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Religious Pluralism and New Year's Day
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In the face of the religious intolerance that continues to exist in this country's public life, many are rightly led to a quest for religious pluralism-to a state where all creeds are equally tolerated. Still, this honorable search for pluralism often loses its way.

Somehow, the solution that this quest seeks has become not an equal acceptance and tolerance of all religion, but a denial of all religious influence in hopes of some sort of religionless society and government. This misguided quest becomes ever more real during this holiday season-when, for example, the "Christmas tree" is renamed the "holiday tree."

Though separating Christmas from its religious undertones seems to be a relatively easy, and executed, task for some, a brief history of New Year's Day will reveal that separating religion from this country's public holiday celebrations is not only unduly offensive to many, but impossible for all.

Various cultures and religions celebrate the New Year at different times of the year; Jews, for example, usually place the New Year at the end of September, and the Chinese locate the celebration of the New Year, perhaps the greatest holiday of their calendar, sometime in January or February. However, our celebrating the New Year on Jan. 1 is a tradition that we owe to the Christian influence upon this country's past.

In the first century B.C., Emperor Julius Caesar moved the Western world toward a purely solar calendar. Concurrently, he chose Jan. 1 as the beginning of the New Year: Janus, for whom the month of January is named, was the god of doors, gates, and beginnings. Romans sought Janus' assistance in every domestic venture and depicted him as having two faces, one looking forward and the other looking backward. The Julian calendar worked well, at least better than its predecessors, but it was, unfortunately, ultimately flawed.

Christians were absolutely forbidden by state authorities from celebrating the New Year, and so instead, as a sort of counterattack, Christians held special services of expiation on Jan. 1.

As time went on, one new year led to another and, by the fourth century, Christianity had overtaken the Roman Empire. Accordingly, Christians adopted the Julian calendar, together with its Jan. 1 New Year's Day. After Christmas was fixed on Dec. 25, Jan. 1 received its much-needed sanctification from pagan ritual and became the day to commemorate Christ's circumcision, which, according to Luke, took place eight days after his birth.

Despite the calendar's shortcomings, the Western world continued to use the Julian calendar, but by the 16th century, the calendar's discrepancies culminated, throwing off the vernal equinox by 10 days. Consequently, on Feb. 24, 1582, Pope

Gregory XIII decreed that the day after Oct. 4 of that year should be reckoned as Oct. 15. Gregory made other changes to the Julian calendar and thus produced the Gregorian calendar, which eventually was adopted throughout Europe: by Scotland in 1600, by Germany, Denmark, and Sweden around 1700, and by England in 1752.

Until that time, the New Year was celebrated, in England, on March 25 (both the traditional date of Christ's crucifixion and the day of Annunciation), in Germany, on Christmas, and in France, on Easter. Nevertheless, most of the West eventually adopted Jan. 1 as the first day of the year.

In calculating the year, the Gregorian calendar took the birth of Christ as its starting point, which was thought to be Dec. 25, 1 B.C. ("Before Christ"). Thus, properly speaking, the New Year we now welcome is "anno domini 2006," "the year of our Lord 2006" (hence "A.D.").

The Gregorian calendar, which all of the Western world now uses, is also called the Christian calendar because of its starting point.

The very fact that we welcome the year 2006 rather than the year 1427 means that our society has chosen to follow the Christian calendar rather than the Muslim calendar, which, among other differences, begins with Muhammad's flight to Medina in the Christian year of 622. We hereby recognize the impossibility of separating religion from this holiday season.

This brief history of New Year's Day elucidates that religion is too ingrained into our culture to completely extract all its influences and place them in the corner to think about what they have done.

If we were to truly and completely separate religion from our society, we would have to change the names of the months and days themselves (goodbye, ancient Roman religion) and consider our weeks by something other than seven days (have a good life, Judaism)-and that is just a brief glimpse at the task that would await us.

The solution to the problem of religious intolerance, therefore, is not to pretend as if no religion exists (who really thinks that the new appellation of "holiday tree" will solve the problem? "Holiday" is only slightly changed from the religious "holy day"), but a willingness to recognize the hand that religions have played in forming our modern world-and from there we can proceed toward a willingness to recognize, tolerate, and sympathize with those religions that have not had as big of an impact in shaping our society and government.

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