

circumstance, even a program one writes oneself. Instead of taking part in rituals, we take rituals apart. There is, to be sure, a sense of loss—like Campbell, we probably will not achieve the *satori* or perfect bliss of a saint, or perhaps even the comfort found in communal worship. We are like Toto, pulling aside the curtain to see what mechanisms are

behind the puff and smoke. After doing so, it is hard to bow to the great and powerful Oz.

Still, a life devoted to reason has its pleasures. There is the joy of discovery in examining the many-faceted mores of human beings. And there is a social function as well. It is often those who are outside of a given practice who are

best able to see its worth. As Santayana perceptively pointed out, “Reason is powerless to found religions, although it is alone competent to judge them.”

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The Trouble with Christmas

Thomas Flynn

As associate editor of *FREE INQUIRY* and co-editor of *Secular Humanist Bulletin*, I’ve gotten to know atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secular humanists, rationalists, and other infidels from all over the world. A distressing number of them celebrate Christmas or some analogous festival like the winter solstice. In my opinion, we would all do better to sit out yule.

It is too much trouble to defy the holiday altogether, these infidels tell me. Some argue that, though Christmas is admittedly shot through with superstitions, only the explicitly Christian elements are worth opposing. After all, it is fundamentalist Christians, not Druid priests, who are electing creationists to school boards, banning textbooks, and bending the Constitution to their beliefs. So why waste energy trying to stamp out the pagan solstice? Yet if we infidels are committed to truth and critical thinking, how can we condemn certain superstitions and embrace others? Doing so seems counterproductive if we wish to be taken seriously as proponents of rational living.

The Solstice: A Workable Alternative?

Some infidels feel they get the best of both worlds by observing the winter solstice. Is the winter solstice a brilliant compromise? Does it let infidels join society’s biggest party without betraying their beliefs?

I don’t think so. What do we gain by ousting one outmoded superstitious



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observance from our lives if we replace it with an even older superstition? I can’t get excited just because the days are getting longer. What *does* excite me is that, thanks to science and technology, most of us get through the winter painlessly. If infidels want a humanistic celebration, let’s not celebrate the supine hope that spring will soon return, which amounts to obsessing on human impotence before the elements. Instead let us celebrate our human achievement in keeping them at bay. What images and rituals might be appropriate for such a celebration of mastery? The traditional festivals, including winter solstice, traded in human helplessness. I doubt they will have much to offer.

Infidels should hold out for something more creative and less corrupted by pre-Christian superstition than the winter solstice.

Do as I Say, Not as I Do

As members of an unpopular outgroup, we should consider the message we send the larger culture when we yield so easily to Christmas. In multicultural America outgroups get respect by highlighting their differences, not by hiding them. Accommodation earns only contempt.

Ultimately, *any* festive observance at the end of the year, whether winter solstice or Chanukah, strikes mainstream Christians as acquiescence in the holiday as *they* perceive it. Our careful silences are drowned out once we join in the common shout. If non-Christians keep feasts so much like Christmas that the difference goes unnoticed, the myth of religious and philosophical unanimity in American life is reinforced. More evidence for the “America is a Christian nation” gang! “Look,” I can imagine Pat Buchanan saying as he spots a Christmas tree in another atheist’s window, “Everyone’s Judeo-Christian at Christmas time.”

We infidels have a stirring, even inspiring message. We tell of an undesigned, unintended, and unmanaged universe filled with possibility. We proclaim that this life is all we have, that the only meanings we can depend on are the ones we create for ourselves. We embody the ideals of life and love without religion. Yet who will listen to us if we appear as hypocrites because we cannot muster the will to forgo a holiday whose history and principles we would reject in any other setting?

I cannot think of a more graphic way

for atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, and secular humanists to “out themselves” than for large numbers of us to live our beliefs openly, and unmistakably sit out the winter holidays.

Zero-Basing: Why Have Christmas at All?

One way to shake off the effects of past accommodation is what feminists call “getting outside the culture.” It is an intellectual and emotional process of peeling away the assumptions, prejudices, and past accommodations that have accreted onto one’s life. I call it “zero-basing,” after the accounting principle of zero-based budgeting. In ordinary budgeting, you draw up each new year’s budget by altering last year’s; old decisions that informed that budget get validated without review. Zero-based budgeting solves this problem by starting from scratch. Nothing is carried forward; each line-item starts from a base of zero and must justify its base allocation anew.

