

Holiday Trees and Seasons Greetings: The Battle of Words in the “War on Christmas”

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In November of 2005, Fox News' Bill O'Reilly interviewed John Gibson, author of *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday is Worse Than You Thought*, on his evening television talk show. Discussing the holiday greetings used by employees of several national retailers, the two sternly agreed that the replacement of the phrase "Merry Christmas" with the generic "Happy Holidays" is not an innocent or isolated gesture; rather, as O'Reilly remarked, "it's all part of the secular progressive agenda" ("O'Reilly's"). For those unfamiliar with the discourse of the "War on Christmas," O'Reilly's accusation might seem off-base. Yet, for those submerged within the language of this cultural battle, his conclusion not only follows a coherent logical sequence, it also reflects a grand narrative about the presumed objectives of insidious secular humanists, that they are seeking to attack and undermine the values and traditions of conservative Christians in America. The celebration of Christmas is only their latest target.

Each Christmas season for the past decade, the Christian right has geared up for battle against those supposedly waging the contemporary "War on Christmas." Focus on the Family, a Christian watchdog organization, releases lists categorizing stores as "Christmas-friendly," "Christmas-negligent," and "Christmas-offensive." Conservative politicians like Sarah Palin weigh in on the hidden secular messages they have discovered in presidential Christmas cards. And the

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rightwing Alliance Defense Fund prepares to protect Americans' Christmas-themed work parties and public nativity scenes (Altman). Bruce Lincoln, a Religious Studies scholar, suggests that the conflict between the two camps commonly recognized as the "secularists" and the "fundamentalists" might better be understood as a tension between the competing interests of religious maximalism and minimalism. According to Lincoln, maximalists understand religion as "the central domain of culture, deeply involved in ethical and aesthetic practices constitutive of the community" (59). In contrast, minimalists posit that religion should be "restricted to the private sphere and metaphysical concerns" (Lincoln 59). As Lincoln aptly points out, the conflicting perspectives represented by these two groups collide in the public space of contemporary American society. Met with the growing influence of minimalists, maximalists understand religious minimalism as an invasion of their sphere of influence and control, as well as a direct and methodical attack upon their very interpretation of the world itself.

In the same interview segment with John Gibson, O'Reilly elaborated on just what was at stake in the "secularization" of Christmas. He explained that Christmas will only be the first to go, after which the secularists will be able "to get Christianity and spirituality and Judaism out of the public square" ("O'Reilly's"). In this comment, O'Reilly exemplifies the sort of cultural contention analyzed by Lincoln. O'Reilly then continues, "if you look at what happened in Western Europe and Canada, if you can get religion out, then you can pass secular progressive programs like legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will, gay marriage, because the objection to those things is religious-based, usually." Here, O'Reilly suggests that those who would restrict religion to the private sphere, religious minimalists, are motivated to do so by a broad secular agenda. Aligning progressive or liberal political positions on social issues with religious minimalism, O'Reilly seeks to craft a clear-cut divide between conservative politics and religious maximalism versus liberal politics and religious minimalism. Claiming that conservative opposition to liberal social policies is "religion-based, usually," O'Reilly seeks to cement this connection between politics and religion, situating fundamental Christianity firmly within the right of the American political spectrum.

So, for Gibson and O'Reilly, like many who speak out on this issue, the "War on Christmas" constitutes a slippery slope. Replacing the word *Christmas* with more neutral terms and banning Christmas decorations from public spaces is merely a gateway for the secular humanists who, once they've done away with Christmas, can implement grander plans of morally empty progressivism. Of course, this assault on Christian values by the secularists is a yearlong struggle, but the "War on Christmas" renders such elusive attacks visible to the American public, as figures like O'Reilly work to uncover their plots each holiday season.

While O'Reilly's "Christmas under Siege" segment on *The O'Reilly Factor*, an annual tradition since 2004, brought national attention to this struggle, it was not he who first unearthed the secularist master plan to steal Christmas and institute irreligious humanism in America. At the turn of the twentieth century, as they moved forward from the intellectual crises of the nineteenth century, many Americans looked ahead into the upcoming years with anxious uncertainty. As Darwinian and Freudian thought began to permeate throughout society, the future of religion in America came into question. Attempting to answer this question in the early decades of the 1900's, ideologically conservative, traditional Christian ministers banded together to create and proliferate a worldview which came to be known as Christian fundamentalism. This maximalist worldview quite consciously pitted itself in opposition to the leading secular impulses of the time, as it directly challenged Higher Criticism of Biblical texts, evolutionary science, Enlightenment-era rationalism, and Marxism.

So, throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, fundamentalist values of traditional or conservative Christianity resonated with many Americans who felt alienated or frightened by the rapidly changing modern world. During this time, fundamentalism occupied a fairly comfortable and vocal space within the national discourse. However, this voice did not ring out in harmony for long. Journalist Michelle Goldberg notes, "many historians date the start of our current culture wars to 1925, the year of the famous Scopes monkey trial in Dayton, Tennessee" (*Kingdom Coming* 93).

In this court case, a high school teacher, John Scopes, went on trial for allegedly teaching evolution to his public school students. During his trial, two prominent American men came head-to-head in a highly

publicized debate. Clarence Darrow, an outspoken secularist and Biblical skeptic, challenged fundamentalist politician William Jennings Bryan to defend the validity of fundamentalist beliefs, and Bryan’s lack-luster defense was widely recognized through media coverage as a symbolic failure of fundamentalism to match the intellectual rigor of secular skepticism (*Kingdom Coming* 94). Yet the Scopes trial did not establish a clear winner, and the rivalry between religious maximalists and minimalists in America would live on throughout the rest of the century, as well as the one to come.

A few decades after the trial, in the 1950’s, rumors began to circulate in conservative circles about a secret taskforce within the United Nations aiming to slowly but surely replace the celebration of Christmas with the glorification of the United Nations itself. In 1959, the conservative John Birch Society decided to take action, printing and distributing pamphlets aptly titled *There Goes Christmas?!*, thereby exposing the supposed conspiratorial plan and warning Americans to defend their holiday from those who sought to destroy it (*Kingdom Coming* 162). None of the leading voices in this “War” today, including those emerging from Fox News, Focus on the Family, the Alliance Defense Fund, and the Liberty Council, explicitly connect the contemporary “War” to the one first alleged five decades ago, but they nonetheless continue and expand upon the work begun by the far-right John Birch Society. And, while the United Nations remains suspect within the Christian right, its role as head conspirator has been eclipsed by the ACLU, an organization portrayed as preying upon the innocent religious folk of America who simply wish to express their faith in public.

Scholars such as Michelle Goldberg have led the charge that the alleged “War on Christmas” is actually unfounded. In an article for *Salon* magazine, she contends that “there is … a burgeoning myth of a war on Christmas, assembled out of old reactionary tropes, urban legends, exaggerated anecdotes, and increasingly organized hostility to the American Civil Liberties Union.” Goldberg’s authority in making such a claim lies in her study of Christian nationalism and Christian responses to secularism. In contrast to the explanations given by those like O’Reilly who claim the existence of this “War,” Goldberg argues that this controversy emerges within a drama carefully designed by the

Christian right, in which secular humanists create and attempt to carry out plans to rid America of God in the modern era.

This drama between the religious right and secular left within the “War on Christmas” emerges largely through language and ritual. In his study of religion and violence, sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer draws attention to the way in which “certain kinds of speech … are able to perform social functions: their very utterance has a transformative impact” (126). Read against the “War on Christmas,” Juergensmeyer’s analysis illuminates the way in which a generic holiday greeting might be perceived as a cultural assault. When one chooses to say “Happy Holidays” *instead* of “Merry Christmas,” one performs “a social function” in which a specifically Christian religious act is *replaced* with one that is pluralist and secularist; it privileges no one tradition, instead acknowledging all “Holidays.” In this way, the word “Christmas,” when spoken in the circumstance of a greeting or acknowledgement, functions as a socio-cultural symbol for the religious speaker. Here, language is performed in such a way as to situate oneself within a specific group – the Christian right.

Moreover, for the Christian right in America, the construction and expansion of the “War on Christmas” functions as mythmaking within the community of religious maximalism. In “Myth,” Russell T. McCutcheon argues that “despite attempts to construct a past or future long removed from the present, mythmaking takes place in a specific socio-political moment and supports a specific judgment about the here and now” (204). Here, McCutcheon draws attention to the way in which mythmaking, as an active process, constitutes a reaction and response to a contemporary space and time. Read against the rhetoric of those who allege the “War on Christmas,” McCutcheon’s analysis highlights the way in which for the Christian right, the “War” functions as a communal response to a perceived secularization of contemporary America.

