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# Looking Back — Why Would Thanksgiving be Controversial?

Monday, November 26, 2007



Some days, a flood of emails and contacts signals something controversial demanding attention. Just as things were settling down for Thanksgiving Day, that appeared to happen out of the blue. Tracing the issue back to its source, I discovered an article posted at [Slate.com](http://Slate.com) by writer Andrew Santella. His article, "[Thanks, but No Thanks](#)," suggests that the so-called "war on Christmas" has spread to Thanksgiving.

In his article, Santella cited an article I had written last year for "[On Faith](#)" at [The Washington Post](#) and [Newsweek](#). That's why my "inbox" started heating up.

Here is how Santella explained the issue:

*A few years ago, some Christians began to sound the alarm about a "war on Christmas," alleging that schools, courts, and local governments were transforming a sacred holiday into a secularized winter festival. Now, much as the 24-hour Christmas music on the radio seems to start earlier each year, a few believers are voicing their worry about the secularization of our society in November instead of December. Concerned about the eroding religious dimension of Thanksgiving, they urge a return to a more sacred holiday. If the war-on-Christmas crowd asks us to put Christ back into Christmas, these Thanksgiving religionists urge us to celebrate Thanksgiving with the emphasis on thanking God. But complaints about a secularized Thanksgiving are even less convincing than the outcry over Christmas.*

Santella may argue that Christians merely allege that Christmas is being turned "into a secularized winter festival," but the evidence is rather overwhelming when it comes to the public schools and government facilities and programs. What Santella calls the "war-on-Christmas crowd" ranges from concerned Christians to ardent controversialists, but the battles over nativity scenes, Christmas plays, and even Christmas trees are all too real.

Has all this now been pushed back a month to Thanksgiving? Santella points to "Thanksgiving religionists" who "urge us to celebrate Thanksgiving with the emphasis on thanking God." Of all things.

Santella continued:

*As holidays go, Thanksgiving has long suffered from an especially acute spiritual identity crisis. Even the most casually religious Americans say grace or otherwise offer thanks before Thanksgiving dinner—even if the thanking is done between pie-eating binges. On the other hand, it's not as common for us to attend a worship service on Thanksgiving as it is on more obviously religious days like Christmas and Easter. So, just how religious of a holiday should we consider Thanksgiving? Some seem to want to answer that question by telling us exactly how and whom to thank.*

In the course of making his argument, Santella suggests that historians are not in agreement about the real story of the "first" Thanksgiving celebration. In his words, "the problem is that holidays turn into a tug of war between cold, hard history and comforting popular folklore, between fact and faith." He suggests that we make room for both.

Along the way, Santella continues his condescension toward those with whom he disagrees. He refers to the "war-on-Christmas crowd," "Thanksgiving religionists," and the "spiritual defenders of Thanksgiving." In the end, he suggests that room should be made for both a secular and a religious celebration of Thanksgiving and that what he might call the

“war-on-Thanksgiving crowd” should stop complaining and let the thanks fall where they may.

In [my article](#) cited by Santella, I did not suggest that the secular-minded should not be allowed to celebrate a secular Thanksgiving. That is their right. I did wonder how exactly that would work, and I reminded Christians of our own responsibility to remember that Thanksgiving is about thanking God — the great Giver.

I wondered just who (or what?) a non-believer thanks. I wrote:

*In his Thanksgiving declaration of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln said, “It has seemed to me fit and proper that God should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people.” Does this language now resonate with the American people? Or, is it merely an exercise in civil religion?*

*The secular vision of thanksgiving feels empty and false. If there is no Creator and the universe is a cosmic accident, whom do we thank? At best, all we can do is be happy—at least in some sense—that this accident has not turned out worse. If there is no divine intelligence or benevolence behind world events, public and personal, it certainly seems like our Thanksgiving is just an exercise in considering ourselves comparatively lucky. How can fate be thanked?*

*Americans are a creative people. Those who disbelieve in God may substitute some “attitude of gratitude” for thanksgiving, but it does look like a pale and artificial substitute.*

It did then, and it does now. Santella himself points to this when he points to the suggestion offered by Daniel Dennett that non-believers thank “goodness” rather than God. Just how does one thank “goodness,” and where does this goodness reside? From where does goodness come? Is it a cosmic force?

Controversy over Thanksgiving is a sign of the times, no doubt. I seriously doubt the existence of a raging “war over Thanksgiving,” but Andrew Santella at least found a debate worth having.