Try it. Imagine zero-basing your life. Regard the unthinkable and laugh. Uproot your deepest assumptions to see what’s underneath. Conceive a method of inquiry that owes nothing to the old transcendental assumptions you have rejected. Feel free to try anything new, to reject the familiar, to follow inquiry where it leads. If you could go through the cafeteria line of life all over again, wholly unfettered, would you put Christmas on your tray?

“I’m not unfettered,” comes the objection. “I have kids. I can’t just chuck it all and say that they won’t have a Christmas any more.”

To which I can say only, Why not? Why not rescue their young minds from the burden of superstition and false expectations past Christmases have imposed? Why not spare the very young the whole dubious experience from the start?

One might worry that raising children Yule-free may create a forbidden fruit effect, priming them to adopt Christmas and the religion it symbolizes all the more ardently when teen rebellion sets in. If true, it is the only compelling argument against denying infidel children the holiday. Perhaps it was true decades ago,

when an overwhelming majority of Americans kept Christmas in a distinctly Christian way. As American non-Christian religious groups grow in influence, we can expect traditional Christmas to seem less like the culture’s default holiday. When infidel children can view Christmas as “something that some other people do,” not as “something everybody but us gets to do,” the lure of forbidden fruit will lose much of its sting.

There is another flaw in the forbidden fruit argument. By definition, infidels have chosen to give up much that makes other people comfortable—the idea of personal immorality, for example. If we try to spare our children everything that might lead them to envy religionists, sooner or later we will wind up restoring guardian angels, life after death, heaven and hell, and indulgences. At some point we have to stop squirming, accept our differentness, and admit it to our kids.

Holidays at All: A Bad Idea

While we’re zero-basing, let’s move briefly beyond Christmas and ask a really broad question. If we were starting from scratch, might we opt to do without holidays altogether? Have we humans grown up so far, so fast, that we no longer have need of festivals and for the ritual and ceremony that went with them?

Our ancient holidays developed in a world of mystery and privation quite unlike the world most of us inhabit today. Consider the revolution that science, technology, and the naturalistic worldview has wrought. Today, at least in the First World, most humans die of old age. Most children live to become adults. There is usually enough to eat. Many diseases are curable. Small families are sufficient to ensure that society goes on. Men and women can view the phenomena of nature with understanding and respect, instead of with superstition and uncomprehending fear. Even when a natural disaster is unavoidable, there is often advance warning. Aid comes quickly, and the victims can confront their experience fortified by their understanding of the physical processes involved. Moderns whose homes are destroyed by a storm, earthquake, or

tornado are still homeless, but at least they are not simultaneously homeless and mystified as to what hostile spirit has done this to them.

We should never underestimate the progress this represents. It is utterly unprecedented. It overthrows all the pessimistic assumptions about life that guided hundreds of thousands of years of biological and social evolution. Life is far from perfect, but the terms on which it is lived have changed more in the last two hundred years than in all the rest of human history. I suspect that they have changed so drastically that the whole idea of a holiday—that is, a special day set aside from the humdrum grind of life for the enjoyment of socially approved excess—no longer serves real social or emotional needs.

Spree of gluttony whenever possible made sense in cultures attuned to privation. Do they make sense in a culture of plenty? Or is the very idea of a holiday irrelevant when so many of us live lives of agreeable consumption day in and day out?

When we confront the modern world of purpose and possibility, we cannot know for certain what is right. But we can know that almost without exception, our instinctive assumptions, our received social forms, our musty rituals and ancient traditions are *wrong*. They developed in response to and were superbly attuned to a world of mystery and limited expectations that no longer exists. Consequently, whatever may be the appropriate social and cultural response to the conditions of modern life, it is far more likely to be an innovation yet unthought of than to be any hand-me-down of our past.

Yet can humans really live without all these happy irrationalities? Don’t they scratch psychological itches that burn deep inside us? Don’t we need all those little lies to insulate us from the sterile truth that the universe doesn’t give a damn for us? If we confront *that* truth too directly, mustn’t we go mad?

