



# HAJJ, HALLOWEEN, HANUKKAH, AND HOSANNA! IF THERE IS A WAR ON CHRISTMAS, CHRISTMAS IS WINNING

It is the end of October and Walter Harris of Decatur, Georgia is out shopping for gardening supplies in order to prepare his lawn for fall seeding. Cool season grasses like fescue grow best in the southeast if they are planted between mid-September and late October when the weather is still warm enough for germination, but not so hot that the seedlings will perish after sprouting. Imagine Harris's surprise when he walked into his local Home Depot to find an enormous display of Christmas lights and winter holiday decorations. "Excuse me," he said to the orange-aproned employee, "can you tell me where to find grass seed and

turf builder?" After getting the directions, Harris picked up a large box of energy-efficient, LED icicle-lights, then walked past the display of artificial Christmas trees and out the double doors into the garden shop where he found what he had come for.

This year's holiday season has thrown its first pitch even before Baseball's World Series has picked a champion. But what exactly is the "holiday season" anyway? And shouldn't it really be called the "Christmas" season?

Part of the answer depends on which calendar we use. The Julian calendar, created by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE was based on a solar cycle of 365.25 days in a year. But by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the calendar was off by 10 days because the Earth actually takes 365.2425 days to orbit the Sun. Pope Gregory proposed a new counting system that would correct the past calculation error, but it would involve adding in the 10 lost days all at once. Thus, March 10, 1582 was immediately followed by March 21. But not every country came on board at once. Britain and its North American colonies, for instance, did not adopt the "Gregorian" calendar until 1752 when Wednesday, September 2 was followed immediately by Thursday, September 14. Even today, however, many religious groups still follow the older Julian calendar. Add to this the Hebrew and Muslim traditions of following lunar calendars based on a year of 354 days, and we find that our most celebrated annual holidays seem

to be jumping around all over the place!

Let's just say, then, that the traditional holiday season in most of the Western world falls roughly in the last couple of months of the "solar" year. That would mean that the most important Muslim holiday, Eid al-Adha, which is tied to the lunar calendar and is takes place following the annual Hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca, did not make it into the season this year since it began on October 15. In Biblical/Quranic tradition, God tested the faith of the prophet Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son. At the last minute, God stopped Abraham from killing his son and provided a sheep for him to sacrifice instead. Muslims the world over celebrate the Feast of the Sacrifice, which follows the Hajj, by sacrificing an animal, usually a sheep, and distributing the meat to the poor. From 2006 to 2008, Eid al-Adha was celebrated in December, which meant it was definitely competing for attention with Christmas festivities.

Halloween is not generally thought of as a sacred, religious holiday anymore, but is now celebrated as a secular, or non-religious, one-day event. Children will dress up in scary outfits like witches or monsters or in costumes that mimic a favorite cartoon or movie character, then go door to door collecting treats from the adults who have stayed home to hand out all of the candy.

In fact, Halloween does have its roots in a very Christian tradition of scaring off evil on the night before All Saints and All Souls day, when prayers are offered to protect the spirits of those who have already passed away. However, very few people realize this anymore. Halloween has become an almost entirely secular and commercial holiday. Many conservative Christians find this troubling and fear that their most important religious holiday, Christmas, will lose its sacred significance as well. In fact, some religious groups and TV commentators even claim that there is a war on Christmas, and they have started policing our language to determine who is fighting for the right side. Do you greet people with "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays"? More is riding on your words than perhaps you had intended.

The day after the American holiday of Thanksgiving, celebrated each year on the 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday in November, is called Black Friday because it is the most popular shopping day of the Christmas season. Actual Christmas day will not turn up until a month later on December 25, unless your religion is Eastern Orthodox and you are following the Julian calendar, in which case you'll celebrate on January 7. In either case,

## 'Tis The Season of Holidays

OCTOBER						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
DHUL-HIJJAH begins...						
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
EID AL-ADHA						
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
...DHUL-HIJJAH...						
27	28	29	30	31		
				HALLOWEEN		

NOVEMBER						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	2
					...DHUL-HIJJAH...	
3	4					
...DHUL-HIJJAH ends						
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
			HANUKKAH begins...			
				THANKSGIVING		

DECEMBER						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		...HANUKKAH ends				
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
					WINTER SOLSTICE	
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
CHRISTMAS		KWANZAA begins...				
29	30	31				
...KWANZAA...						

JANUARY						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1	2	3	4
		...KWANZAA ends				
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	ORTHODOX CHRISTMAS					
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

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you've got at least a month of shopping days until Christmas.

