

*Sunday December 22, 2013*

## **The message and the messengers**

By Jim Taylor

Two small items caught my eye in Thursday morning's paper.

In one, some of the troops at the Guantanamo Bay detention center wanted a Christmas Nativity Scene and Christmas decorations removed from the base, on the grounds that it improperly promoted Christianity over other faiths.

In the other, a shopping centre had run an advertisement wishing its customers "Happy Holidays." A McDonald's customer picked up the paper, and saw that someone had scribbled across the ad, "If you can't say Merry Christmas, then just ##### off, you J## b#####."

Of course, the vandal didn't use hash marks.

Don't expect me defend either of those viewpoints. Both have merit. Both have failings.

Personally, I resent cards that tell me to have a Happy Holiday. Or that offer Season's Greetings. Like Scrooge, I'm tempted to slip into "Bah! Humbug!" mode.

We don't single out any other season for special greetings. We don't urge people to celebrate any other holiday break. We all know the message refers to Christmas, but apparently we haven't got the nerve to say so. That strikes me as hypocritical.

If it's about Christmas, let's say so.

## **Reversing the situation**

On the other hand, there's a cultural arrogance in assuming that everyone should celebrate a Christian festival.

A century ago, perhaps, that assumption might have been justified. But not any more. Not in Canada today.

Perhaps the only way to understand the effect of such an assumption is to imagine the shoe being on the other foot.

When I was young, my parents served as missionaries in India. The whole country went berserk celebrating the Hindu festival of Holi each spring. Exuberant crowds thronged the streets, scattering brightly coloured dye over each other, indiscriminately. Going downtown or to the market inevitably meant coming home with clothes, skin, and hair stained fluorescent green, pink, purple, red, orange, blue, or all of the above.

The crowds made no distinction by religion. Everyone -- friend or stranger, rich or poor, male or female, toddlers and elders, Christian and Muslim -- all got painted with the same palette.

Expatriates generally withdrew to the safety of their compounds.

Is that what we want Jews and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, Wiccans and pagans, to feel like when we shower Christmas sentiments upon them? To feel that they need to keep their heads down? To isolate themselves? To feel that they're outsiders?

I hope not.

## **Good neighbours**

There's a common saying, "Don't shoot the messenger!" It advises us to pay attention to the message, not to blame the carrier of the message.

In the context of Christmas, I suggest, that advice gets it backwards. The problem is not the Christmas message; it's the messengers.

In Guantanamo, for example, the military moguls who feel they have a right -- even an obligation -- to impose the American Way of Faith on their inmates.

In the newspaper, advertisers so afraid of offending potential customers that they hide behind meaningless euphemisms, and hot-tempered readers who lash out at anything they see as watering down their beliefs.

Like Hindu crowds celebrating Holi, we fling our festive net over everyone. No one escapes. Some adherents of other faiths join the party. They buy Christmas trees. They send Christmas greetings – with more or less innocuous wordings. But even if they avoid the ostentatious excesses of Christmas lights and Christmas presents, they can't avoid the deluge of Christmas carols, Christmas movies, Christmas sales, and Christmas parties.

They'll tell you it's OK. They don't mind. But I notice that they don't do unto us as we have done unto them. They don't expect us to adopt kosher food rules to suit them, or to fast for a month during Ramadan.

The man whose birth we honour at Christmas told his followers, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Sometimes I think our neighbours practice his teaching better than we Christians do. They recognize that Yom Kippur or Vesak, Imbolc or Eid, have meaning only within their own religious cultures.

## **With due respect...**

The answer is not to abolish Christmas. Let me repeat that – the answer is not to expunge Christmas from our language and our lives, to erase religious roots from our schools, our businesses, and our churches.

No, I don't want to replace "Merry Christmas" with "Happy Holidays." I don't want to turn December into a purely secular period of financial and dietary overindulgence.

But I need to remember that Christmas is primarily a Christian celebration. It has significance to those who belong to the Christian family, the Christian culture. To them, we can and should say "Merry Christmas" without self-consciousness.

But we should do it while respecting the feelings of those who may belong to different cultural traditions.

It's one thing to value the message of Christmas. It's quite another thing to act like an imperial envoy imposing the emperor's message on lesser mortals.

Don't confuse the message with its messengers.

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## **YOUR TURN**

Last week's column tried to relate electronic and personal snooping.

Jim McKean wrote: "Excellent parallel about voyeurism whether it is a person or nation. I believe that you are the first I have read who has done this. Nation states are suffering psychological disorder, which, I believe, is fueled by fear. Perhaps that fear is founded in a lack of social justice. In this time of Advent may we be reminded to whom the angel's first announcement of the birth was given. "Fear not, for behold I bring tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" (not just to the powerful and rich).

Dorothy Haug thought the issue was more than just snooping: "I am less concerned about the snooping than what errors can be made in interpretation of what someone is saying (or writing) in a private conversation. It is too easy to misinterpret one's intentions or comments when there is no face-to-face discussion and when the other party is not able to clarify everything they say. We often speak (or write) in a kind of shorthand that the other person understands -- but irony, exaggeration, or even humor does not always transmit through the filter of the telephone or e-mail -- thus false accusations or profiling can be the result."

Isabel Gibson thought I might be too simplistic when I wrote, "Security comes from the unity of a shared vision, a common purpose."

"Maybe so," she replied. "What then shall we do to achieve security in a world where our communities do not exhibit 'a shared vision, a common purpose'? What tools would we want if the security of our neighbours were our own day-to-day responsibility?"

"David Brin argues for what I might call 'reciprocal visibility' – whatever of our lives is to be open to government view, so should the same level of their operations be open to citizen review. That's a vision I can share."

So did Charles Hill, in Texas. "Would your stance on this topic change if you knew that there was a bomb on your airplane, planted by someone who planned all the details via cellphone? We live in a dangerous world where technology is both a lethal weapon and a protection. You have [obviously] never encountered a true psychopath who would cut your throat for your car and never blink. It is worse when the psychopathy is justified by religious zeal. Believe me, there are people who have no conscience. I've met them in my criminal justice work.

"Would you refuse to install surveillance cameras if you could reduce the losses in a store you own by 50% or prevent an armed robbery? If the rules for not using technology could be enforced for every government or terrorist, I would relish complete invisibility.

"Privacy is gone. Maybe only those with illegal, hurtful, or immoral agendas need fear loss of privacy."

Charles also suggested a parallel between NSA snooping and traditional teachings in Sunday schools: "Back in the days of my youth, I attended a church who told us that on judgment day, everything we ever said or did would be displayed on a big screen for everyone who ever lived to see. It did work to control some of us, some of the time."

Nancy Kerr wrote (I think from the U.S. – I can't keep all your locations in my head, unfortunately), "Irony that the 2nd Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is repeatedly mentioned even as the 4th and 5th Amendments are no longer a defense against 'unreasonable search and seizure' and the right not to incriminate oneself. Irony, that the glorification of the 2nd Amendment is taken out of context and is difficult to apply to today's weapons, while the injunctions of the 4th and 5th are not time-bound. Irony that our security from invasion of privacy is no longer observed in the name of security. Irony that the effort to provide security, doesn't."

Allan Baker caught what I thought was the core of my concern: "I particularly appreciated the truth embedded in the brief paragraph that reads:

'National security and personal security are closely linked. A nation cannot be secure if it systematically undermines the security of its citizens. Citizens are not just a nation's means to an end; they are the nation.'"

Vern Ratzlaff summarized the issue more briefly than I did: "Caesar trumps G-d again."

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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