In 2011, Media Matters for America reported that during the month of December, O’Reilly spoke about the “War on Christmas” over three times more often than he spoke about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on *The O'Reilly Factor* (Dimiero). In devoting airtime to this “War,” O’Reilly is able to firmly plant the grand secularist scheme in the present, and as the “War” serves as an eerie reminder for secular

assaults yet to come, he is simultaneously able to foreshadow the dim future of a secular America, in which the “legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will, gay marriage” may all come to pass (“O'Reilly's”).

McCutcheon advances our understanding of the power of mythmaking in a community. “Myths,” he writes, “present *one particular* and therefore contestable viewpoint as if it were an ‘agreement that has been reached’ by ‘we the people.’” (204). This sort of communal mythmaking is voiced by Alan Sears of the Alliance Defense Fund in his book *The ACLU vs. America*. Even in his title, Sears crafts a problematic dichotomy, characterizing the American Civil Liberties Union in direct opposition to the country it represents. Additionally, Sears uses the concept of a unified America to represent one particular faction, those within the conservative “backlash” – thereby suggesting that all Americans share conservative and religious values in contrast to the ACLU. And yet, for Sears and his readers, this dichotomy works because it fits into the narrative constructed through mythmaking by the religious right, in which America becomes a unified Christian nation, desperately fighting against the implicitly foreign liberal influences infiltrating its heartland.

In his book, Sears writes, “It will take sacrifice, perseverance, and concerted effort by millions of Americans to defeat the ACLU, its many allies, and their agenda. But with God’s grace, we are confident it can and will be done” (qtd. in Goldberg, “How”). Here, the two opposing forces, America and the ACLU, come head to head in battle. Firmly connecting “God’s grace” with the Americans, Sears is hopeful that the religious will prevail. In this, he exemplifies what McCutcheon describes as the collation of the pieces of mythmaking “into one grand unfolding narrative” (204).

In her analysis of the political-religious narrative woven by the Christian right, Goldberg argues that Christian nationalism “is a conflation of scripture and politics that sees America’s triumphs as confirmation of the truth of the Christian religion, and America’s struggles as part of a cosmic contest between God and the devil” (*Kingdom Coming* 6). In this way, the political uncertainties of America’s future are pre-scripted to fit into a narrative that attributes victory to the blessings of God and aligns defeat with the reign of Satan in

America. Within the Christian cosmology that informs this narrative, this maximalist-minimalist struggle has even greater implications. As the enemies in the “War on Christmas,” secularists and leftists are positioned in opposition to the Christian right. As the Christian right identifies itself with the word of God, secularists in America also become positioned in direct opposition to the will of God and, thus, with the devil. Through this system of oppositions, secularists are incorporated into a Christian understanding of the world which unfolds through the existence and acknowledgment of omnipresent, yet invisible, spiritual warfare.

The concept of spiritual warfare posits that the physical world is occupied by supernatural forces battling for control over the souls of people through various means. While the Holy Spirit motivates the positive influences exerted by Christian and conservative organizations and efforts, demonic spirits give rise to influences that might lead souls away from fundamental Christianity. The “War on Christmas” represents a form of “spiritual mapping,” as Peter Gardella calls it. According to Gardella, “believers see the world as a battleground in which Christian and demonic forces hold particular cities and territories” (330). Combined with the ideas motivating Christian nationalism, “spiritual mapping” suggests that America, as a space, has become a “battleground.” With demonic influences seeking to reclaim America as a secular country, Christian nationalists must fight back in order to claim this land for Christ. In this way, the “War on Christmas” is rendered a battle in which “Christmas-centric” language functions as a defensive weapon against the secularist attacks on the Christian holiday.

In 2011, Pure Flix Movies released a film, *Christmas with a Capital C: Putting Christ Back in Christmas*, that captures the essence of the narrative constructed by the Christian right. The plot hinges on a controversy inspired by the “War on Christmas.” Set in the fictional, picturesque small town of Trapper Falls, Alaska, the movie opens with the local townspeople in fellowship together in a local diner, knit together by the spirit of Christmas. Then the music changes, and Mitch Bright drives into town. Bright was born in Trapper Falls but moved away to the big city, where he became a successful lawyer who echoes positions often publically voiced by the ACLU. Out of the blue, he rolls back

into town, demanding that the local nativity scene be removed from public grounds. As the townspeople gather to discuss how they will save Christmas from Bright, one man shakes his head sadly, saying that Bright “hates God, he doesn’t want equal representation of religion, he wants none.” Bright only affirms the townspeople’s mounting discontent with him, confessing, “I do have a problem with Christmas and all the rest of the garbage you Christians have been shoving down my throat since I was a kid.” An angry townsman yells triumphantly at Bright as he climbs into his private jet, “Christians happen to have started the United States of America!” These characterizations fit into the narrative of the “War,” in which the humble common folk, attempting to celebrate their favorite holiday, are challenged by an affluent and irreligious outsider. Recasting Bright’s petition that the town’s nativity scene is in conflict with the separation of church and state as a direct attack on the heart of the Christian holiday, the film shows that it is up to the townspeople to band together to save Christmas from his secular attack.

