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Christian Holiday Cycle

Adapted from Living in the Shadow of the Cross

By Paul Kivel

Holidays are great when they reaffirm our connections to family and friends, are inclusive, build community and honor accurate histories. Holidays are also important when they celebrate significant cultural events and connect us to our deepest communal values.

However, holidays can be destructive when they celebrate war or colonialism, are promoted aggressively or when corporations use them to promote values hostile to our environment and us. Holidays become destructive and exclusive when they are proclaimed as universal but are actually culturally specific or when they are based on historical lies and perpetuate misinformation. We need to think seriously about what we celebrate and why, who is included or excluded in the celebration and what values are implicitly or explicitly communicated.

Christian leaders have established an annual holiday cycle that extols US militarism/ triumphalism, the nuclear family, consumerism and whiteness. This holiday cycle downplays the violence in our history, holds up a few white Christian men, such as Christopher Columbus and our presidents, for uncritical praise and emphasizes faith, family and country.

For many in the US, this cycle has come to seem traditional, even though it is constantly recreated and most of the holidays originated within the last 150 years. For some, these holidays have come to feel familiar, unifying and just plain American even though for millions of others they

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can be painful and alienating. Most of our national holidays are seen as secular, even though their underpinnings are deeply Christian. Even Christmas and Easter are viewed as secular by many. (I have been told that the phrase Merry Christmas in bold letters on the public buses in my city is not religious but merely a general holiday greeting.)

New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve/Day is clearly a Christian holiday. The central figure of Christianity is publicly acknowledged to such an extent that history itself and the entire yearly cycle are centered on his birth.

New Year's day for Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Chinese, Vietnamese, Mayans and many Native peoples happens at other times of the annual cycle, according to other calendars. The fact that western countries imposed this calendar worldwide, even though those in the West are a minority in the world, is never acknowledged.

At the same time, non-Christians operate simultaneously with a second, culturally specific calendar and a set of celebrations and calibrations that guide their community life. Many of these calendars are lunar-based and have a very different rhythm than the solar-based Christian one. And yet we say "Happy New Year" as if this calendar were universal, and we might say "Happy Chinese New Year" or "Happy Jewish New Year" to note these other calendars are culturally specific.[1]

Washington's Birthday / Presidents' Day

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Goerge Washington's birthday is now celebrated as Presidents' Day in February. Washington is extolled in US history books as a man of integrity and honesty. (Remember the cherry tree story?) The actual man was very different. George Washington was one of the richest men in the American colonies in his time. He inherited ten enslaved people as an adolescent and eventually owned 100. He worked them hard, watched them closely, broke up families and sent recalcitrant people to the West Indies. Washington also made tremendous profits from wars against Native people and from selling their Ohio River valley lands.

Almost all of the US presidents until Lincoln owned slaves. Every president has believed in the manifest destiny of the United States to actively expand across the continent and throughout the world to Christianize and "civilize" other countries.

Some of our presidents have also provided leadership in difficult times and promoted specific policies and legislation that have been beneficial, especially when pushed to do so by widespread public pressure. Having a holiday that unilaterally extols our presidents without acknowledging the complexities and contradictions of their lives simply reinforces the myth we should uncritically honor benevolent white Christian men as our leaders.

St. Valentine's Day

Although not often recognized as a Christian holiday, St. Valentine's Day was established by Pope Gelasius in 496. Because the Church could not otherwise abolish the long-established pagan fertility and spring planting celebration of Lupercalia, which was celebrated in mid-February, it declared February 14th a saint's day to honor two Christian martyrs, Valentine of Rome (a priest) and Valentine of Terni (a bishop).

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There was no association between the holiday and romantic love until Chaucer wrote a romantic poem, "The Parliament of Fowls," centuries later. During the following period of courtly love, another specifically Christian phenomenon, a tradition developed to compose and send love poems to one's beloved on St. Valentine's Day. The day became more popular around 1800, and by the 1840s the growing greeting card industry promoted a tradition of giving cards, candy and presents to one's beloved.

