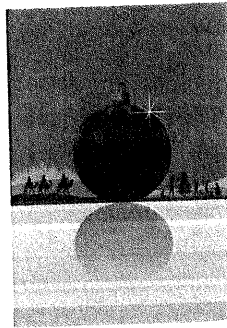


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## CHAPTER 6

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTMAS  
FOR LIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM

Christmas worries some multiculturalists. It shouldn't worry those who are also liberals. Indeed, Christmas can play a small, but significant, role in creating and maintaining a well-ordered, secular, liberal, multicultural society. A multiculturalist is a person who would like to see her society become or remain a multicultural society, a society, that is, that gathers together different cultures and communities within a continuous geographical area and a single political state. Some multiculturalists, in advocating multiculturalism for their societies, would ban Christmas decorations and celebrations from public places. That is, they would ban Christmas from spaces under government control, such as government offices, court houses, and public parks. And they would strongly discourage owners of shopping malls, gas stations, stores, and the like from putting up displays or playing Christmas music. They would do so because they think that to honor Christmas publicly is to privilege a particular tradition, and the constellation of values associated with that tradition, over all the other traditions and constellations of values current in their multicultural society. Privileging that one tradition, they add, disparages other holidays or traditions of celebration, and that, in turn, marginalizes or excludes everyone for whom Christmas is alien. Those who celebrate Christmas should certainly be free to do so, these multiculturalists insist, but they should do so in their own houses or meeting places and on their own time.

Multiculturalists who would ban Christmas from public life might not apply the same reasoning to Chanukah, Muharram, Kwanzaa, or other celebrations or observances that often occur during the Christmas season. Christmas is a mainstream or majority celebration in their societies, while these others belong to minority cultural, ethnic, or religious groups, and that makes a difference. In contemporary multicultural societies, Christmas overshadows these other celebrations or observances. Because these other celebrations and observances exist within minority traditions, shopkeepers, libraries, and municipalities would do well to honor them with displays or greetings. People from minority cultural, ethnic, or religious groups will feel valued and at home were they to note that people in the wider society recognize their celebrations and observances. Perhaps, in time, as people in a society become more aware of other holidays and celebrations, holidays and celebrations outside their own traditions, we could begin again to acknowledge Christmas publicly, for then it would take its place as one among many special times to acknowledge and appreciate in public life. It would no longer dominate other traditions and marginalize their adherents.

Those who propose that Christmas take its place as just one among many sectarian celebrations have overlooked something important, though. They have overlooked the fact that Christmas is not an exclusively Christian holiday any more. For at least three or four generations now, even before the recent waves of immigration and the advent of multiculturalism, Christmas has been evolving into a secular holiday. Nowadays, Christmas is, for many of us, a holiday that has no religious significance at all. In Canada, the United States, Great Britain – in any contemporary multicultural society – millions of people celebrate and enjoy Christmas with nary a religious thought. Christmas, for both the Christians and non-Christians who honor it, is a celebration of good will, generosity, and peace among nations. It is a time to appreciate and enjoy the company of family and friends. Children, of course, are central to Christmas – a great lot of Christmas traditions are devoted to creating fun and excitement for children, and adults get a kick out of seeing the kids enjoying themselves. None of this need have any connection to religion, and for many people none of it does.

Now, for the Christians among us, Christmas marks the birth of Jesus, so it is also an occasion for worship. But it isn't any such occasion for the rest of us. And while the activities and symbols through which we honor and celebrate good will, generosity, peace, family, friends, and children derive from Christian traditions, they now have a life of their



own independent of those traditions. Christmas trees, wreaths, colored lights, candy canes, carols and Christmas music, sleigh rides, presents, Santa Claus – though all of them have their origin in Christian traditions (or, at least, have come to us via Christian traditions), they don't put us in mind of any values or doctrines specifically Christian or religious.

The fact that for many who celebrate it, Christmas is an entirely secular holiday, irks many Christians. They resent that the symbols and practices by which they celebrate the birth of Christ and worship God have, for many people, lost the meanings that they have for Christians. Many Christians are not pleased that there are two holidays that go by the name "Christmas," one that has religious significance and one that doesn't. That the two holidays resemble each other in very many ways has a perfectly simple historical explanation: secular Christmas evolved from religious Christmas as religion declined through the generations. Interestingly, many of the multiculturalists who oppose public Christmas displays are Christians. For them, not only are public celebrations of Christmas insensitive to the non-Christian faithful, but they also confirm and extend the existence of non-religious Christmas. Their opposition to Christmas in the public square has two sources. It stems both from their multiculturalism and from their desire to restore a purely Christian Christmas.

