

Christmas isn't for everyone

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Every December, I suppress a flash of irritation at the well-meaning folks who wish my family and me a Merry Christmas. "Why do they assume we're all Christian?" I ask in frustration.

I feel similarly when visiting the National Gallery of Canada, where taxpayer dollars support a towering Christmas tree in the main foyer, or when Santa thrills the children in a government-funded agency.

Many view Christmas as a secular symbol; the trees and stars, they say, have little or nothing to do with Jesus. Christmas, in this view, is a celebration all Canadians can enjoy. Others even think the country has become too politically correct, removing too many prayers and symbols from public places.

For secular non-Christians, this "Christmas is not Christian" argument should, at first glance, convince.

Although my parents are Jewish, I married a non-Jew, and follow few of my religion's strictures, but I've never found the "Christmas is everyone's" argument persuasive. As my children ask more probing questions about the world around them, it increasingly seems narrow-minded and even intolerant.

I've done research in India, Serbia, Israel and Turkey, and in each of these countries, I've heard similar arguments from dominant group members. Although these are all mixed-faith countries, individuals in the majority tend to see their own group's unique symbols as "general" and "inclusive."

Canadians of Christian background, religious and secular alike, should recognize that for some fellow citizens, the symbols of Christmas are exclusionary, no matter how many times they are assured that the tree, Santa, and brightly coloured lights have nothing to do with Jesus.

Consider this: When you walk down a street, do you implicitly assume a correlation between the presence of multi-coloured lights on the front of a house, and at least one household member being from a Christian background?

The answer, most likely, is yes. It is a fair guess, although there are surely many exceptions.

Do you also believe that those lights signal deep religious conviction? Surely not; many of those who string up lights do not believe in a Christian God or consider themselves to be observant.

The same is true for homes with a Menorah in the window. Although there is likely to be at least one Jewish person in the house, little can be inferred about that individual's level of religiosity.

Canadian citizens who are Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others are often "secular," but that does not mean they feel identical to all secular Canadians of Christian background.

Menorahs and Christmas lights are markers of group identity, not religiosity. They signal the potential existence of shared histories, stories, migration patterns, and political events.

Group markers do not imply that everyone thinks alike, but they do suggest that group members share key points of reference.

As an academic, I'm wary of making claims unsupported by strong empirical evidence. Still, it seems reasonable to suggest that many secular Jews would view the placement of multicoloured lights in their windows as bizarre and intrusive.

In Canada, lights of this kind suggest membership in the group of Christian-background Canadians. Unless Jews are in a mixed marriage, they are not likely to signal their identity in this way.

In privately funded spaces, Canadians of any faith should and do feel comfortable when displaying their group's symbols. Heterogeneity of this sort suggests Canada is a zone of tolerance and peace, where anyone can display her identity without fear, and in a world marred by religious conflict, this is no mean feat.

When specific group symbols are displayed in public or taxpayer-funded spaces, however, they take on a more ominous tone. They symbolically reinforce the majority's dominance, and tacitly signal the minority's inferiority.

To me, the national art gallery's glorious, taxpayer-supported Christmas tree is not a symbol of joy. Instead, it sends a clear -- if unintended -- message: "You and your children are different, and your traditions are neither known nor welcome. In this country, our national institutions support the majority's symbols. If you don't like that we're sorry, but too bad."

If we can't devise a truly common symbol of celebration, perhaps we should have no taxpayer-funded symbols at all. Although this may upset many, this could be the price of real, as opposed to superficial, tolerance.

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