Good Friday/Easter

Easter is another Christian holiday overlaid on earlier ones. It is based on spring rites of fertility (eggs and bunnies) and alignment with the spring solstice and the full moon. The evening before Good Friday commemorates the Jewish Passover meal Jesus shared with his followers before his murder by the Romans on Friday. Today Easter may seem like a secular event to many, but no one should take the Presidential Easter Egg Hunt on the White House lawn for a non-Christian event.

Mother's Day

Mother's Day is also a holiday with little known Christian roots. Over the centuries the Church had established the fourth Sunday in Lent as a day for people to celebrate the church in which they were baptized - their Mother Church - by decorating with jewels, flowers and other offerings. At times this event included celebration of Mary as the mother of Jesus.

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In the 17th century, Christians extended this holiday to honor actual mothers. Called Mothering Day, it was a day for families to unite and give mothers respite from their work. As a workers' holiday, it provided a break from the fasting of Lent. But eventually the Puritans squelched this holiday, as they did the revelries of Christmas, considering them too festive.

Social activist and Unitarian Julia Ward Howe called for a Mother's Day for Peace in 1870. She wrote a Mother's Day Proclamation as a call for peace, disarmament and to unite women against war.[2] By 1873 the holiday was celebrated in 18 North American cities, but despite the eloquence of her appeal, Howe failed to get formal recognition of a Mother's Day for Peace.

Linking to an earlier Christian-based tradition, on a Sunday in 1907 Anna M. Jarvis passed out 500 white carnations to each mother in her mother's church, to establish a memorial day for women to honor her mother. Jarvis chose Sunday because she intended the day to be treated as a Christian holy day. With the backing of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the World Sunday School Association, Jarvis launched a successful campaign, and in 1914 US President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the first national Mother's Day, now redesigned as a day for American citizens to show the flag in honor of those mothers whose sons had died in war.

Independence Day / The Fourth of July

Even the founding document of the US has roots in Christianity. While mostly a long list of grievances against the English government, the Declaration of Independence also refers to a Christian God with such phrases as "the laws of nature and of nature's God," "all men … are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" and it concludes by stating that "… with a firm reliance on the protection of

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Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

As Frederick Douglass pointed out so eloquently in his famous essay "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,"[3] July 4th did not mark independence for enslaved people, and until 1863 was a cruel reminder of their bondage. Native Americans also were hardly free, and even white women had to wait 150 years before they forced US political leaders to grant them the vote.

Columbus Day

Even by the standards of his day Columbus was an extreme Christian who saw his voyages as attempts to meet up with the kingdom of Prester John (a mythical Christian ruler in east Africa) and from there reconquer and rebuild Jerusalem. Brutal in his suppression of Native Peoples, Columbus condoned rape of Native women and hung rebellious infidels in groups of 13, the number representing Jesus and his apostles. In a letter to the Spanish court dated February 15, 1492, before his departure, Columbus clearly delineated his goals: "to conquer the world, spread the Christian faith and regain the Holy Land and the Temple Mount."[4] "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."[5] Those indigenous peoples who were not enslaved were killed. The population of Haiti at the time of Columbus's arrival was between one and a half million and three million. Sixty years and five Columbus expeditions later, nearly every single Native had been murdered.[6]

During his voyages Columbus was carrying out Papal policies of discovery which gave him divine sanction for the theft of Native lands and the destruction of Native peoples on the grounds that they were not Christian. Even his economic motives had religious undertones. He wanted to discover riches so that the rulers of Spain could afford a new

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crusade to reclaim the Holy Land. In addition, his voyages were probably at least partially funded from wealth stolen from Jews when they were expelled from Spain in 1492 to create a pure Christian kingdom.

Halloween

Continuing Christian efforts to curtail non-Christian community rituals, in the eighth century Pope Gregory III moved All Saint's Day from the spring to supplant the Celtic holiday, Halloween (originally the pagan holiday Samhain), which celebrated the harvest and preparation for winter.

Catholic Irish immigrants brought many of the current customs practiced on the holiday to the US during the Great Famine (1845-1852). Traditional Halloween figures include the devil, demons, witches and black cats, all associated with evil by Christianity. Even the name jack-o'-lantern can be traced back to the Irish legend of Stingy Jack, a greedy, gambling, hard-drinking farmer who tricked the devil into climbing a tree and then trapped him by carving a cross into the tree trunk. In revenge, the devil placed a curse on Jack, condemning him to forever wander the earth at night with the only light he had: a candle inside a hollowed turnip.

