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# “Merry Christmas” — Richard Dawkins Says More than He Means

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Roger Kennedy of *The New York Times* wondered how some of the “New Atheists” now popular in the media and bookstores would be observing the “holiday” season. Presumably, these vigorous opponents of Christianity would treat the observance of Christmas like a disease and stay as far away as possible.

Not so, it seems. Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and the more recent *Letter to a Christian Nation* has a Christmas tree in his living room, complete with ornaments. As Kennedy explains, Mr. Harris and his wife are observing “a (relatively) holly, jolly atheistic Christmas.”

More:

*“It seems to me to be obvious that everything we value in Christmas — giving gifts, celebrating the holiday with our families, enjoying all of the kitsch that comes along with it — all of that has been entirely appropriated by the secular world,” he said, “in the same way that Thanksgiving and Halloween have been.”*

Well, the problem is evident in Mr. Harris’ judgment that gift giving, family gatherings, and “kitsch” represent “everything we value at Christmas.” He can speak for himself, of course, but that is *not* the sum total of what Christmas means for Christians. That statement reveals a great deal more about Sam Harris than about Christmas. Christians can do without the gifts and gatherings, but not without the remembrance and celebration of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, seriously-minded Christians should be far more offended by the kitsch than Mr. Harris is.

Richard Dawkins, the Oxford professor who aggressively opposes all belief in God as dangerous, seems to agree with Sam Harris. As Kennedy explains:

*Mr. Dawkins, reached by e-mail somewhere on a book tour, was asked about his own Christmas philosophy. The response sounded almost as if he and Mr. Harris — and maybe other members of a soon-to-be-chartered Atheists Who Kind of Don’t Object to Christmas Club — had hashed out a statement of principles. Strangely, these principles find much common ground with Christians who complain about the holiday’s over-commercialization and secularization, though the atheists bemoan the former and appreciate the latter.*

*“Presumably your reason for asking me is that ‘The God Delusion’ is an atheistic book, and you still think of Christmas as a religious festival,” Mr. Dawkins wrote, in a reply printed here in its entirety. “But of course it has long since ceased to be a religious festival. I participate for family reasons, with a reluctance that owes more to aesthetics than atheistics. I detest Jingle Bells, White Christmas, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, and the obscene spending bonanza that nowadays seems to occupy not just December, but November and much of October, too.”*

*He added: “So divorced has Christmas become from religion that I find no necessity to bother with euphemisms such as happy holiday season. In the same way as many of my friends call themselves Jewish atheists, I acknowledge that I come from Christian cultural roots. I am a post-Christian atheist. So, understanding full well that the phrase retains zero religious significance, I unhesitatingly wish everyone a Merry Christmas.”*

The self-identified “post-Christian atheist” argues that Christmas long ago ceased to be a “religious festival.” He dislikes silly Christmas songs on the basis of aesthetic judgment (a judgment shared, by the way, by many Christians) and is happy to “wish everyone a Merry Christmas.”

How charitably secular of him. Nevertheless, Professor Dawkins should be more careful. He obviously misses a fascinating irony here. The title “Christ” is a transliteration of the Greek word for “the anointed one” — the Messiah. He mocks the holiday but declares the fact that Jesus is the Messiah every time he wishes anyone “Merry Christmas” — whether that is his intention or not.

The book of Ecclesiastes declares that “the voice of a fool [comes] through many words” [Eccl. 5:3]. For Richard Dawkins, it just takes two words. Merry Christmas.

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