Throughout the discourse of the “War on Christmas,” in both fictionalized retellings and newscasts, there runs a common rhetorical thread. Although the Christian right has initiated an accusatory offensive, it simultaneously fashions its constituents as victims. In *A New Hindu Identity*, scholar Sudhir Kakar, using the clash of traditionalism and modernism in contemporary India as a case study, brings insight to this perception of victimization. As Kakar explains, “an actual majority [may] feel a besieged minority in imagination, [and this] anchors the dubious logos of a particular political argument deeply in fantasy through the power of mythos” (163). Here, Kakar first draws attention to the actual status of the majority group at hand. In this case, the group consists of the Christian right in America, seeking to speak for all Americans who wish to celebrate Christmas. While those who celebrate Christmas in America indeed constitute a majority, the Christian right, through the rhetoric of the “War on Christmas,” amplifies isolated cases in which the ability to celebrate Christmas publicly is, in some way, suppressed. By focusing in on and exaggerating these cases, pundits like Bill O’Reilly are able to construct the “dubious logos” that Kakar refers to – repeatedly emphasizing minuscule company memos concerning proper holiday greetings and

telling and then retelling stories in which nativity scenes are removed from school pageants.

Furthermore, as Kakar points out, these stories are grounded “deeply in fantasy through the power of mythos” (163). While mythmaking to craft the narratives that constitute the “War on Christmas,” the Christian right also constructs a sense of nostalgia for a mythical religious past in America. As McCutcheon suggests, although the conflict is firmly grounded in a contemporary struggle, much of its rhetorical fuel is gathered from reinterpretations of the past. As follows, the “War” is commonly featured on websites and in texts that argue for the advancement of Christian nationalism. Within this community, and within the related Christian Reconstructionist movement, members advocate a country grounded in Biblical principles and law. The “War on Christmas” resonates within this far-right community because the two share a narrative, in which an originally religious country has gradually become less religious in the modern, secular era. Consider, for example, the moment in *Christmas with a Capital C*, when a man yells at Bright, “Christians happen to have started the United States of America!” This understanding is representative of that which permeates throughout the arguments alleging the “War on Christmas” and the Christian nationalist discourse out of which it emerges. As both communities argue against secular attacks on previously-founded religious traditions, an argument for the Christian foundation of the country becomes crucial, as it allows one to then frame the encroaching influences of secularism as attacks upon an already-existing status quo.

Of course, this national religious foundation constitutes another form of mythmaking for the Christian right. While the “city on hill” rhetoric resonates strongly in the “War on Christmas,” with commentators lamenting the loss of this supposed religious heritage, it’s interesting to note that early Puritan settlers actually outlawed the celebration of Christmas in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1659. This ban, repealed in 1681, fulfills the greatest fear of those defending the holiday today. Ironically, it was the religious ancestors the Christian right so often idealizes, not the secular modernists, who took offense to the pagan origins of Christmas festivities and so actually prohibited the holiday (Altman). As the fight to defend Christmas

often falls within the Christian right's broader mission to maintain the Christian heritage of America, it is also relevant to note the way in which it constructs a subjective national history as fact. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Republican nominee John McCain, a self-professed conservative Christian, claimed "the Constitution established the United States as a Christian nation" (qtd. by Lind). Yet, as Michael Lind, an American historian, suggests in his column "America is not a Christian nation," such claims constitute a refashioning of historical documents to fit contemporary arguments and socio-political stances. In fact, references to religion in the Constitution appear only in Article VI and the First Amendment, both of which point toward religious tolerance and freedom rather than promoting any specific religious tradition (Lind).

