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Christmas or Holiday Tree?

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By David O'Brien, University Professor of Faith and Culture

Christmas tree or "holiday tree"? Manger scenes on public property or a "naked public square"? These are long-standing American arguments, historically associated with the desire of religious communities to receive visible public acceptance and respect. Most of us who are Christian take pains to say "Merry Christmas" to fellow Christians and "Happy Holidays" to those who have other or no religious commitments. Yet we get irritated when, in seeking to respect all of us, public officials such as Rhode Island's governor call the Christmas tree a "holiday tree."

All of us want our religious beliefs to be respected, not just in our own church, mosque or synagogue but also in the communities we share with others, and so we argue about trees and mangers. In dealing with Christmas questions, our courts are just as confused. The U.S. Supreme Court allows manger scenes outside of public buildings, but not inside. Christian displays are okay as long as they're accompanied by "secular" symbols like Santa Claus and reindeer.

Consider the difficulty posed by the common-sense suggestion that Christian symbols should be allowed as long as other religious groups can display their symbols. Then ask what should be done about religious groups who profess beliefs that may be at odds with human rights, such as polygamists, or those who engage in practices that endanger the health and safety of themselves or others, such as the use of illegal drugs. They should be disallowed, most of us say, little noticing that we thus endow government agencies with the task of deciding between acceptable and unacceptable religious beliefs and practices.

Push the courts to resolve such questions and we risk creating Richard John Neuhaus' "naked public square," devoid of any expression of our shared cultural values that rise from religious roots. So far we have done better by welcoming religious pluralism and occasionally blurring the boundaries between government and religion, with ubiquitous Christmas trees, commissioning clergy as military officers and allowing "conscience" exceptions to delivering medical care and social services based on religious beliefs.

For those of us who are Christian, there are many important questions: Should Christmas be both a Christian and a national holiday? We acknowledge with other holidays there is something sacred about our national community, our founding, our veterans and the abundance for which we give thanks. And, when we look around the world, is there not something sacred about our desire to be "one nation, under God" even as we argue over what to call trees with colored lights? As he lit our national tree this year, President Barack Obama said the Christmas story "speaks to a hope we share as a people." Does it?

That depends in part on what we Christians say to our fellow Americans as we mark Christmas, whether the manger scene is on public property or in front of a church. Do we say our Christmas story comes from the Jews, and that while it inspires us as Christians, it is also about everything and everybody? The baby, a person like us, is also Emmanuel or "God with us." His coming required the "yes" of a young Jewish woman and the cooperation of a remarkably trusting man. Those shepherds suggest that our God chooses the company of poor and marginal people. The "wise men" represent all of us who seek the truth with open hearts; notice that they returned home without becoming Jews, much less Christians.

And what does this story tell us about God? Boston College theologian Michael Himes says the truth revealed in Jesus is that "love" is the best word we have for God. The word "love" names the reality that lies just beyond the horizon of our consciousness. President Obama got the Christmas story right at the national tree lighting: "Tonight we celebrate a story that is as beautiful as it is simple. The story of a child born far from home to parents guided only by faith but who would ultimately spread a message that has endured for more than 2,000 years — that no matter who we are or where we are from, we are each called to love one another as brother and sister."

That message speaks to all Americans. So the tree is a shared American symbol of solidarity that draws on the Christian story to enrich our common life. In the same way, the manger is a Christian story of community that we hope enriches our entire human family. The sometimes-conflicted questions of what we call the tree and where we put the crib are important but secondary. The big question, for all of us, as for Mary and Joseph, is whether or not, despite all evidence to the contrary, faith, hope and most of all, love, are truths by which we can live. Joseph and Mary took the risk of saying, "yes." Perhaps we can invite

each other to do the same and consider the possibility of love.

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