We should note that those of us who celebrate and enjoy secular Christmas agree with the Christians that Christmas is prone to corruption. That corruption goes by the name of commercialization. Secular Christmas is about good will, generosity, peace, and children (it's about everything that religious Christmas is about, save religion); it's not about shopping or outdoing the neighbor's display of lights and ornaments. That's not to deny, of course, the importance that both shopping and lights have in the whole of the celebration, but it is to acknowledge the danger they can pose to the holiday when left unchecked. Christians who take a proprietary interest in Christmas are wrong to think that without religion at its center, Christmas must degenerate into a frenzy of shopping, but they are right that plenty of forces conspire to push it away from the values at its center.

Christmas, to repeat, is for many who celebrate it an entirely secular holiday, devoid of religious significance. So if public displays of Christmas trees or greetings of "Merry Christmas!" privilege some people or exclude others, it is not in virtue of their privileging Christianity or excluding non-Christians. Moreover, what we honor and celebrate at Christmas and through such things as Christmas trees, gift giving, and greetings of



“Merry Christmas!” – good will, generosity, peace, family, friends, children – are important in many traditions and ways of life current in multicultural societies. These values have wide and deep appeal.

Still, a multiculturalist might respond that though it is for many in her society a secular holiday that honors values to which almost everyone subscribes, Christmas is *someone’s* particular celebration of these values and, so, maybe not someone else’s. Christmas, secular Christmas, is a *particular* tradition of celebrating those values. And that fact brings us to the question what sort of multicultural society we would like ours to be.

We ought to distinguish between two sorts of multiculturalism that can be embodied in a society, *liberal* multiculturalism and *communitarian* multiculturalism. A liberal multicultural society is one that takes the individual person as the basic social unit and his or her flourishing as central to questions of social and political arrangements. A communitarian multicultural society is one that takes groups of people or cultures as basic social units and the wellbeing or rights of groups as central to questions of social and political arrangements. Christmas, as a secular holiday, can play a role in creating and maintaining a liberal multicultural society. But why should ours be a liberal multicultural society, or even multicultural in the first place?

Liberal multiculturalism is a wonderful thing – something to enjoy for its own sake and something to protect and extend. To see why, let us think for a moment about diversity, something which many who identify themselves as multiculturalists seem to cherish, but which, at least as I think, is something to which we should be indifferent. Diversity is not something that should matter to us one way or the other. For many people, the terms “multiculturalism” and “diversity” are synonymous. So let me explain the distinction I mean to mark by them. A liberal multicultural society is one in which people are free and able to live as members of the cultures with which they identify. To be liberally multicultural, then, a society cannot place barriers between people and the ways of life they wish to live. It must be a society that respects wide freedoms of thought and expression and assembly, and it must respect freedom of movement, freedom of dress, and freedom of manners. That is, it must be organized to honor traditional liberal values. But not only must a society, if it is to be multicultural, not interfere with people’s choices how to live. It must also help people to live the lives they choose. That is, it must provide plenty of public space in which people can come together, it must support media such as newspapers and television programs, through which the people of a culture can talk to each other and to people outside

their groups, it must support minority tastes in food, dress, education, recreation, and the rest. Without such help, social, political, and economic pressures might well push a society toward cultural homogeneity against the wishes of its people.

Diversity, on the other hand, is about having in each public realm people from many of the different cultural groups present in the society at large. Diversity in the workplace, then, consists in white, brown, and black people, men and women, straights and gays, atheists and Christians, people of Lebanese heritage and people of Ecuadorian heritage, old and young, working together in the same building or factory. Diversity in the university or in the classroom consists in people of lots of different types and cultures learning together. To support diversity in jobs, housing, education, and the rest, one must actively recruit and promote people from groups underrepresented in each particular sector of a society. Each university or fire department or softball league is at its best, for one who values diversity, when it reflects in the make-up of its members the demographic make-up of the larger society in which it is found.

A commitment to liberal multiculturalism comes directly as an expression of a commitment to three fundamental values. Those of us who value respect for individuals as individuals, who value equality before the law and equality of opportunity, and who value decency must be strongly committed to multiculturalism. We express our respect for individuals as individuals by acknowledging that their ends are as significant to them as our ends are to us and, then, by refraining from manipulating them as they pursue their ends. We express our respect for equality of opportunity by requiring that all public positions be available to anyone on the basis of fair criteria alone. Decency has to do with allowing another person's hardship or pain to take precedence over one's mere inconvenience or discomfort. We are decent when we do not hoard what others can use to make their lives better or when rather than use our resources to indulge our small desires we contribute them to alleviating suffering. If we respect others, we will leave them free to pursue whatever way of life they will; if we are also decent, we will happily contribute resources toward enabling each of us to live as he or she will. That is why we value multiculturalism. We want people to live as they will and we want that they have what they need to live as they will.