In an unusual coincidence, calendar-wise, Thanksgiving and the start of the Jewish holiday Hanukkah fall on the same day this year, November 28. Thanksgiving and Hanukkah are both movable feasts on their respective calendars, one Gregorian and one Hebrew. George Washington declared Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1789, and in 1863, Abraham Lincoln permanently set the date for late November. While originally celebrated as a feast of the autumn harvest, Thanksgiving has also been associated with the survival of early European-American settlers who, seeking freedom from religious persecution, established the Plymouth colony in 1620. In 1623, after three years of drought and harsh winters, these Pilgrims gave thanks to God for their survival. Since that time, on the other hand, Native Americans have been somewhat less thankful for the survival of those Europeans.

In the 2nd century BCE a small group of Jews defeated Greek King Antiochus IV and reclaimed Jerusalem. To celebrate, they lit an oil lamp that symbolized the bringing of God and his "light" back to the city. Because the one-day supply of oil lasted for eight days, Jews celebrate this miracle each year during Hanukkah by lighting a new candle each day for eight days. Also

called the Festival of Light, Hanukkah, like Thanksgiving, essentially celebrates religious freedom. However, as well-matched as these two holidays are, they will not overlap again for another 77,000 years, so this is your one and only chance to celebrate Thanksgivukkah!

In the minds of devout Christians, however, there is no doubt about the "reason for the season." The birth of the Christian Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, more than 2,000 years ago is the only reason to celebrate at this time of year. Hundreds of years after the fact, religious scholars and church leaders fixed his birth on December 25, and that date has been celebrated ever since even though that date turns up as different days in different months on different calendars. But never mind the confusion there, as the season has expanded to cover all possible variations.

Christmas is a massive holiday in the Western world that covers both religious and secular themes. In addition to the recognition of the birth of Jesus, Christmas is celebrated as a time of gift-giving . . . and gift-receiving. Even non-Christian parents will participate in the fantasy ritual that includes a white-haired fat man in a red outfit who slides down chimneys bringing gifts to children who have been good for the previous 12 months. And now, this character, called variously Santa Claus, St. Nick, or Father Christmas, is turning up in cultures all

over the world. Apparently, the idea of buying, giving, and getting gifts is a marketing ploy that works everywhere.

Despite all of the commercialism, Christmas remains the quintessential religious holiday in America and it is spreading everywhere. Even Muslims recognize the significance of Jesus's birth since he is revered in Islam as well as in Christianity. Americans are surprised to find that in Israel where Jesus was born, for instance, Christmas is not officially recognized by the government, whereas in neighboring Jordan, which is 98% Muslim, the birth of the Messiah is a national holiday. Either way, the Christmas season, whether secular or sacred, cannot be easily avoided anywhere on Earth.

And now, like NBA basketball, the Christmas season has begun overlapping the baseball season! This is surely evidence that if there is, in fact, an inter-faith holiday war at the end of each year, there is a clear winner. So back down in Georgia, Walter Harris got into the spirit of the season by re-seeding his lawn, watching the Red Sox win the World Series, preparing candy for Halloween, and lighting the Christmas lights that he had just purchased . . . in October.

Happy Holidays!

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## QUESTIONS

1. "Holidays" is a word that comes from "holy days" which means a day with religious significance. But most holidays are now dominated by activities that have little connection to anything sacred, or religious. Christmas has Santa Claus and Easter has the Easter Bunny, for instance. Do you think our religious holidays have become too secular or too commercial? Apart from getting out of school, what do you like best about the Winter Holiday season? How are your views about the coming holiday season different from your parents?

2. America is a very diverse country both ethnically and religiously. Consequently, many people use the terms like "Happy Holidays" or "Seasons Greetings" when greeting each other during at this time of year instead of "Merry Christmas," which has a definite Christian meaning. How sensitive are you to the meaning of the various greetings during the holiday season? Christianity is by far the dominant religion in America. Is it fair, then, to ask that we say "Merry Christmas" during this time of year as a sign of respect for the majority? If you are not Christian, and someone says "Merry Christmas" to you, or if you are Christian and someone says "Happy Holidays" how do you react? Is this an issue that seems less important to your generation than perhaps to your parents?

3. Many holidays at this time of year are celebrations of abundance, and for giving thanks to God for all that we have. However, some complain that the season has become too commercial, that all we care about now is receiving gifts. Do you agree with that assessment? One proverb says that "It is better to give, than to receive." Has this been true about you? Do you enjoy giving at times like these? Do you ever give anything to people that you do not know personally, like people less fortunate than you, for instance? Does your school organize any drives to help the needy with food, clothing, or toys? If so, do you participate?

4. Finally, the most important question is: What do you want Santa Claus to bring you?

### Scott Wilson:

For 30 years Scott taught Social Studies and English in DeKalb County, Georgia where he was both National Board Certified and Georgia Master Teacher Certified. After retiring from teaching in 2010, Scott joined the United States Peace Corps and served for 27 months as an English teacher in the desert near the Syrian border in Jordan.