Thanksgiving

Like Columbus Day, Thanksgiving is a holiday that attempts to give a benign veneer to a violent colonization process. Early New England colonists generally believed Native Americans to be infidels and Canaanites. Puritan preachers in the colonies routinely referred to them as savages.

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The historical evidence is not of a thanksgiving meal but of an invitation from the invaders inviting Wampanoag locals to a feast, with the goal of negotiating a treaty for land the Puritans wanted. The Wampanoag brought food to the gathering out of a sense of hospitality.

The Wampanoag and other Natives refused to give up their lands, but the pressure and violence from the colonists were unrelenting. Within a single generation the Puritans eliminated nearly all Native peoples in New England by murdering them, driving them into French territory as refugees or selling them into slavery in the Carolinas.[7]

Thanksgiving as celebrated today promotes a false understanding of this period, in which white Christians supposedly coexisted peacefully with Native Americans. It portrays Indians as generous but long gone, mysteriously vanished from the places the so-called pilgrims lived and where their descendants live still.

For the Puritans, a thanksgiving was a religious holiday in which they would go to church and thank God for a specific event, such as the winning of a battle. Many of their early thanksgiving celebrations were to give thanks that they had triumphed over "the Indians" and been able to massacre so many.[8] This is illustrated in the text of the Thanksgiving sermon delivered at Plymouth in 1623 by Mather the Elder. In it, he gave special thanks for a devastating smallpox plague that wiped out most of the Wampanoag Indians who had helped the Puritan community.[9]

Celebration of Thanksgiving ensures that the European invasion of North America and the genocide against its original inhabitants remain invisible. Native peoples remain stereotyped, marginalized and exploited. Thanksgiving is a time of mourning for many Native Americans and their allies.

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Christmas

Similar to St. Valentine's Day and Halloween, Christmas began as a thinly veiled attempt to place a Christian overlay on Winter Solstice celebrations common throughout the Roman Empire. Christmas has a checkered history and was never a particularly spiritual holiday. The noisy and festive celebrations brought over from England by non-Puritan colonists were so unsettling to the Puritans that they banned them. In fact, many of the dominant religious churches in the colonies did not celebrate holidays such as Christmas.[10]

Even into the 17th century boisterous festivities marked the holiday. In the late 19th century Christian male elites such as the Knickerbockers - a group of New York gentlemen - began a systematic process of domesticating the holiday by moving its celebration from the rowdy public to a more quiet home setting. The people most influential in establishing Christmas as we know it now were writers Washington Irving,[11] Charles Dickens,[12] Clement C. Moore,[13] Francis Church,[14] Thomas Nast and Queen Victoria,[15] through her very public celebrations of the new Christmas.[16]

North America's traditional Christmas was created during this late 19th century period. People were moved off the streets and into churches and family gatherings, where everyone was encouraged to give gifts to children. The rise of department stores and advertising during this time further commercialized and managed this holiday. There have periodically been campaigns to "put Christ back in Christmas," but in fact he was never really there.

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However, authoritarian values normalizing reward and punishment for good and bad behavior, the watchfulness and judgmental nature of God are memorialized in the verses in "Santa Claus is Coming to Town":

You'd better not shout,

You'd better not cry,

You better not pout,

Though I'm telling you why

Santa Claus is coming to town.[17]

Although one is fat and jolly and the other is lean and serene, the similarities between Santa and Jesus/God are striking. They are both all-seeing and all-knowing, both reward or punish behavior (even thoughts), both are portrayed as living in pure white lands with assistants (elves and apostles), both are immortal, accept prayers (and letters) that pledge good behavior in return for favors, perform miracles (bottomless bag of toys/loaves and fishes) and are claimed to be universal in bringing good things to all people.[18] Although Christmas was recreated as a secular commercial holiday in the 19th century, Christian values remain not far below the surface.

During the Christmas season, calendars, school activities, public displays, constant advertising and the media all convey a message that everyone else is not quite American if they celebrate "exotic" holidays such as Chanukah, or more recently, Kwanzaa.

