

Which 'Holiday' Was That Again?

Nearly 90 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas.

So why are even merchants afraid to acknowledge the "reason for the season"?

By Robert H. Knight



As the Christmas season approaches ... Wait. Did I say Christmas? Better play it safe and say "holiday season."

From shopping malls to department stores, to radio, print and TV ads, we will soon hear the phrase "happy holidays" repeated incessantly. Nearly 90 percent of Americans identify as either Christian or from a Christian background, yet most of the nation is afraid to use the phrase "Merry Christmas."

After the Supreme Court banned Bible reading in the public schools in 1963, educators began substituting "Winter Holiday" and "Winter Break" for Christmas, and dropping Christmas carols from choral repertoires. Recently, Kwanzaa and other ethnic celebrations have replaced traditional festivities.

In the marketplace, the trend

began in the 1970s, as stores began shifting to "holiday" catalogs and "holiday" displays in an effort to avoid offending non-Christians. By 2002, the change was complete. Try finding the word Christmas in a prominent place in any American shopping mall. Try to recall a radio ad that featured Christmas instead of "holiday." Try saying "Merry Christmas" to a store clerk. Depending on what part of the country you are in, you might get a nervous "happy holidays" in return or a guilty "Merry Christmas," as if it were a secret sign from a cult.

Real Christmas trees have a star on top, signifying the Star that led shepherds and the wise men to Jesus. Christians borrowed the custom of decorating an evergreen tree from the Germanic pagan culture, from which

also came the yule log and other symbols now commonly used to signify Christmas. It was only in recent years that most retailers quietly removed the star on the tree in their stores, leaving the top unadorned. Last year, a real estate company in Virginia even held a promotion offering “holiday trees.”

Secularism Spills Over

Don Feder, an observant Jew and longtime columnist who is now a political consultant, finds the trend disturbing. “One of the things I find most remarkable is that someone is afraid to wish me a ‘Merry Christmas,’” he told *Family Voice*.

“They’re afraid you might be Jewish, and God forbid you should hear that and have a heart attack. I’ve always taken it as a gesture of goodwill. I’m secure enough in my faith not to be offended. Often, the Jews most offended by it are the most secularized. They’re threatened by any expression of religious observance.”

In a memorable December 13, 2000, column, “In the culture, Christmas morphs into holiday,” Feder observed:

“In a demographic sense, America is more Christian than Israel is Jewish. Try to imagine no signs of Purim or Passover in Jerusalem, or a Saudi Arabia where Ramadan is barely mentioned. But I forget. America is to be the first totally secular nation on earth, contrary to the spirit of our

founders. The secularists’ war on faith has spilled over to the culture.”

Ringin’ Up the ‘Holidays’

Christmas is the engine that hauls the consumer economy, with over \$200 billion spent in the five or six weeks preceding Christmas. Newspapers are full of nervous reports about the rise or fall of spending. But if you go by what the marketplace serves up, you might

be forgiven for wondering which holiday all the fuss is about.

A check of seasonal catalogs from major merchants shows that the vast majority have “holiday” catalogs, even though the merchandise is clearly intended for Christmas

shopping.

“The ‘holiday’ shopping season is not focused on Thanksgiving or New Year’s Day, or any other winter celebration, so who is fooling whom?” said Al Dobras, who writes on religious issues for Culture and Family Institute’s *Culture & Family Report*. “On June 26, 1870, the United States Congress declared Christmas Day, December 25, a federal holiday. It is the only national holiday in the month of December. If the Congress of the United States recognizes Christmas as the singular ‘reason for the season,’ it should be good enough for the catalog merchants as well.”

A major exception to the secular trend is the Maine-based, mail-order

“Wal-Mart greeters will say ‘happy holidays’ nearly half a billion times in the month of December.”

— *“Holiday Fun Facts” on Wal-Mart’s Web site.*

giant L.L. Bean, which had dropped the word Christmas from its catalog a few years ago but recently restored it. The current offering is an unabashed "Christmas 2002" catalog.

A check of Web sites of major retailers shows little recognition of Christmas, with lots of references to "the season" or "the holidays."

Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, has a list of "Holiday Fun Facts," which includes this: "Wal-Mart greeters will say 'happy holidays' nearly half a billion times in the month of December."

The "Holiday Fun Facts" page, which was originally posted on November 10, 2000, includes 10 references to "holiday" or "holiday season," and a single mention of Christmas: "In a 4-week period, Wal-Mart will sell enough Christmas trees that, if laid end to end, would cover a distance of 524 miles."

