialism. The bellicosity of irascible Christians should not trump the rights and feelings of non-Christians.

In this country, we are all co-equal citizens, free to be privately zealous in our various idiosyncratic ways. On the other hand, public areas must be DRZs (de-religionized zones). In public, a crèche should be neither more nor less welcome than a monk chanting “Hare Krishna.”

When the O’Reillies and Hannities—and, to be fair, the Lou Dobbsses—mount their righteously belligerent steeds, let us remember that the steeds are nothing but hobby horses rocking on the quicksand of mindless hate.

In addition, if a retailer—out of business sense, if not out of courtesy—adopts a generically neutral and all-encompassing holiday salutation, let us applaud the act. Even more, let us hope that the day arrives when the act will go unnoticed.

Furthermore, let us remember that there are two Christmases, the religious celebration of the birth of a savior and the latter day secular Saturnalia of gift-giving profligacy. To confuse the two demeans the former.

If we were honest, we would admit that the true Lord of American Christmas is Mammon.