



How Do We Address the December Dilemma?

Discussion Guide

Discuss

Najla discussed the demographics of religious diversity in the United States with 70% of Americans identifying as Christian, 23% as unaffiliated or nonreligious, and 6% as Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, or another religion. What is the religious diversity of your workplace? Why does it matter?

Najla described some of the religious holidays that occur in or around December: Hanukkah, Eid al-Fitr (depending on the lunar calendar), Diwali, Bodhi Day, and Yule, in addition to Christmas. Did you notice any common themes across these holidays? Are there other cultural or religious holidays occurring in December that are significant to you?

How does your unit acknowledge the holidays? Who leads the planning for your unit's activities? What actions are taken to ensure that everyone contributes to the planning?

Suppose most people in your unit want to do a cultural Christmas celebration¹. What actions can be taken to ensure that the event is inclusive of people who don't typically celebrate Christmas—either religiously or culturally? In other words, how can the event be an invitation to co-workers to learn more about and share in local culture? And, how can this be reciprocated so that co-workers who follow different traditions can share theirs, if they wish?

Sometimes, efforts toward inclusivity around the holiday season provoke strong reactions with some people going so far as to say that there is a "war on Christmas." What are some ways to respond to this perception?

Practice

Najla encourages that we ask curious and respectful questions. Take turns sharing your responses to the questions below:

- What is your preferred holiday greeting—and why?
- What holidays do you celebrate in December?
- What are some of your favorite holiday practices?

Do an "audit" of your holiday or year-end party. Consider how awareness of religious diversity in your unit might affect decisions around these details:

- Does the menu consider religious dietary restrictions?

¹ "Cultural" celebration refers here to traditions such as decorations, gift exchanges, non-religious holiday music, and so forth that are identifiable as Christmas, but don't refer to Christianity.

- Will alcohol be served?
- Where will the party be held?
- What are expectations for attendance?
- Does the party take place during work hours, or is it planned for after-hours?

Is there anything that may need to be done differently to make your event more inclusive of religious and cultural diversity?

Go Deeper

Many of the traditions surrounding Christmas—holiday greenery, Christmas trees, wreaths, wassail, caroling, mistletoe, gift exchanges, candles, and Santa Claus—are actually rooted in pagan practices associated with the Winter Solstice. Even the date of Christmas on December 25th was an intentional choice to coincide with the rebirth of the sun. This is an example of *syncretism*, the combining of different beliefs and practices in order to form a new and distinct system. Syncretism is common across cultures and religions and is often a driver in their evolution over time.

If you are a practicing Christian, how do you feel about the origins of these symbols? If you practice a Pagan tradition, how do you feel about the appropriation of these symbols?

Are you familiar with other examples of religious and cultural syncretism? How is the blending of beliefs, traditions, and symbols a way to foster belonging?

Some people refer to Hanukkah as “Jewish Christmas.” (Similarly, Diwali has been described as the Hindu Christmas.) Why is it inappropriate to describe these holidays in this way?

In 1966, Maulana Karenga founded Kwanzaa and held the first-ever Kwanzaa celebration. Karenga says that “Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, but a cultural one with an inherent spiritual quality” created to unite and empower African-Americans of all faiths and backgrounds. Even though it was created as an Africa-American and pan-African holiday, people of all races and cultures are welcome to share in the seven-day cultural festival.

Discuss the relationship between traditional holidays and the creation of new holidays built around secular values. As more Americans profess to be nonreligious, can we expect to see more holidays like Kwanzaa emerge?

Learn More

The Pluralism Project advances understanding and cooperation around religious pluralism in the United States. Read its excellent essay on “Rivers of Faith” to discover the complexity and dynamism of religion in our country and to learn more about seventeen different belief systems.

<http://pluralism.org/religions/>

The Tanenbaum Foundation offers resources for respecting religious diversity in the workplace.

<https://tanenbaum.org/programs/workplace/workplace-resources/>