



Keep Christmas, and Add Other Faiths' Holy Days

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As the United States' population reaches unprecedented levels of religious diversity, it is time for federal, state and local governments to officially recognize other religions' holidays. For too long, the narrative on religion in the public square is that more diversity should mean less religion – that schools must have “winter concerts” instead of Christmas concerts, and that we should all say “Happy Holidays” at Christmastime.

The fact of the matter is that those changes are a thin veneer over the privileges that Christians alone enjoy in the United States. Lawmakers and society should not focus on taking Christianity out, but on bringing everyone else in.

The most important part of this dialogue is starting it, by recognizing that Christianity already permeates all facets of society and the law. The federally recognized Christmas holiday is just the tip of the iceberg. The advantages that Christians enjoy are broader, and run so deep that they are virtually invisible to Christians. Christians get to live in a society that is familiar to them and with them. They are raised with Christian ideas and images – for whom “scripture” means one agreed-upon text, “God” is obviously singular and male, and the Sabbath never falls on a work day.

Americans shouldn't hesitate to say 'Merry Christmas,' as long as they know when to say 'Happy Diwali,' 'Eid Mubarak' and 'Joyous Passover.'

Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Bahais and others live on the flip side of that equation: By comparison these religions are often considered deviant, cultish and exotic. They are spoken of in caricature, preached of as false paths, or co-opted to sell candles and perfume. The conveniences of a Christian's life are lost to the Hindu who must leave work to observe a holiday or the Muslim student fainting in gym class because he's fasting for Ramadan. Hanukkah is elevated in status because it happens in December, near Christmas, while more theologically significant Jewish holidays remain unfamiliar.

The solution isn't pushing Christianity to the side, where the other religions have been relegated. Working toward religious pluralism means adding to the religious holidays, rituals, practices that are recognized in law and society. Christianity isn't going anywhere. It's time to bring other religions into parity with it. Other religiously diverse countries, like India, Guyana and many others, formally recognize both majority and minority religions' holidays.

These changes probably won't begin at the federal level. Across the U.S., school districts are becoming the first to grapple with the issue. Many already break for the Jewish high holy days. More recently, cities like Passaic, N.J., and Dearborn, Mich., have responded to local residents' needs for observing Hindu and Muslim holidays. Change will rise up from there. Practical responses to growing religious populations will lead to dialogue and new connections between “us” and “them.”



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As that happens, we can again become a society that says “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays.” For that to happen, we will also need to know when it’s time to wish our neighbors a “Happy Diwali,” “Eid Mubarak” or “Joyous Passover” – and to extend others’ greetings as genuinely as we do our own. That’s the sound of a more perfect union.