

CHRISTMAS AND JEWS

Well, we made it through another Christmas.

A lot of people are apparently thrown into depression at this time of year because they are far away from home and family, or perhaps because they are far away from their own childhood.

But the Jews in America have always had a special problem with Christmas. To begin with, it reminds them that they are surrounded by a Christian culture. That might not be so bad, if the Jews were not also apprehensive about that fact. They are mindful of the history of hostility from that culture, including attempts to force it down their throats.

But there is some ambivalence which complicates many American Jewish feelings about this season. There are many Jews raised in this country who also have good feelings about this season -- and they are uneasy about having those good feelings.

There are now nine national legal holidays: New Year's, Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Veterans' Day, Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King Day -- and Christmas. Of those, Independence Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas are the most festive for young Americans. Christmas, especially, marks the long winter holiday from school, embedded in a protracted period of general festivity. For young people, it means leisure time, excitement, color.

Jews are not ambivalent about attempts to impose on them explicit religious symbolism. Nine out of ten Jews in the San Francisco area expressed opposition to allowing nativity scenes in the public schools. But, on the other hand, only about six out of ten expressed opposition to Christmas trees being allowed in the public schools, if they were unadorned by angels.

Why the difference? Christmas, after all, marks the birth of Jesus on the Christian calendar, and Christmas trees became associated with that religious occasion, probably in Germany in the seventeenth century.

Many Christian clergymen complain bitterly that the Christmas tree, among other things, has lost its religious significance in the American public culture. And presumably it is true that any such object has its significance only in the eyes of the beholder. There are Buddhas all over the place, but we Jews tend not to see religious significance in them; or to be offended by them even if we do.

Of course, Jews have not been the objects of proselytism or oppression under the Buddhist image as they have under the Christian image. But that is another matter -- and the fact is that younger American Jews do not feel as threatened on that account as do older Jews. Maybe they are right. Anti-semitism, more and more, stems from political rather than religious motivations.

Furthermore, a study in the San Francisco area a few years back found that those Jews who were most deeply committed to a traditional Jewish life tended to be the least offended by such matters as unadorned Christmas trees in public places, although they would not have them in their homes. They seemed to be more secure in their feeling that their children would find no serious religious significance in these items, or be subverted by them.

Perhaps young American Jews are, as a whole, not only more secure in their civil status than were their grandparents; but also more secure in their own Judaism than were their parents. As long as increased comfort with this season does not weaken opposition to any actual violation of church-state separation -- and as long as it is accompanied by a strengthened Jewish commitment -- it may not be an index of assimilation at all, but quite the opposite.