



## Whose holiday is it, anyway?

John DiLeo © 30<sup>th</sup> October 2022

When I signed up to lead today's service, I figured it would be easy to come up with things to say. I mean, after all, there's no shortage of writings and opinions around the Church's appropriation and subjugation of non-Christian customs and occasions.

I also figured it would be really easy to find information on what Unitarians think about Halloween and other 'appropriated' holidays. As Garrison Keillor said:

*“A lot of folks say that Unitarians have no beliefs. That is not true. Unitarians have very strong beliefs. It is just that what those beliefs are depends upon what book they last read.”*

The truth is that I *have* a lot of thoughts on the topic – unfortunately, I found myself at a loss to assemble any *coherent* thoughts.

Growing up in a very White, very Christian community in semi-rural Connecticut, I received precisely the indoctrination you would expect: Church holidays have *always* been Church holidays *first*. Any non-religious themes that have crept into those holidays are the result of those creepy secular types on Madison Avenue and their constant desire to turn wholesome and uplifting holiday observances into commercialised freak shows.

Of course, once you do even a little digging – rather than simply listening to what your Christian clergymen tell you – you learn the truth is often quite the reverse. Rather than a lofty, spiritual “holy day” having been ordained by God and springing forth fully formed, we learn the early Catholic Church intentionally created holy days to lie atop – and, they hoped, eventually smother – existing non-Christian (and, therefore, “pagan”) commemorations.

[An interesting aside here – once I became *aware* of Christian holiday appropriation, I came to assume that was *always* the reason the Church

calendar put *every* holiday where it is...including with regard to the date of Christmas. But, it turns out Christian scholars placed the birth of Jesus around the December solstice *before* many of the now-co-opted traditions – such as Yule – even arose.]

Practices and customs associated with those existing festivals and celebrations have become part of ‘traditional’ observances by modern Christian families, with their meanings and origins whitewashed, diluted, or forgotten completely.

As a skeptic, though, all of this leaves me with a big “So what?!?” feeling. Do I really care from which religious or spiritual tradition a particular practice comes, when I don’t actually believe in *any* of that “spirituality stuff”?

A key take-away for me is that there’s ultimately no such thing as a “pure” observance of *any* holiday. Even for a holiday observed exclusively within an indigenous people, in a relatively small part of the world, there are variations among local traditions – largely a feature of their having been handed down orally, without a ‘definitive’ version committed to written form.

For us, as a congregation, I believe that also means there’s no one “right” way to observe any given holiday, or even our weekly time together on Sunday mornings. We have a framework of traditions, such as:

- Lighting candles and singing Christmas carols on Christmas Eve;
- Lighting a chalice and sharing our Joys and Concerns on Sunday mornings; and
- Marking the turning of the seasons with annual events – the Service Auction, Water Communion Sunday, the Pledge Drive, and so forth.

Within that framework, there is – and there is *supposed to be* – broad latitude to vary the details, as suits the circumstances or the personal preferences of those organising each event. Any approach to leading an event that accomplishes the purpose of that event – while upholding our core principles – is valid. In practice, some things will turn out simply not to work in a given circumstance, and we need to take those lessons learned into account when planning similar events in the future.

Turning our attention specifically to our weekly time together on Sunday mornings, we note there have been a lot of changes, many brought about as we weathered – and continue to be concerned about – COVID. There are members of our congregation who may *never again* feel comfortable attending an in-person Sunday service. We continually have to adapt to last-minute changes of plan, because a key participant is home isolating after a positive RAT.

Many of the things we try as service leaders will turn out not to work well in our new Hybrid reality, and attendees may at times be unhappy with how a particular element of a service is conducted by a leader. As it says in the John Lydgate quote, popularised by Abraham Lincoln:

*“You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time”*

What we want to avoid, of course, is doing things that don't please anybody, any of the time. For that, we need everyone's help – as we try different approaches to service elements, such as music and singing, let us know how they're working *for you*. Your feedback will be taken into account, but...bear in mind others may feel precisely the *opposite* of how you do, or practical considerations may get in the way.

All of this provides our service leaders with a fun and interesting challenge. It's my hope we can rise to it, and we can continue to grow and strengthen as a community.

**Meditation / Conversation Starters:**

- What holiday traditions are important to us?
- What Sunday service customs matter most to me?
- If you feel like something's missing from our “new normal” traditions, how can we regain it, within our new constraints?