Despite the lack of historical evidence, the contemporary Christian right consistently beckons to a "religious" past constructed through mythmaking that situates contemporary secularists in an offensive position; rather than continuing a tradition of religious tolerance, they are recast again and again in the discourse of conservative Christians as an organized group bent on redirecting America from a religious past to a irreligious future. Kakar elaborates upon this process of victimization among religious and cultural groups, noting that such a process includes:

marking afresh the boundaries of the religious-cultural community, making the community conscious of a collective cultural loss, countering internal forces which seek to disrupt the unity of the freshly demarcated community, idealizing the community, maintaining its sense of grandiosity by comparing it to a bad "other" which, at times, becomes a persecutor and, finally, dealing with the persecutory fantasies, which bring up to the surface the community's particular sense of inferiority, by resort to some kind of forceful action. (166)

Here, Kakar pays close attention to the ways in which a group crafts itself as a noble and unified community in order to lay the foundation for its victimization.

In 2003, Ron Paul, a Texas Representative and longtime presidential candidate, published an essay, "The War on Religion," in his newsletter

to supporters, revealing the careful process of alignment and loss that Kakar analyzes in his study of victimization. In this essay, Rep. Paul asks of his readers, “Why have we allowed the secularists to intimidate us into downplaying our most cherished and meaningful Christian celebration?” Here, Paul very carefully uses plural, collective pronouns to craft a group - “we … us . . . our” - that celebrates Christmas. In this way, Paul exemplifies Kakar’s point that the groups who refashion themselves as victims must first construct themselves as a unified whole. After establishing his readers as an organic “we,” Paul then seeks to make, as Kakar writes, “the community conscious of a collective cultural loss” (166). To do this, Paul catalogues a list of the “wonderful Christmas traditions” which have been “lost” in this “War.” Such casualties include “Christmas pageants and plays, including Handel’s Messiah,” “Nativity scenes,” “Office Christmas parties,” and “even wholly non-religious decorations featuring Santa Claus” and “snowmen.” Lamenting these losses, Paul seeks to craft a sense of deprivation amongst his readers, reminding them of the treasured traditions of Christmas past.

Aligning with Kakar’s analysis of the sequenced process of victimization, Paul glorifies the Christian community and the Christmas tradition as he wistfully recalls “the Christmas spirit, marked by a wonderful feeling of goodwill among men.” Using pejorative language to describe the aims of religious minimalists, he denounces the “perverse court decisions and years of cultural indoctrination, [by] the elitist, secular Left.” In this way, he further elevates the Christian right, as a group which seeks to innocently celebrate its cherished tradition publically in America. Furthermore, Paul advances the narrative of Christian nationalism, leading readers to believe that “The Founding Fathers envisioned a robustly Christian yet religiously tolerant America, with churches serving as vital institutions that would eclipse the state in importance.” Here, Paul not only romanticizes the American past, he writes within the *mythos* of a discourse in which the founding of America privileged Christian traditions above others.

Finally, Paul concludes his essay with an analysis of the motivations behind the supposedly liberal “War on Christmas,” refashioning secularism as an attack on the past, present, and future of Christian America. “This is the real reason the collectivist left hates religion,”

he asserts; "Churches as institutions compete with the state for the people's allegiance, and many devout people put their faith in God before their faith in the state. Knowing this, the secularists wage an ongoing war against religion, chipping away bit by bit at our nation's Christian heritage. Christmas itself may soon be a casualty of that war." In this analysis, Paul makes five familiar rhetorical moves that create, and in a sense define, the "War on Christmas." First, he identifies religious America with the political right, while identifying irreligious America with the political left. Second, he poses these two groups in opposition to, and in competition with, each other. Next, he accuses the "secularists" of attacking the religious right through their policies of neutrality regarding religion in the public sphere. Paul then situates this conflict within a larger narrative, one of "an ongoing war," in which secularists, beginning with modernists in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, seek to rid America of religion altogether. Finally, he reimagines America as a Christian nation through vague references to its "Christian heritage." In doing so, he fashions religious maximalists as victims in the invasion of secularism upon American soil.

Such rhetoric resonates throughout the discourse of the "War on Christmas," as is demonstrated in the "persecutory fantasy" promoted by Bill O'Reilly (Kakar 166). Even the name of his segment, "Christmas under Siege," suggests that the accusers are the victims in this battle in the war for dominion over American public space. Although the concept of this "War" is constructed and spread entirely through the discursive community of the Christian right, it is nonetheless framed by the right as an organized conspiracy, headed by the American Civil Liberties Union, to attack the right of Americans to celebrate Christmas. In this way, the "War on Christmas" functions, for those who allege it exists, to perpetuate a sense of victimization by secular humanists attempting to extinguish the essentially Christian character of the nation.

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