

## Celebrating Christmas in a Pluralistic Culture

**By Gide Démosthène**

Christmas in a pluralistic culture will always be met with various cultural challenges. Today, we hear quite often about the stringency of various businesses, public offices, and private organizations who, for one reason or another, have chosen to *not* make “Christmas” a part of their yearly observed holidays. The forced removal of Christmas trees and Nativity scenes and other Christian symbols from the public square is almost a yearly occurrence.<sup>1</sup> “Happy Holidays” has become the favorite seasonal greeting used, *in lieu* of Merry Christmas, by a growing number of institutions and business organizations. To counter this passive attack on Christianity and on its first celebrated holiday in the Christian calendar, the AFA also known as The American Family Association, published its list of “Naughty or Nice”<sup>2</sup> companies that Christians in the USA should or should not be doing business with during the Christmas holiday. Interestingly, shortly after the publication of the list to AFA’s subscribers and its affiliates, some of the enlisted companies respond by changing their policies and allow “Christmas” to become a part of their sales campaigns during the Christmas season.

The Cultural shift hit home when, early in the Advent season, I began to look for Christmas decorations and greeting cards in many major stores around my community in Brockton, Massachusetts. After many extensive searches through holiday items in display, I could not find one décor with the message “Merry Christmas.” There were plenty of all types of other decorative items with holiday insignia and the inscription “Happy Holidays.” But definitely, Christmas seemed to be unwelcomed, at least, from inside a number of stores. To use the specific words of Charles Colson: “This is a significant cultural shift.”<sup>3</sup> A statement Colson made after a comprehensive succinct analysis of Naturalism in contemporary culture. Perhaps it has never occurred to some Christians in the United States, that Christ and His followers are becoming, more and more, a grave cultural, social, and spiritual offense to many; and that the land whose pioneers and founders were Christians is fast becoming at enmity with their proclaimed and celebrated Faith.

Christmas and the Christian faith came to America and were established in the land through the persons of the founders by the sovereign will of God.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the challenges that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://freedomforum.org/templates/documents.asp?documentID=8138>, accessed on 12/13/2010;

*Federal Examines Say Religious Decoration Inappropriate*, <http://www.koco.com/r/26162860/detail.html>, accessed on 12/17/2010

<sup>2</sup> <http://action.afa.net/Detail.aspx?id=2147486887>, accessed on 12/11/2010.

<sup>3</sup> Colson, Charles, *How Now Shall We Live?*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999, 22).

<sup>4</sup> Cairns, Earl E. *Christianity Through The Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, 357-371).

Christmas, Christians and Christianity face today come in the persons of U.S. citizens, residents, and immigrants whose faiths differ from Christianity's core beliefs, values, and traditions as found in this land and in our national heritage. They are our colleagues, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances who happen to live in communities all around us. This pluralistic cultural change in the demographics, as integrated in our ethnically and morally diverse co-existence, provides for the overwhelming secularization of American culture. Ethicists Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter rightly observed and confirm that "Secularization, like weed in an unmanaged garden, gradually outgrew the Christian monopoly in Western Civilization."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Christians today are a minority in their own backyard. There is a striking irony here between the Creator of the world who came to save His world, but only to be rejected and crucified by the world (John 1:10-11). This might be a good reminder for all Christians as we celebrate and worship our Messiah this Christmas. Christians ought not to be offended by the movements of diverse *goyim*, peoples or ethnic groups, in their midst. Our God is the God of the nations, (Psalm 47:8). And, above all, Christ is and will be lifted up as the Light of the nations, Isaiah 42:1, 6). In effect, God's ordinance to Israel is that it must embrace the aliens and treat them as its own people, (Ezekiel 47:22-23). What are absolutely forbidden are the believers' embracing and indulging in the nations' immoral, conniving and idolatrous lifestyles; and imitating their arrogant and unrepentant attitude toward God's mercy and enduring faithfulness.

The Prophets proclaimed the coming of Christ to their contemporaries (1 Peter 1:10-11; Acts 3:18). Their stunning prophetic revelations concerning the coming Messiah were specifically transmitted only to God's chosen people. Consequently, those forebears in the Jewish faith should have been looking toward the fulfillment of God's promise "in the fullness of time," in their midst. Preoccupied with the political, social, and spiritual scene in Judea, Israel's leadership could only interpret the Holy Scriptures unto others; but personally, blinded by their own prerogatives, they remained ignorant of God's magnificently accomplished work. Evidently, they quoted fulfilled prophecy as something for the future, unaware that Christ was presently living among them. God, paradoxically, had the Magi proclaimed the Good News of Christ's birth to the people who were keepers of the prophecy:

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who *has been*<sup>6</sup> born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him, (Matthew 2:1b-2, NIV).

This "disturbance" is no exaggeration, for the Greek word, *tarasso*, rightly translated by "troubled" in the NASB, is the descriptive reaction of the people living during the first Christmas. The political ruler and representative of the imperial might of Rome was troubled, together with the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Were those people ignorant of God's revealed truth?