Wal-Mart also boasts that if it "took all the red velvet items sold this holiday season, combined them and cut them into a two-inch strip, we could tie a ribbon around the world and have enough velvet left to make a nice bow." A nice, Groundhog Day bow, perhaps?

New York-based Macy's, the retailing giant that inspired the film *Miracle on 34th Street*, has all but done away with Christmas in favor of the generic "holiday" label. Interestingly, on its Community Service Web page at macys.com, the company boasts: "Macy's believes in giving back to the people and communities that have supported us over the years." An AIDS ribbon adorns the screen, along with a list of causes that Macy's supports. But under the heading "Not eligible" are:

"Church Groups and Religious organizations (unless grant request is for a program other than religious purposes; in that case, the request falls under a priority area in the section above)."

Given that a major reason for the success of Macy's is the billions of dollars that Christmas shoppers, many of them churchgoers, have spent on Christmas presents over the years, the "giving back" statement rings a bit hollow.

Source of Generosity

Many stores go to great lengths not to mention Christ's name in any form.

J.C. Penney's Web site leads shoppers to "Holiday at Home," "Holiday Decorating" and "Holiday Accents," as well as "Gifts for the Season." A Web search of the site for the word "Christmas" turns up a handful of Christmas references, such as one "Country Christmas" item. Calls to Macy's and J.C. Penney's were unreturned as of press time.

Sears' Web site has 143 citations of "Christmas," but most are for artificial trees and jewelry that could be marketed year-round.

It's not just department stores. Fast-food chains, such as McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's, avoid the "C" word. Even Chick-fil-A, a Christian-owned company based in Atlanta and famous for its chicken-promoting cows, is planning no specific Christmas references, according to a company spokesman.

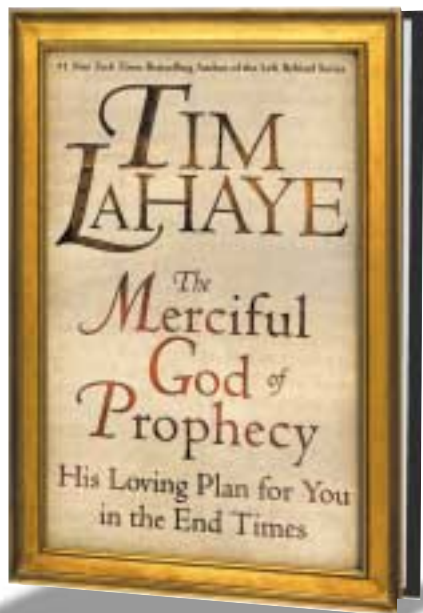
Dr. Tom Landess, a South Carolina-based author and cultural writer, explains why retailers ignore at

Continued on page 26

From the #1 New York Times bestselling
coauthor of the Left Behind series

**“This is the most
important book
I’ve ever written.”**

—Tim LaHaye



**“A bright ray of hope amid
the pallor of contemporary
pessimism and despair.”**

—Paige Patterson, president,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Available in hardcover, as a Time Warner
AudioBook™, and in a Large Print Edition

Read an Excerpt Online at
www.twbookmark.com

**God has a plan for each one of us.
Find out what it is.**

W WARNER BOOKS An AOL Time Warner Book Group Company

Continued from page 22

their own peril the reason behind their golden goose:

“For Christians, the exchange of presents is a profoundly religious act, and more than a recreation of the gift-giving of the Magi. It is an attempt to imitate the infinite generosity of God in giving His Son for the world. Most Christians may not consciously acknowledge that this motivates them to spend so much money on one another during the Christmas season, but deep in their hearts they know it. The more you drain Christmas of its religious content, the more you separate Christians from the source of their generosity.”

In the meantime, we recommend saying “Merry Christmas” as often as possible, and buying from merchants who are not afraid to use the word “Christmas.” It is good for the spirit. And it is akin to the early Christians using the fish symbol in a hostile culture in order to distinguish themselves. As Mark Twain, although apparently not a believer himself, once said, “Tell the truth. It will amaze your friends and confound your enemies.”

More importantly, Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.” (Matthew 5:14-15)

“Merry Christmas to all.” 

Robert Knight is Director of CWAs Culture and Family Institute,

<http://cultureandfamily.org/>, and author of *The Age of Consent: The Rise of Relativism and the Corruption of Popular Culture*, \$15. To order your copy, call 800-323-2200, or use the coupon on page 38.