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A Holiday Greeting That Applies to Everyone

Terri Susan Fine
University of Central Florida

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A Holiday Greeting That Applies to Everyone

By Terri Susan Fine
UCF Forum columnist

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The Thanksgiving holiday season brought with it interesting discussions about “the holidays” – so many holidays are celebrated by people of different cultures, religious backgrounds and nations of origin.

The one most celebrated here in the United States is Christmas. The “Christmas Season,” traditionally beginning the day after Thanksgiving (but more lately it seems to start even before), involves lots of shopping and planning for family and friends.

The season is shaped by vacation and travel plans, parties with friends and at work, family get-togethers, plans and preparation for holiday worship, preparing and sharing lots of food, many of which we do not cook at any other time of year, along with greeting cards and clothes we might not otherwise wear. People wish each other “Merry Christmas” whether they know the other person’s religious background or not.

In the interest of diversity and inclusiveness, businesses and workplaces may add symbols of Chanukah, a Jewish holiday that takes place most often in December. Christmas falls on the same day each year, Dec. 25, while in the United States, Chanukah – the eight-day festival of lights – begins somewhere between late November and late December because Jewish holidays follow the lunar calendar used in Israel and not the solar calendar that is followed in the U.S. and elsewhere.

There are some who may celebrate both holidays such that they wish each other “Merry Christmas” and a “Happy Chanukah,” while others include Chanukah decorations on their Christmas trees or add the traditional red and green Christmas colors to their Chanukah menorahs, the eight-light candelabra used as part of the Chanukah observance.

There is so much wrong with this picture.

It appears that “Happy Holidays,” “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Chanukah” cover most of the bases while leaving out only a small number of people during the December holiday season. Christmas is one of the two holiest days for Christians, while Chanukah is a minor holiday on the calendar. It is not appropriate to equate Christmas and Chanukah just because they take place around the same time.

Suggesting that Christmas is a minor holiday, which it is not, insults the Christian celebrant, while elevating Chanukah to the same level as Christmas denies the holiness associated with the major Jewish holy days and festivals, such as Rosh Hashanah (the New Year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks), none of which falls in December.

In our efforts to be inclusive, we show cultural insensitivity both by equating one major holiday with a minor holiday and failing to recognize that diversity includes those who celebrate neither holiday.

What should we do? Water down these greetings with “Happy Holidays”? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of being culturally sensitive to those who celebrate Christmas? I think so.

Couldn’t “Happy Holidays” be the most inclusive greeting because it is so non-specific? Yes, perhaps, but it is the non-specificity of “Happy Holidays” that makes it inappropriate because it fails to recognize the importance of Christmas to Christians while it also suggests that Chanukah should be more important to Jews than the high holidays and festivals that come at other times during the year.

I would suggest that we take a new approach that observes “the holidays” we all have on our calendars, no matter our religion.

My friends and I wish each other a “Happy Federal Holiday.”

Happy Federal what? Because the U.S. government in some cases and the state government in others have identified certain days during the year as state and federal holidays, including those that fall during the late fall and winter season – Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s Day –we have no choice but to observe these holidays whether we want to or not.

Most everyone is included and no one is excluded no matter their religious beliefs or practices. The banks are closed, along with post offices, local, state and federal government offices, and state institutions such as UCF. As long as we live in the United States, these federal and state holidays impact us equally so we might as well celebrate them equally, too.

The upside to wishing each other a “Happy Federal Holiday” is that we have lots of opportunities to do so during the year and not just during the current “Holiday Season.” We know that we are not being culturally insensitive by extending to someone a holiday greeting that has no meaning to them because they practice a different religion or no religion at all.

Even better, though, is that we can use this opportunity to get to know one another—to learn about each other’s religious and cultural beliefs and practices because we will not treat people as if we already know what those beliefs and practices are.

Terri Susan Fine is a UCF professor of political science and associate director of the Lou Frey Institute. She can be reached at terri.fine@ucf.edu.