I have heard that argument advanced by thoughtful humanists who believe that people are not yet ready to cast away their myths. Of course, I hear the same argument from religionists defending the “necessity” of believing in life after death,

eternal justice, faith healing, or the power of tea leaves to foretell the future. How can I accept an argument from humanists that I reject from the religious?

Self-awareness, reason, language, science, and technology have given human beings the power to change their world faster than biological evolution can keep up with. It is up to us to update our natures, to remake ourselves in the image of the world we are creating as we go. Why us? There is no one else. Why not wait for nature? It is too slow. If we try to limit intellectual evolution to biology's pace, our ingenuity will surely kill us.

The Answer to Christmas

After all we've seen of the trouble with Christmas, what is the answer? For infidels, the most appropriate answer is "Ho ho ho? Thanks. I'll pass."

More atheists, freethinkers, and secular humanists need to treat Christmas as "just another day." Skip the feasts. Sit out the exchange of gifts. Put in a normal day's work if you can. Infidelity is hard for believers to take seriously when its advocates so visibly cashier their principles rather than pass up an excuse to eat, drink, and be merry.

A respectful but uncompromising denial of Christmas is consistent with most infidels' convictions about religion and rationality. What most of us do instead is not. Living without religion, without ritual, and without superstition may seem more attractive to members of other communities when we carry *ourselves* consistently and look comfortable doing it.

Some infidels find my approach overzealous. They think it carries too high an emotional cost. Or they think it's too much work. They dismiss it as one more case of throwing out the babe with the bathwater. Yet many of us—certainly those of us who gave up Christianity to become infidels—threw out the Babe long ago. The mystery is, Why are we so reluctant to part with the bathwater?

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A National Day of Blame

Norm R. Allen, Jr.

During the Thanksgiving season last year, I did a lot of thinking about this special day of thanks. Americans routinely thank God for historically blessing the United States with land, abundant harvests, health, wealth, and many other good and desirable things.

But I have come to the conclusion that if it is good to thank God for the good things in life, it is only fair and fitting that we blame Him for the bad things. After all, God would likely be insulted if we were to lower our own standards of accountability just for His sake. I therefore propose a National Day of Blame (which could possibly be held the day following Thanksgiving).

On this special day we could blame God for either causing or refusing to prevent natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and volcanic eruptions. We could blame him for either causing or refusing to prevent cancer and various other devastating diseases. We could blame Him for hardening the hearts of pharaohs, rapists, muggers, murderers, war mongers, and various other mischief makers. We could blame Him for promoting sexism, patriarchy, slavery, parochialism, and genocide. We could blame him for being inconsistent and contradictory in his sacred texts.

We could also ask God many questions—and demand logical answers. We could ask him why, if he is responsible for our plentiful harvests, does he not bless starving Africans, Asians, Central Americans, and South Americans for a change. And why did he decide to destroy *all* life on the planet with the Deluge, though only human beings were supposedly responsible for the planet's mismanagement? We could ask why, if Eve had to be punished with pain during childbirth, were *all* women consequently cursed? Furthermore, why did God curse *all* female animals with pain during childbirth, simply because one woman "sinned"?

There are also many questions about war we could ask him. If he helped us to "win" the war against Iraq, why did he cause us to lose in Vietnam? And why did he wait until after Hitler killed millions to make us victorious in World War II? And most of all, why did he bless us with the nuclear bomb which today threatens our very survival?

Certainly, if we have much for which we should be thankful, it logically follows that there may be much for which we should be angry. Perhaps on this special day we could initiate contests for those who have the most to complain about. Perhaps we could even have special interest groups present God with a long list of grievances. Native Americans could ask why God "blessed" America at their expense. African Americans could ask why God blessed America via the Middle Passage.

Borrowing from Catholicism, we could have nationwide confessions. People could go to their moral leaders and say things like: "I blame God for blessing me with a job, and then allowing my factory to go bankrupt, leaving me poorer than I have ever been in my life." Or, "I blame God for saving my life when my house was on fire, while he allowed my other family members to die in the fire." Or, "I blame God for blessing me with the talent to become a champion boxer, only so I could go on to suffer permanent brain damage at the end of my career."

A National Day of Blame. What a concept! But will the Congress go for it? Probably not. But that does not mean that we cannot recognize it in our own way without official approval.

The National Day of Blame is an idea whose time has come. I strongly suggest that all Americans observe it—just for the sake of consistency.

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