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<sup>5</sup> Trull, Joe E. and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2009, 33).

<sup>6</sup> Italics added for emphasis

Absolutely not! They all feared social irrelevancy. Tyrannical governments and individuals whose main purpose is to maintain a systemically abusive and oppressive culture, at the expense of the weak and the poor and the marginalized in society, will always see the gift of Christ as a threat to their social status and positions of power. They are threatened by the dominion of One who is born and proclaimed to be a “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Even more threatening is the fact that Christ’s government of justice and righteousness will never end.

The chief priests and the teachers of the Law confirm to Herod, the local government, the prophecy that Christ’s birth would create an anticipated change for God’s people:

For this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

Accordingly, Christmas ushers in a season of hope, peace, prosperity, and of justice and righteousness for God’s people, over which Christ is established as the King Shepherd. In the first Christmas, we see this Christ is rejected by those whose life objectives were very different than the revealed plan of God. For they, too, are seeking to exercise continual dominion over the same group of people... whether Herod, as local governments; or the chief priests as apostate spiritual elitists; or the innkeepers as entrepreneurs. These three groups exist among us today and pursue the same priorities as they did at Christ’s birth. In a secularized pluralistic and materialistic culture and society, Christ is not needed and only Mammon is king. Christmas, like many other Christian holidays; has become a means only to maintain tradition and to show “spirituality” for some, and to achieve “profit” for others. How then can Christmas be genuinely celebrated in the spirit of God’s revelation in a pluralistic society?

Fortunately, God provides wonderful insights in the Holy Scriptures regarding those who have truly embraced Christ and His mission among people—the faithful. Generally, people of all groups may celebrate the “Holidays” for various reasons, but only faithful Christians can celebrate Christmas in the true spirit of the season. Mary believed God’s promises and sacrificed her prerogatives to allow the Son of God to enter humanity through her own flesh (Luke 1:38, 46-55). She forsook social reputation and standing to identify with God’s redemptive plan. Joseph accepted social and cultural ridicule to stand in faith with his pregnant fiancée according to God’s revelation to him (Matthew 1:19-21). Almighty God entered our *cosmos* through a mocked and destitute family in order to bring complete spiritual, social, and cultural renewal and relevancy and *Shalom* to the people of the world. This reminds us that *Yahweh Elohim* can and will use obedient and submissive believers, throughout the generations, to advance His kingdom. That first night of Christmas, God’s angels celebrated God’s fulfilled promises by singing the eternal anthem: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests,” (Luke 2:14, NIV). Likewise, the angels have also called upon the shepherds, this despicably rejected group of servants, to go and see God’s salvation—Immanuel. And God,

through a revelation to the Magi, brought the wisdom of man at the feet of Incarnated Wisdom. Considering, the human participation in the whole event, it is incontestable that the first *Noel* was celebrated only by a flimsy minority in the neglected town of Bethlehem, in an empire of millions.

Celebrating Christmas in a pluralistic society in the twenty first century and beyond will not be very different than the first Christmas. The Prophet Micah crystallizes the radical conviction believers must maintain among the nations: “Though all the peoples walk each in the name of his god, as for us, we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever,” (Micah 4:5, NAS). Society’s challenges will always be before us. For the majority of peoples, will not always believe nor accept the ways of *El Elyon*, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. Indeed, they too, have their affections set on their many gods—and therefore, they will want everyone to share in the celebration of their many “Holidays” outside of Christmas.

Christmas is a holiday for Christian believers (John1:12). Christmas is about a loving divine gift of eternal life that God has freely offered and bestowed only upon those who are destitute enough to eagerly accept the Savior of humanity by faith. “For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,” (John 3:16, NIV). In this spirit alone, genuine Christians are called to celebrate Christmas with a deep and genuine love and compassion for one another, and for those who have lost their way back to God. Gloriously, Christ’s light will shine in the darkness of the world through us, and a new day will dawn, and Christ’s gift of eternal life will find its way into the hearts of many.

Contextually, Joseph Aldrich explains that: “a Christian becomes good news as Christ ministers through his serving heart.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, our Lord rightly said: “Blessed is he [the one] who does not take offense at me,” (Matthew 11:6, NAS). The nations around us may immerse themselves in ancient winter solstice practices;<sup>8</sup> however, it is required of Christian believers to celebrate *only* the true Spirit of the season: Jesus Christ—the Light of the world! This Christ, incarnated into our lives, needs to shine through us before all men, so they may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven, (Matthew 5:16). Interestingly, all this can be done marvelously, in the power of the Holy Spirit, apart from seasonal Christmas trimming. May God find you instrumental to His kingdom, as you share His gift of love with a family, a friend or a foe, in this blessed season of Christmas in our pluralistic culture and society! Merry Christmas!

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<sup>7</sup> Aldrich, Joseph C. *Life-Style Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World*, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1981, 81.)

<sup>8</sup>[http://www.religioustolerance.org/winter\\_solstice.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/winter_solstice.htm), accessed 12/14/2010