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The Battle for Christmas—A New Front in the Culture War

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Writing in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sara B. Miller underlines the urgency of this issue. “Across the country, a battle for the soul of the public square is being waged this holiday season. The question: Has the quest for inclusiveness gone so far down the road of sensitivity that children might be forgiven for not knowing what holiday many Americans will celebrate on Dec. 25?”

By now, most Christians have noticed the marginalization of Christmas during the commercial holiday season. Just a few years ago, the concern of many Christians was expressed in the motto, “Keep Christ in Christmas.” These days, Christmas has itself become the issue, as some public schools have been purged of all Christmas symbols and the words “Merry Christmas” are now characterized as discriminatory and intolerant.

In some locales, Christmas has become front-page news. In Denver, Mayor John Hickenlooper decided to remove the lighted phrase “Merry Christmas” from the roof of the city’s downtown City and County Building. The mayor had intended to replace the Christmas greeting with a more generic “Happy Holidays,” but was forced to reverse course when his office was flooded with complaints and constituent calls.

“I didn’t even think twice about it, and it’s perhaps my inexperience as an elected official,” Hickenlooper told the *Associated Press*. “To have it veer off in this other direction, where so many people felt being deprived of this tradition, was certainly not what we intended. It was so far from any of my intentions that it’s easy for me to apologize.”

The mayor’s reversal of course stood in stark contrast to the decision of the Downtown Denver Partnership to prevent the Faith Bible Chapel from sponsoring a Christmas-themed float in the city’s annual “Parade of Lights.” According to the organization, the Parade of Lights is a strictly secular affair, and any religious message—including “Merry Christmas”—is out of bounds.

Pastor George Morrison explained that Faith Bible Chapel, one of the region’s largest congregations, had intended to enter a float featuring multicultural Christian themes and a Merry Christmas message. The Downtown Denver Partnership, which organizes the thirty-year-old parade, told the church that its Christmas message might offend others in the community. DDP Vice President Susan Rogers Kark told the *Rocky Mountain News*, “Many things have changed as we look back 30 years, in terms of being sensitive to the fact that there are other traditions” that now may appear offensive.

It seems that the DDP has a rather eccentric definition of “religion,” however. The group did allow floats from the “Two Spirits Society,” honoring the spirits of gay American Indians, and an Asian group was allowed to sponsor a float that featured dancers performing traditional Chinese dances to ward off evil spirits. Nevertheless, Kark insisted that these two groups and their floats were not expressing religious messages. Evidently, the religious inclusion kicks in only when Christianity is involved.

Nevertheless, the two nights of the parade became the occasion for a significant Christian revolt against the secularist regime. Hundreds of Denver-area Christians attended the parade and responded to the rejection of the church's float by singing Christmas carols, handing out hot chocolate, and inviting persons to church.

The parade organizers just didn't get it. Jim Basey, DDP President, told The New York Times, "This was always just supposed to be a cutesy parade, for the kids," adding, "The purpose was to get bodies downtown." Those last words are very revealing, for the DDP's main concern in the whole event is to get persons downtown in order to go shopping. Commercialism is driving their ambition, not a celebration of Christmas.

That was just too much for some Christians to accept. How can these businesses get away with taking advantage of the Christmas selling season while doing everything within their power to deny that Christmas even exists?

A similar question should be addressed to Macy's, one of the nation's leading retailers. Manuel Zamorano of Sacramento, California, became agitated when Macy's removed "Merry Christmas" banners from its stores and advertising. Zamorano decided to take action, forming the "Committee to Save Merry Christmas" to organize a boycott against the chain.

Zamorano accused Macy's of hypocrisy. Why should the chain advertise "after-Christmas sales" when they will not even mention "Christmas" sales, noting also that Bloomingdale's wishes its customers a "Happy Hanukkah" but will not use "Merry Christmas" in its advertising.

Federated Department Stores, parent company to Macy's, appears unmoved and unconcerned by the protest. Spokeswoman Carol Sanger simply referred to the boycott as "unfortunate." According to Religion News Service, Macy's raked in \$5 billion in fourth-quarter sales in 2003 and expects to do as well or better in 2004. "I think our sales will be quite fine, thank you," Sanger insisted. "People are always boycotting. It's sort of like, get in line and take a number." Apparently, Macy's needs lessons in public relations as well.

