

## **A Christmas greeting from the God Squad**

December 18, 2004

We hope you enjoyed Tommy's Hanukkah greeting last week. Now, continuing our holiday switch-a-roo, we offer Marc's Christmas greeting.

This is our way of showing you one of the deepest beliefs behind our love for each other: The sweetest fruit of interfaith dialogue is not tasted by merely helping someone of another faith understand our own.

It is in coming to truly, sincerely and respectfully understand the way friends and neighbors of other faiths find their way to the top of the same mountain along a different path.

So ... A Christmas greeting from Rabbi Marc Gellman:

I've always liked manger scenes. I even like them on public property. As long as there's also a menorah somewhere, I love the idea of Christmas brightening what would otherwise be just the winter shopping season. I also like greeting people I think are Christians with "Merry Christmas" and not the anemic, politically correct greeting of "Happy Holidays!"

When people wish me a Merry Christmas, I take it as a well-meant mistake, not a deep insult to my Jewish identity. So I wish you, my Christian brothers and sisters, a very Merry Christmas. I wish you a Christmas during which you remember what you must never forget: that you are gathered together not by your common belief in Santa Claus, but by your common belief that Christmas is the birthday of your Savior and redeemer, Jesus, whom you call the Christ.

What I take from the extraordinary life of Jesus is obviously not what you take, but it is still enormous. I take from him the commandment echoed in my daily prayers to love each other as people made in the image of God.

I take from him the ennobling idea from the Gospel of Matthew that feeding the hungry is feeding God, clothing the naked is clothing God and bringing hope to those who sleep in the dust is bringing hope to God.

I take the example of his courage and his charity, his forgiveness and his humility as stirring examples for every spiritual seeker, even those who do not see Jesus as the Christ.

And even if I do not and cannot see Jesus as the Christ, I still marvel and exult in the joyous message you have brought to the world through this magisterial and glowing holiday of Christmas. I love your Christmas trees, but I love more the way you decorate them together. I love your caroling, but I love more that you are singing together.

I love your Christmas meal, but I love more the fact that it is eaten only after you have gone to church together. I even love that one of your best Christmas songs, "White Christmas," was written by a Jewish guy, Irving Berlin.

Some people think that the more Christian Americans profess their faith publicly, the more non-Christians have to fear. I strongly disagree. I'm comfortable admitting the truth that we live in a country that is overwhelmingly Christian, but I don't fear that the public expression of Christianity presents a threat to my freedoms.

I trust that the free exercise clause of the First Amendment will always be balanced by the establishment clause so that both the free exercise of religion and the separation of church and state will both be honored as we celebrate the great American experiment in religious pluralism.

This is not the Middle Ages, and neither I nor any other rational members of the Jewish or Muslim communities need fear another Inquisition or Crusade. America is history's best example of a country where religion can be honored in public and in private without fear of some divine right of kings overwhelming our right to find God, or reject God, each in our own way.

So on this Christmas Day, I celebrate what Christianity has brought to our country and to our world. This Christmas, I'll help Tommy decorate his tree. Although I cannot celebrate the birth of the Messiah that is the reason for the tree, I can get close enough to see the lights, feel the joy, hear the music and know that the celebration points to a another place, a better, more joyous place where one day everything will be light and the songs we sing will rise to praise God in sweet harmony.

Merry Christmas!

Send questions only to The God Squad, Telecare, 1200 Glenn Curtiss Blvd., Uniondale, NY 11553; post them on the God Squad Web site: <http://www.askthegodsquad.com> ; or e-mail them: [godsquad@telecaretv.org](mailto:godsquad@telecaretv.org).)

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