

Scholar explains how Christians and non-Christians can begin to understand one other

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Ah, the Christmas season. It's the most wonderful time of the year. A time to celebrate peace, love and the religious beliefs of America's religious majority – whether you like it or not.

While some [Christians](#) may declare there's a war on Christmas and choose to proclaim their faith with the shout of a [billboard](#), some [atheists](#) find it an equally opportune time to boldly express their disdain for the holiday that has been foisted upon them.

There may be no easy solutions to this modern-day religious war, but one religious [historian](#) says that we all might be a little better off if we simply took the time to try and understand one another.

"Whatever side a person comes down on in this argument, I would encourage them to try and see the other's point of view and the complexity of the debate," says Leigh [Eric Schmidt](#), the Edward Mallinckrodt University Professor at Washington University in St. Louis, who joined the university's John C. Danforth Center on Religion & Politics in 2011. "A basic level of civility is a good idea."

That civility is often missing on both sides of the argument, Schmidt says.

"I don't think insulting billboards or rants from atheist comedians are a particularly good way of engaging people, since they are designed to be sensational instead of substantial," he says. "On the other hand, you can

see why atheists and non-believers have a chip on their shoulders in this culture. They have been a persecuted minority, and there were laws designed to suppress non-belief for a long time. Many people believe that this is a Christian nation and others should just keep their mouths shut."

Then how should we talk to one another about this? Or is it best to adhere to the adage of not discussing religion and politics in polite company?

"I think there are ways to get people to talk about their differences more constructively," says Schmidt, author of numerous books on American religion, including *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton University Press, 1995). "Non-believers need to hear how believers feel insulted by their remarks and, in turn, Christians need to hear all the ways in which non-believers feel slighted. There needs to be some understanding about why both groups seem so angry at one another. They need to understand where this anger comes from."

If we're going to move beyond this animosity, we need to start considering a different set of questions, Schmidt says. Questions like: Is it good for it to be so easy to laugh at another's religious belief? Should we be able to insult the faith of others as a free speech issue? How do different religious minorities cope with Christmas and the dilemmas that Christmas produces? What kind of sensitivity do we owe each other?

But civility, Schmidt says, doesn't mean foregoing rigorous debate for the sake niceness. While being respectful, both sides must be able to forcefully make their claims to being right.

"You can only press the point about respect for each other's feelings so far because there has to be some ground somewhere where you have the capacity to make this claim that others are wrong," says Schmidt, who

previously held professorships at both Harvard and Princeton Universities. "You have to be able to make claims about what you really stand for, whether that is freedom of speech or civil liberties."

Relatedly, among Christians one of the most common holiday rituals is the annual bemoaning that the "Christian-ness" of the holiday is disappearing. To that point, Schmidt says people need to think more complexly beyond, "we're all going to hell in a hand basket."

Historically, he points out, many mainline Protestant denominations such as Congregationalists and Presbyterians didn't celebrate Christmas at all because they saw it as pagan and Catholic, and often an occasion for drunken street festivals.

"They didn't want it there at all," he says. "They thought Christian time should be organized Sunday to Sunday, Sabbath to Sabbath. They had a very even sense of what Christian time looked like, and that was without this big spike of activity around Christmas and Easter."

As Protestant and Catholic tensions lessened in America, the two sides began to agree more and more on this idea of "keeping Christ in Christmas," Schmidt says, making the campaign a more powerful and ecumenical cause.

"It became one more way that Christians could make a claim on the public culture," he says. "It's useful for people to talk about this and not just fall into the easy narrative of, 'we were once Christian and now were not as Christian as we used to be,' and 'it's so terrible that Christmas isn't what it once was and that we're all selling out to secularism.' But there are a lot of things that Christians can still feel good about in regard to how Christmas is being celebrated."

Schmidt says that Gallup polling shows that Christmas Eve and

Christmas services, carol singing and nativity scenes all remain very popular, even among irregular churchgoers.

"We have this discussion every year but we have to keep having it because there's a deeper anxiety out there about the place of Christianity in our culture, and Christmas becomes the occasion to worry about that," Schmidt says. "In some ways, it's the perfect place and time to worry about it because Christianity is so prominent during Christmas and, at the same time, also so clouded by everything else that's going on. It's a wonderful metaphor for Christianity's ambiguous place in American culture."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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