So why, then, would one value diversity? What reason could one have for thinking diversity itself a worthy goal to pursue? Partisans of diversity offer instrumental reasons for valuing it, reasons for valuing diversity that take it to be a tool useful in realizing other ends. One is that diversity



makes for a dynamic workplace, one able to respond well to challenges and opportunities. Likewise, diversity in the classroom leads to a better education for all through the clash of values and viewpoints. The evidence seems, though, to be that diversity costs businesses more money than it produces. And if the clash of viewpoints and values promotes education, then what is at work are the values and viewpoints themselves, not the differences in skin color or manners. But perhaps these instrumental reasons for valuing diversity do after all have merit. The question is one for economists and other social scientists to settle. They might discover that the costs are low and the benefits high. In any case, instrumental reasons for valuing diversity do not amount to reasons for thinking it valuable in itself. There doesn't seem to be any reason for valuing diversity for its own sake.

Now certainly a multicultural society will be, at least in most areas most of the time, a diverse society. A commitment to a multicultural society, because it is a commitment to respect, fairness, and decency, would lead to diverse workplaces and universities and other institutions. That a workplace or whatever does not reflect the cultures of the society as a whole can be taken, though only *prima facie*, as evidence of a lack of commitment to multiculturalism. But that through a commitment to multiculturalism each workplace and public institution became as diverse as the society as a whole would mean nothing one way or the other to those of us who value multiculturalism. What matters to us is that each person is making a life for him or herself as best as he or she can without interference and without surrendering her values or identity.

Perhaps this difference can be brought out by an example. Suppose that a partisan of diversity for its own sake and a partisan of multiculturalism for its own sake are together at a gathering – a public lecture, for instance, or a political rally or a parade or a concert or a restaurant. Let's suppose that each notices that there are very few black people present. The partisan of diversity thinks "this gathering should be more diverse. There should be more black people here." The partisan of multiculturalism, though, has a more complex thought. "Are there black people," she wonders, "who would enjoy what is happening here but who are not here? If so, what are the barriers preventing them from being here? Let us identify those barriers and bring them down. But maybe," she continues, "people who aren't here simply don't want to be here. Maybe they would rather be elsewhere, doing other things. In that case, are they able to gather to do what they want to do as easily as the people here were able to gather?" Her goal is that no one who wants to be somewhere be excluded from being there.



I indicated above that I can't see why one would value diversity for its own sake, and I noted that instrumental reasons for caring about diversity are doubtful. Even more, though, I worry that valuing diversity has bad consequences. What's at stake is whether we are to value people as individuals or to value them as representatives of a type. The liberal multiculturalist is concerned about people as individuals. She understands, of course, that for many of us our individual flourishing is intimately connected to the flourishing of others within the groups with which we identify. Nonetheless, it is your flourishing as the particular person you are that moves her. The partisan of diversity, on the other hand, looks at you and sees a representative of a group. It is the flourishing of your group that moves her. You yourself don't matter.

Before returning to Christmas, let us summarize our discussion of liberal multiculturalism and diversity. Liberal multiculturalism, stemming from respect, equality, and decency, upholds the worth of each individual person, as the individual person he or she is. Because individuals are who they are to a large extent in virtue of their identifying with one and another culture, multiculturalists are interested in protecting and advancing the different cultures within their societies, but only as a means towards individual flourishing. So where does Christmas enter into this? What reason have we to think that Christmas has a role to play in fostering and maintaining a liberal multicultural society? We can imagine a multicultural society in which no celebrations or holidays are public celebrations or holidays. There are, perhaps, statutory holidays, such that everyone gets off work the first Monday of every third month. Or maybe each of us just gets a certain number of days off work each year to take when she or he chooses, so that people can coordinate with others of their culture to celebrate together their own particular holidays. Each of us, in that system, congregates with others of her group when according to her traditions or authorities it's time to honor something, and we engage in whatever activities our particular tradition or authorities would have us engage in.

In the sort of multicultural society we are imagining, some cultural groups might invite outsiders to be with them on certain celebration days; perhaps some groups have a fair that anyone who wants to attend can attend. Other cultural groups might instead just have one of the elders write an article for the city newspaper describing that group and its ways, and explaining what that group is honoring. We find a lot of this sort of thing in our society today – articles by local imams, for instance, explaining Ramadan, or features on the Hindu festival Diwali.



Multiculturalists advocate devoting public money and public facilities to assist people in conducting their celebration or observance, and not only for the economic gain of attracting tourists or creating good will. So, in the sort of society we are imagining, though various cultural groups may well engage in one or another sort of outreach to other cultural groups and to the society as a whole, nevertheless no celebration is by everyone for everyone.

