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THE DECEMBER DILEMMA: Tips for Creating an Inclusive Holiday Season

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Each year we are faced with the same well-intended questions asked by Christians:

Can we do an office or residence hall Secret Santa?

Can we put up a Christmas tree in the office or at school?

Can we do a Christmas party as long as we call it a "holiday" party?

Can we do Christmas decorations as long as we include a Menorah?

These questions and many more perplex us each and every December. Without question, there are challenges to consider when trying to create an inclusive environment. Recognizing the variety of celebrations of Christian and non-Christian holidays is essential to the success of having people feel valued.

Besides Christmas additional holidays such as Eid al-Fitr, Ramadan's festival of gift-giving (Muslims), Hanukkah (Jewish), Kwanzaa (African Americans) and Pancha Ganapati (Hindu) may also be celebrated in December depending on the lunar calendar. Many Christians, though well-intended, will try to liken Hanukkah to Christmas in an attempt to be inclusive. They will even go so far as to joke, "You get eight days of receiving gifts and we only get one!"

At times it may be difficult for Christians to understand the full impact that the Christmas season, which begins as early as October, has on non-Christians. And yes, it is experienced for many as the "Christmas" season and not the "holiday" season as there is such a void and lack of acknowledgement of non-Christian holidays. In fact, the true "Holiday Season" begins in September/October with the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah and continues through the end of January with the Chinese lunar New Year. Yet it is nearly impossible to escape the continuous reminders of Christmas with the non-stop playing of Christmas music everywhere you go, the relentless TV commercials selling the must have toys, Christmas caroling, Secret Santa, pictures with Santa, TV specials, movies, etc...Sometimes it gets so overwhelming even Christians grow tired of the constant barrage of "good tidings".

Continued on back

TIPS TO CONSIDER

- Create an atmosphere that seeks to educate not discriminate. The separation of church and state allows us to educate about different religions but not to dominate at the exclusion of others.
- Recognize and educate different religious holidays throughout the year not only during the month of December. Consider putting together or purchasing a diversity calendar and distributing the information so that people can reference the material and acknowledge ongoing events.
- Develop a policy that addresses religious concerns such as time taken off from work or school. In the United States, Christian holidays are institutionalized into the calendar and as a result there is no need to use personal days or vacation days to celebrate their holidays. Allow flexible time in the work setting so that people can celebrate their holidays without being penalized or discriminated against. For students, be certain to include a policy for test taking and make-up options.
- Outline what is and is not appropriate for December celebrations and provide that information well in advance.
- When preparing for religious celebrations assemble as diverse a group as possible to plan for events throughout the year.

CONCLUSION

For some, the fuss being made regarding the December holidays is blown way out of proportion. The question asked by many is, "What if everyone in your office or school celebrates Christmas is there really a need to acknowledge these other religious holidays?" Yes. First, there is a high likelihood that there are

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Dr. Maura Cullen is the author of the bestselling book "35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap". She is a highly-acclaimed diversity trainer who has educated and inspired people worldwide in over 400 universities and organizations on how to be more inclusive and authentic when communicating with others. She is widely considered one of the nation's foremost authorities of diversity issues today.

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