The Original 'War on Christmas' Was Waged by the Puritans

Much ink is spilled every December over the "War on Christmas"—a perceived assault, led by secular folk, on the public acknowledgment of the holiday. But in fact, public-spirited "warfare" against Christmas goes back a long way in our history, and it was carried out by very religious people.

The New England Puritans' hostility to the holiday is well known; yet the reasons for their anti-Christmas sentiment went deeper than the impulses of a Scrooge. As author Stephen Nissenbaum explains in his book *The Battle for Christmas*, the Puritans' objection to Christmas was both theological and social. Being biblical literalists, they pointed out that Scripture contains no command to celebrate Christ's birth and indeed never specifies its date or season. Moreover, they strongly suspected Christmas of pagan origins (an idea which has been safely put to rest by competent historians).

The Puritans also objected to the way the holiday was commonly celebrated. Far from the family-friendly holiday it is today, Christmas in the early modern era was often an occasion for wild revelry, drunkenness, gambling, and licentious behavior. (The reasons for this are complex, some of them having to do with the period of leisure following the harvest.) One Puritan divine lamented that "Christ is dishonored more on Christmas than on any other day."

Accordingly, the Puritan authorities banned the holiday and enacted a fine for anyone who tried to celebrate it publicly. No church services were held on Christmas, unless it happened to be a Sunday; schools and businesses remained open, and children who tried to cut class were punished; December 25

appeared in almanacks and calendars as a blank entry. The harshest measures were enforced between 1659 and 1681. Not until the mid-19th century was Christmas finally recognized as an official public holiday in New England.

We can understand and even sympathize with the Puritan leaders' desire to curb public debauchery and encourage virtuous living. But they overlooked a fundamental aspect of human psychology. Religious joy often finds its release in secular merry-making. It's true that during such merriment things can get out of hand, but the proper solution is to re-channel the energy toward a healthier observance and celebration.

The Puritans thought it preferable to throw away a beloved holiday rather than reform peoples' behavior. And they imagined that leveling the entire year into "ordinary time" would improve spiritual life.

Curiously enough, the Puritans' actions served the cause of secularism, making December 25 an occasion of work and commerce instead of worship. If anything, we are reminded of the atheistic Soviet Union and its campaign to obliterate Christian holidays and symbols. The Puritans may have taken Christmas away from the devil, but they didn't give it back to Christ.

And in some ways, their campaign left its mark.When you take festivity out of the Christian experience, you get the commercial frenzy of the modern Christmas season and a culture characterized by busy-ness and overproduction. We are industrious but joyless, because we have lost touch with the values of gratitude and rejoicing. The original War on Christmas teaches us the heavy price we pay for defaulting in our duty to be merry.

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