This would, I think, be what we would find in a society that embodies the principles and ideals of communitarian multiculturalism, the sort of multiculturalism that insists on the separateness of cultural groups and values cultural groups for the ways of life they represent rather than as modes through which individual people seek to flourish. The groups are separate, and there is no common identity as citizens of a society. Indeed, for the communitarian multiculturalist, a common identity is impossible – perhaps not in principle, but at least in practice in contemporary societies, given the wide differences in traditions, if not also in values, that mark such societies. What might seem a common identity would really be just another particular identity, though one that imposes itself upon others. For the communitarian multiculturalist, then, a common holiday is a threat, a threat to the integrity of particular cultural groups. A common holiday – that is, a common celebration, a holiday with a particular meaning and not just a day off for everyone – could not but be an imposition by one cultural group on all the others.

In another sort of multicultural society, though, a *liberal* multicultural society, some holidays or celebrations *are* common, public events – events funded and organized by or through civil authorities acting on mandates from governments. These holidays would, of course, have to honor values important to most people in the country and to honor them in ways people from various cultures find congenial, or else they would attract few participants. In this second sort of multicultural society, a few holidays, maybe only two or three a year, belong to *all* the people. They are times when everyone gets together to enjoy themselves and to enjoy each other – and to enjoy themselves and each other through participating in common traditions. In a liberal multicultural society some celebrations will be common celebrations because a liberal multicultural society will feature a common, or at least widespread, public life. This common life will be based on the liberal ethos, the three values of respect for individuals, equality before the law and equality of opportunity, and decency. The common life will first of all, of course, be lived in and expressed by important social institutions: schools, government, work places, the law,



and the courts. And yet secondary manifestations of it in, for instance, communal recreation and celebrations, will play an important role in solidifying the liberal ethos.

This sort of multicultural society, the liberal multicultural society, is much more attractive than the communitarian sort. There are two reasons why this is so. The first is simply that the communitarian multicultural society is apt to breed envy and rancor within itself. Each cultural group will be concerned for its own wellbeing and see other cultural groups as hostile toward it. Communitarian multicultural societies will be marked by the ills of identity politics and the cult of the victim. A communitarian society certainly might evolve political, legal, and social mechanisms to prevent it from falling apart and to enable it to function. But such a society will not be able to generate loyalty to or love of the society itself, given that these mechanisms won't touch the fact that each group is envious of what the others possess and jealous of its own property and resources.

The second reason why liberal multiculturalism is more attractive is that liberal values, and the ways of life that honor them, are attractive just in themselves. The people in a liberal multicultural society enjoy whatever group identities they have, just as do those in a communitarian society. They are free and welcome to honor their distinct identities. But they also see themselves as citizens of a country and view their neighbors as fellow citizens. In a communitarian multicultural society, people see themselves merely as residing among their neighbors, not as connected to them through projects of citizenship. On the other hand, in a liberal multicultural society, the political, legal, and social mechanisms that evolve in order to deal with disputes and conflicts will not represent merely a *modus vivendi*, a method of securing the peace. They will, instead, encourage loyalty and love, for these mechanisms will be expressions of respect, equality, and decency.

So what might a holiday that all of us celebrate together look like? What traditions and practices would be appropriate to a holiday whose values touch all the members of a liberal multicultural society? An obvious candidate is the secular holiday known as Christmas. If we want to have a few holidays that belong to all of us and that all of us can enjoy, I say we make Christmas one of them. Christmas has been evolving into a secular holiday for decades. Now, though, there's pressure from both Christians and communitarian multiculturalists to reverse the trend. Some people would have us say "Season's greetings" rather than "Merry Christmas," or to say nothing at all to those outside our particular cultural



groups. They would deny us Christmas trees in public areas and Christmas music in the shopping malls. Some of them think, wrongly, that Christmas in countries such as the United States and Canada is properly a Christian affair, and they want to preserve it for the Christians. Many of these people are Christians themselves, upset at what they see happening to their holy day. Others recognize that Christmas isn't only for Christians anymore, but then object to it on the grounds that it is still a particular tradition of a specific culture. They espouse a communitarian form of multiculturalism, in which any common tradition within a society must be symptom and cause of one culture's dominating others. Both the Christians and the communitarians would undo the good work people have done over the decades to transform Christmas into a celebration that's moving and fun for everyone in our multicultural societies. Willingly or not, these people are helping to make all celebrations in our various countries small, sectarian, private affairs. I say we instead take up the noble task of continuing to offer Christmas to all as a delightful secular holiday that we enjoy together and at which we honor values we all cherish.

Let us, then, say "Merry Christmas" to each other and decorate Christmas trees in public places. And let us explain to anyone who worries that our behavior will offend or exclude someone that while Christmas does have its origins in Christian traditions, and was once the property of a particular, majority culture, the Christmas we celebrate is not at all a Christian or a religious holiday or even a specific culture's holiday. Christmas now belongs to all of us, no one is excluded from it, it privileges no particular religious or other tradition. Secular Christmas, we will tell them, expresses the liberal values that underpin our multiculturalism.