



Right wing: 'Happy holidays' is for homos and hedonists

By Sean Cahill

In 2004, after Christian conservatives helped re-elect George Bush and a Republican Congress, right-wing groups and journalists launched a campaign alleging a “war on Christmas.” They denounced the fact that Macy’s and other retailers were wishing customers “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly ran a regular segment titled “Christmas under siege” trumpeting the newly formed Committee to Save Merry Christmas. Sean Hannity and others also got in on the action.

Because disputes over public school Christmas pageants and government-sponsored crèche scenes are a perennial affair, I wondered whether this was the same silliness as any other year and I was simply noticing it more, or whether it was actually worse than usual. The consensus among friends and colleagues was that it was worse than usual.

2005: Fox News anchor ups the ante

In 2005 another Fox News anchor, John Gibson, published *The war on Christmas: How the liberal plot to ban the sacred Christian holiday is worse than you thought*. Gibson decried “the annual parade of Christmas outrages,” including the renaming of Christmas parades as holiday parades and the banning of Christian-themed gifts from student gift exchanges at school holiday parties.

He insisted those waging a war on Christmas are “a cabal of secularists, so-called humanists, trial lawyers, cultural relativists, and liberal, guilt-wracked Christians — not just Jewish people,” but then went on to blame non-Christians in general.

The other key event of 2005 was when the city of Boston officially renamed the giant spruce tree erected on the Boston Common a “holiday tree.” After Jerry Falwell and the Alliance Defense Fund threatened to sue, Mayor Thomas Menino assured residents he would continue to call the tree a Christmas tree, and the controversy abated.

O’Reilly again repeatedly hyped these stories, calling for a boycott of stores that wished shoppers the inclusive “Happy Holidays” instead of the exclusive “Merry Christmas.” He claimed non-Christians would be “crazy” to be offended by “Merry Christmas,” while insisting that “Season’s Greetings” and “Happy Holidays” are “absolutely... for a fact” offensive to Christians.

2006: The “war” escalates

This “war on Christmas,” Gibson charged, is really a “war on Christianity.” This theme emerged more explicitly in 2006. Vision America’s Rick Scarborough convened a conference titled “War on Christians and the Values Voters in 2006,” where speakers denounced “moral relativism,” “hedonism” and “Christophobia.”

Not surprisingly, several speakers denounced the “gay agenda.” Peter LaBarbera called gay people “disgusting” and urged the closing of “homosexual establishments.” Brian Camenker falsely claimed that Massachusetts gay activists were pushing a bill to decriminalize bestiality. Lou Sheldon, Phyllis Schlafly, Alan Keyes and other anti-gay leaders also spoke.

Persecution was a major theme. The Hudson Institute’s Michael Horowitz claimed “you guys have become the Jews of the 21st century.” Navy Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, a chaplain who was disciplined for proselytizing, compared himself to the Afghan Christian who was nearly executed.

While this comparison is an overstatement, three-quarters of evangelicals believe they are a minority under siege.

In a culture that is 90 percent Christian and in which the Christmas shopping season begins around Halloween, Christmas and Christianity are not at all threatened by the use of inclusive language such as “Happy Holidays.” Maybe calling a Christmas tree a holiday tree is a little ridiculous. But here the issue is public funding, not mere language. I trust the ACLU and the courts to work out this important principle of church-state separation.

But what does this mean for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community? Anti-gay activism is part of a broader right-wing politic of resentment, fear and majority domination. This sometimes manifests in the portrayal of dominant groups as oppressed minorities. In Massachusetts, anti-same-sex marriage activists demand, “Let the people vote!” — insisting that equality for our families somehow denies them of rights. In California, anti-immigrant activists warn, “Do you want your children to have to learn Spanish to get a job?” even though Latinos learn English at about the same rate Swedish-Americans do.

We’ve also seen this with the so-called “war on Christmas” and affirmative action, where Christians, whites and men are portrayed as oppressed even as they hold disproportionate power and privilege.

So this holiday season, when conservatives claim there is a “war on Christmas,” take it for the manipulative hyperbole that it is.

And meanwhile, enjoy the holidays — no matter what you call them.

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