

## To whom does Christmas belong?

Is God's grace just for Christians?

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM



We Christians have a way of acting, well, exclusive, when it comes to our holidays.

Maybe it's because there are so few sacred seasons left anymore. First it was Halloween, once celebrated as the sacred eve of All Saints Day, now a time of witches and demons.

Then it was St. Patrick's Day which quickly deteriorated to the wearing-of-the-green and good luck in four-leaf clovers.

St. Valentine's Day followed suit, moving from a time of sacred celebration to candy boxes and sweetheart cards.

Thanksgiving, once a unique American holiday when the entire nation came together to worship God and give thanks, is now dominated by football, turkeys and more football.

Even Easter has gone secular, with more emphasis on rabbits than the resurrection.

The Jews, it seems, have been able to hold on to their sacred times much better than we Christians. Yom Kippur, Purim and the Passover remain times of sacred meaning.

Hanukkah, the festival of lights, lingers in all Jewish minds as a great memory of a great people who overcame even greater hardships.

But Christians have let their religious holidays slip into the realm of the secular, until much of the meaning is lost in busy commercial endeavors.

Thus, when Christmas rolls around and it seems everyone from Minnie Pearl to Bloomberg's Department Store wants in on the act, well maybe you can understand why Christians get a little puffed up.

After all, this is THEIR holiday. Christ is the heart of Christmas. What right do others—Jews, Arabs and people who never go to church—have to get in on the act?

And it does seem a bit strange, sometimes. My friend, Ike Kornblat who owns a department store, and never, never goes to church (in fact, he never even goes to his synagogue) called me over to his cash register last Christmas Eve when I was making some last-minute purchases.

Rubbing his hands as he punched the keys on his ancient register, he chuckled. "Do you know what my favorite song is in December? It's 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus.'"

I laughed with him, but someone standing nearby was offended. When we got out on the sidewalk he made it very plain that even though he shopped at Kornblat's Discount Store, he didn't appreciate the way this Jewish merchant took advantage of our "Christian holiday."

I remember several years ago when country singer Judy Collins picked up an

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old Christian hymn, "Amazing Grace," and turned it into the number-one hit song in the nation.

At that time there was a lot of self-righteous grumbling from Christians who seemed horrified that "Amazing Grace" was being sung in honky-tonks by singers high on drugs, or sandwiched between rock 'n' roll songs on a Top-40 radio station.

Yet, isn't God's grace for all? If the good news of salvation were limited to churches, not very many people would have a chance.

In the final say, then, to whom does Christmas belong?

Last Christmas Eve Jackie and I were standing in our front yard. A group of carolers from the church had just pulled out and we were standing in the darkness, thinking how fortunate we were to live in a nation where Christmas caroling was allowed.

Softly, we heard the strains of "Joy To The World" wafting through the woods next

to our house. At first I thought the carolers had stopped out on the road and were singing again. Then I recognized the music was coming from our next door neighbors' place.

We live in the country. Next door to our property is a retreat center for a Hindu group known as Yoga Shakti. They are mostly young people who have worked hard and built a small chapel which is surrounded by several acres of garden. Several times a year Yogis from all over the region gather to listen to their guru, a Hindu woman who comes from India to teach. Christmas is one of those occasions.

That night the Yogis, dressed in orange saris, playing wooden flutes and banging cymbals and tambourines, were dancing around in a circle in front of their little chapel singing:

"Joy to the world, the Lord has come  
"Let earth receive her King."

I was offended. They had taken one of "our" songs and were singing it as though it belonged to them.

But to whom does Christmas belong?

To the Christian?

Should manger scenes be limited to church lobbies or are they welcome in Jewish shop windows, the bars at motels, and in the foyer at Macy's?

Should Christmas carols be sung only by choirboys, or is "Silent Night" appropriate in night clubs as well—even when sung by those half drunk? And is the good news—the "joy to the world"—also for the Yogis?

Was it not to Jewish shepherds the first angels appeared? Did they not proclaim, "For unto YOU a child is born . . . ?" So, maybe Christmas really belongs to the Jews.

Was it not Arab wisemen who came from far off Iraq and Iran, bringing gifts to the Christchild? Perhaps, then, Christmas belongs to the Arabs?

And what about those Yogis?

To whom does Christmas belong?

Like God's grace, it belongs to all mankind. Let all the voices sing. Let all the merry bells ring out. Let joy flow like wine and let all the people—those who say "Shalom," those who say "Salaam," and those who simply smile, wave flowers and say "Peace brother"—raise their glasses (or tambourines) in a common toast to God.

Christ is born.  
Hallelujah! ↵