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White Christmas
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Okay, admit it. You like the Christmas song, "White Christmas." Or at least you did until you heard it too many times as Muzak. Well, maybe I am overdoing it. But even if only half of you enjoy the song, it illustrates its popularity and success. In fact, this song may be the best-liked song in the USA, and not just for Christmas. It has been recorded more times and has sold more copies than any other song.

The popularity of "White Christmas" is more than just an interesting tidbit to be remembered for the Christmas edition of the "Jeopardy" quiz show. It reveals how a large part of America has thought about Christmas for more than half a century.

Irving Berlin wrote "White Christmas" in 1942 for the film "Holiday Inn," starring Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire that also earned Berlin an Oscar. In 1954 a second film along the same theme was released with Crosby and Danny Kaye. To help promote the film, they named it after its featured song, "White Christmas."

The 1950s were a pivotal time in 20th century America. Young people returned from World War II, got married and started families. Families required places to live, which led to a boom in new houses and new neighborhoods. And these families were religious and required places to worship near them. In response, more churches (and synagogues) were built in America during the 1950s than in any other 10-year period of our history. People attended the new churches in droves and for those who could not, the new technology of television devoted Sunday morning to religious programming.

In this context, it may come as a surprise that "White Christmas" was such a popular song. It had no religious content. It did not mention the gospels' Christmas story, nor even refer to worship, a church or anything that could be construed specifically Christian. Instead, the words recall the glistening of snow, the sound of sleigh bells and writing Christmas cards. The last two lines even sound like a greeting card, "May your days be merry and bright and may

all your Christmases be white." Nor does the film "White Christmas" fill in the religious elements lacking in the song. The film emphasizes the importance of seeking and holding on to relationships after WWII, in particular, finding marriage partners. The two male leads, the two song-and-dance men are ex-soldiers and still single. By the movie's end, they have found women who love them and who the movie implies they will marry. The film telegraphs the message that Christmas is a time for families, and the holiday's special character helps create them.

The film neither emphasizes nor even mentions the religious aspect of Christmas. The closest the film comes are references to bells, once referring to sleigh bells and the other time to "merry bells," rather than to church bells. The show's other songs avoid mentioning the word "Christmas," singing about "snow" and "happy holiday."

So, how should we interpret the popularity of the secular song "White Christmas" with the high level of American religiosity in the 1950s? The answer is simple: American society was comfortable acknowledging and even celebrating all aspects of the Christmas holiday. To talk about family, snow and Christmas cards at one moment did not mean that a person did not talk about Jesus, Mary and the shepherds at another. To say "happy holiday" in one breath did not mean that a person did not say "Merry Christmas" in another.

The explicitly religious character of the holiday did not block out elements that lacked such links. America's heightened religiosity of the 1950s was inclusive and multifaceted; it allowed for a wide variety of religious and non-religious expression and did not find it threatening.