

Celebrating many traditions through the seasons



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Someone posted a meme that said: "It's the season when Christians insist that a Jewish cashier say 'Merry Christmas' to an Atheist customer." Some believers do that, of course, at least those

who claim there is a "War on Christmas." I'd like to think most people are knowledgeable and considerate enough to know Christmas is not the only holiday celebrated in this season. If we're thoughtful, we can appreciate the many traditions in this land of "E Pluribus Unum" ("Out of Many, One" – maybe that should be a holiday all by itself?).

When I was the manager for an ecumenical nonprofit, supervising two houses for low income independent seniors, I tried to make sure winter holi-

days were respected. We would have strings of lights in both houses, trees for residents to decorate, a menorah and special holiday meals. I would encourage everyone to be respectful of the fact that not all residents celebrated particular holidays.

As a secular person managing these houses, I found it especially impressive that Manuel, our chef and handyman, would put up lights and decorations each year, set up the trees and cook wonderful holiday meals with many tra-

ditional foods and desserts. Our board of directors would also provide festive decorations and dishes for everyone to enjoy.

Now, the backstory to holiday traditions in a diverse communal living environment is this: Manuel is a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Witnesses do not celebrate the holidays most Americans do. Yet, Manuel would help prepare the household for Christmas, Ha-

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nukkah or the Winter Solstice.

I've had Witnesses in my family and that made some relatives uncomfortable. I didn't have much contact with them, and may have questioned some of their beliefs, but I never felt the need to try to change them by engaging in debate – they were family.

During the Holocaust, Witnesses were persecuted alongside Jews, homosexuals, intellectuals and artists. Anyone “outside the norm” was seen as a threat, singled out, killed. Whom do we consider outsiders today, those “others” to be cast out and judged for their lives or beliefs? This question helps keep me honest about whom I may dislike, what religious beliefs I don't care for, and what prejudices – usually based on ignorance – guide or cloud my judgments.

I'll never forget during college, two Jehovah's Witnesses came to my door. Since I was studying Religion, I invited them in. We sat down and they began to quote Bible passages. I asked them to show me those passages in the Gospels, handing them the copy I was hold-

ing. They stared at it with puzzlement, holding the book upside down. Turning it over for them, I explained that I was studying Greek and this was a Greek New Testament. Since it was obvious they couldn't read the original language as I could, I made it clear they couldn't tell me what the Bible actually said. With a look of embarrassment they stood and I walked them to the door.

This incident marked a moment. It was becoming clearer for me that the Bible – or any holy book – can be used by anyone to say almost anything. In my experience, even in churches, I have rarely found people who understand that what they believe isn't necessarily in their scriptures. They believe what they've been taught to believe. I understand. I've been there. But I'm no longer tolerant of ignorance disguised as faith.

What I saw in Manuel, however, was another approach. He was a model for all of us – directors, residents, manager. The ecumenical (religiously diverse) board helped direct the finances and facilities and we did what we could to assist 20 seniors to live together peacefully and cooperatively. Yet, it was essentially up to the households to manage themselves, to work together day by day for the benefit of all. Manuel was a constant presence and paragon for everyone whether

Catholic or Protestant, Jewish, Atheist or Unknown.

In my work with interfaith organizations I found it important to be of two minds: It doesn't much matter what someone believes or doesn't believe, and ... it does matter what someone believes or doesn't. Holding these two apparent opposites in mind is the essential balance of living and working with people in a pluralistic community. I will treat you the same no matter what your faith is, or if you have any faith at all. I will respect your right to believe as you choose and trust you to do the same.

Several residents would give Christmas cards and small gifts to Manuel in December. He always smiled and thanked them. I think of Manuel whenever someone assumes others should give their chosen holiday or tradition special preference or privilege.

I wish everyone a wonderful E Pluribus Unum season.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. His latest books are “A Freethinker's Gospel” and “Broken Bridges.” Learn more at chighland.com.