There are many efforts to reclaim some holidays and to abandon others. A few cities have proclaimed Columbus Day Indigenous People's Day,

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sponsoring education and alternative activities. Throughout the Americas there are Dia de la Raza festivals not only protesting Columbus Day activities, but also celebrating the survival, cultures, land claims and diversity of Indigenous peoples.

Native Americans and their allies have organized indigenous celebrations around both Columbus Day and Thanksgiving.[19] People of the Wampanoag nation and their allies in the Plymouth area have declared Thanksgiving a Day of Mourning and hold alternative activities. For several years in Oakland, CA, Native Americans and their allies hosted a Thangs Takin pre-thanksgiving event. They currently organize a day of protest against the post-Thanksgiving shopping that occurs at a mall built on a Native American village site and cemetery. Some Christians try to avoid the commercialization of Christmas and to infuse the holiday with an alternative set of values.

The holidays we celebrate confront us with the values we uphold and pass on to our children. The choice is ours. Christian hegemony operates through the holiday cycle; yet we each have the ability to challenge its impact and gather with others to celebrate our diverse families and multicultural communities. We can do this with simplicity, creativity, joy and much fun.

1. David F. Noble. *Beyond the Promised Land: The Movement and the Myth*. Between the Lines, 2005, p. 51.

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2. John M. Hobson. *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

3. "The Bible and the Apocalypse." *Time*, July 1, 2002 quoted in Simon Pearson. *The End of the World: From Revelation to Eco-Disaster*. Constable & Robinson, 2006, p. 3.

4. Newton was an ardent believer in the Apocalypse, believing the end of the world would come in 2060: Pearson, *The End of the World*, p. 145. Others who used apocalyptic images include Wordsworth, Dante, Donne, Milton, Coleridge, Carlyle, D. H. Lawrence, Y.B. Yeats and Hildegard of Bingen.

5. See: Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World,* p. 222.

6. See: Joe Bageant. "A Whore that Sitteth on Many Waters: What the *Left Behind* Series Really Means." *Dissident Voice*, December 17, 2005. [online]. [cited March 6, 2013]. dissidentvoice.org/Dec05/Bageant1217.htm.

7. Kathleen Sands. *Escape from Paradise*. Fortress, 1994, pp. 168-9 quoted in Catherine Keller. *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*. Beacon, 1996, p. 134.

8. Lux Xun, a Chinese dissident philosopher of the early 20th century, quoted in Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, p. xiv.

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9. For example, the University of Paris was chartered directly by Pope Innocent III. Its seal was composed of a cross and portraits of the Virgin Mary, the bishop of Paris and a saint: Noble, *A World without Women*, pp. 147-8.

10. Ibid., p. 149.

11. Ibid., p. 152.

12. Latin was also the language of the male-centered, militaristic and violent stories and histories of valor that became the Western canon, the "great books" curriculum that served as the basis for liberal arts and sciences. It was still emphasized in the curricula of predominantly male, elite universities and secondary schools well into the 1960s.

13. Margaret C. Jacob. *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution*. Temple, 1988, pp. 34, 75.

14. James Hannam. *God's Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science*. Icon Press, 2009.

15. Noble, *A World without Women*, pp. 151-4.

16. Fellows at Oxford and Cambridge were not allowed to marry until 1882, nearly 800 years after the founding of these universities: Noble, *A World without Women*, p. 154.

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17. Noble, *A World without Women*, p. 157.

18. Voltaire was referring to Marquise Emilie du Chatelet, mathematician, physicist and philosopher: Margaret Alic. *Hypatia's Heritage*. Beacon, 1986, pp. 139, 147 quoted in Noble, *A World without Women*, p. 199.

19. Daniel J. Hemel. "Summers' Comments on Women and Science Draw Ire." *Harvard Crimson*, January 14, 2005. [online]. [cited February 28, 2013]. thecrimson.com/article/2005/1/14/summers-comments-on-women-and-science/.

Paul Kivel is an educator, activist and writer with decades of experience working on issues of violence prevention and social justice. His books and curricula include Uprooting Racism, Men's Work, You Call This a Democracy?, Helping Teens Stop Violence, Build Community and Stand for Justice and Living in the Shadow of the Cross. Information about his work, books, and other resources is available at www.paulkivel.com and www.christianhegemony.org.

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