In South Florida, Fort Lauderdale's Broward and Fashion Malls displayed Jewish menorahs, but no nativity scenes. Karl Woodward, general manager of the Broward Mall, confirmed that the mall's policy is to allow the menorah while disallowing nativity scenes, explaining that "religious symbols" have no place in the mall. When challenged that the menorah is a religious symbol, Woodward insisted, "it's a celebration of a battle," and not religious at all. That must come as news to Jews who understand the menorah to represent a miracle.

The schools are prime arenas of conflict during the Christmas season. From coast to coast, various school districts come up with insane, irrational, and totalitarian policies that amount to a Stalinist purge of Christmas from holiday festivities. One of the most ludicrous cases of anti-Christmas bias run amok is found in Southwest Florida, where the Freedom Elementary School in East Manatee forbids even snowflakes. In this school, winter itself has been banned as overtly religious, and the school's students will be singing patriotic songs at this year's December concert. "There's a lot of rules and regulations out there," explained Principal Gary Holbrook, who said he was just trying to respect everyone.

When even snowflakes become controversial because of a supposed connection with Christmas, reason has left the room and paranoia is all that stands in its place. The radical secularization of America's public square now means that students in some school districts are not even allowed to wear red and green clothing during the Christmas season.

That's right—the Plano Independent School District of Texas has apparently lost its collective mind. Jonathan Morgan, an eight-year-old student at Thomas Elementary School, was denied permission to hand out pens shaped like candy canes at his school's holiday party. School officials turned down his request because the pens were to be marked with a message that was explicitly Christian.

Attorneys with the Alliance Defense Fund and Liberty Legal Institute have filed suit in federal district court, alleging that the school has violated young Jonathan Morgan's constitutional rights by allowing other messages but disallowing only his candy canes.

"The policy is a perfect example of politically correct extremism," said ADF Senior Counsel Gary McCaleb. "School officials have gone so far as to prohibit students from wearing red and green at their 'winter break' parties because they claim they are Christmas colors. Even the plates and napkins must be white. The district's policy is ludicrous to even the

most common observer.”

Well, the policy may be ludicrous, but it was adopted by a school board in Texas—the very heart of ‘red’ America. Apparently, this school board has been intimidated into adopting this extreme policy simply out of fear that secularist forces will take them to court if they allow students even the freedom to wear red and green during the Christmas season.

These attacks on Christmas represent more than isolated incidents and agitating anecdotes. Christmas has become politically incorrect simply because the season is inevitably and irreducibly connected with Jesus Christ. Now, even the greeting “Merry Christmas” is labeled as intolerant and discriminatory. How long will it be until “Merry Christmas” is labeled as “hate speech?”

The logic is clear—Christmas has become a threat to those Americans who now claim a right never to be confronted with Christian truth, never to see Christian symbolism, and never to have to hear “Merry Christmas.”

Who knew that—in America of all places—singing Christmas carols and wishing strangers “Merry Christmas” could become a form of civil disobedience? This Christmas, Christians should determine to be cultural subversives, spreading “Merry Christmas” and Christmas blessings, even to those who expect the political correctness police to show up at any minute. We cannot take this sitting down. When candy canes are ruled out of bounds in Plano, Texas, we are obviously in big trouble.

UPDATE: U.S. District Court Judge Paul Brown, based in Sherman, Texas, has ordered the Plano Independent School District to allow Jonathan Morgan to distribute his candy cane pens at the school’s “winter break” party. The ruling came after his parents sued the school district over the prohibition. The judge ruled that the school district had violated young Jonathan’s constitutional rights by discriminating against religious speech, and made its ruling immediate because Jonathan would suffer “immediate” injury if he did not act. The judge also noted that, in his opinion, there is “a substantial likelihood that Plaintiffs will prevail on the merits.” Hats off to Judge Brown and young Jonathan’s lawyers, the Liberty Legal Institute.

