

Article VI

How Religious and Hero Holidays Can Bring Us Together

Holiday celebration can be unifying or inadvertently divisive. We all celebrate holidays for the same reasons. We celebrate spring, harvest, or heroes, for example.

On the other hand, celebrating ethnic holidays can sometimes separate people by making them feel uncomfortably left out, different, isolated, or excluded. Worse still, celebrating our group's military victories and war heroes' defeat of other groups is obviously not the way to build bridges or reduce inter-group hostility. Ethnic holiday celebrations can unwittingly pit one ethnic group's history, accomplishments, self-pride, even joy against another, perpetuating an unwittingly counterproductive isolating, competitive, separate-but-equal, alienating mindset.

How then can we improve? First, let's study the history of our holidays -- and those that others celebrate. We find, surprisingly, that the major holidays of major religions and ethnic groups celebrate the same things in many of the same ways. Christmas (that used to be celebrated at Easter time), Easter, St. Patrick's Day, Asian Lunar New Year, Passover (first day of the old Jewish calendar), Rosh Hashanah-Yom Kippur (another Jewish New Year), Persian Nowruz, and Holi, for instance, are all celebrated as spring holidays between the winter solstice and vernal equinox.

Winter solstice marks the moment when days finally begin to get longer. Ancient peoples celebrated the arrival of new crops and new life. Vernal equinox is the culmination of that period with the longest day of the year. Ramadan/Eid al-Fitr and Diwali display all of the same spring earmarks, but fall out of this period. Ramadan follows a rotating lunar

calendar. Historically, Ramadan is when Allah plans for the new year and Eid al-Fitr (month of Shawwal) when camels are pregnant. Diwali is a festival of lights celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and some Buddhists and one of South Asia's several new year/ spring holidays.

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So let's compare the remarkably similar traditions most all of which accompany each of these holidays. Putting the dark and bad behind and looking forward to the new crops and better times were ancient universal reasons to celebrate. Symbolically then, we celebrate the sun and dispel the dark with displays of candles, lamps, torches, bon fires, fireworks, and now electric lights.

New life, birth and rebirth, and everlasting life, or the cycle of life are celebrated by eggs, buds, flowers, evergreens, and circular wreathes. House cleaning and washing, paying off debts, repentance, fasting, and giving to the poor all represent putting the bad behind, making amends, and starting afresh. Giving gifts and feasting auspiciously celebrate new and better things to come in the new season. Colorful decorations include sun colors of red, yellow, orange and gold. Green represents life. Foods are likewise symbolic such as dried fruits, sprouts, yellow rice, or long noodles signifying longevity and continuing success.

On the other hand, Christmas, Ramadan-Eid al Fitr, Hanukah, Diwali, and Kwanza tell similar

stories about how holidays can make people feel separate, left out -- or comfortably included. Religions, races, and ethnic groups cannot ignore the larger powerful cultural forces around them. Christians did not and could not abandon the popular cultural celebrations of the Jews or other cultures, as the Jews could not escape influences of the cultures of the times and locales in which they lived. And Islam, as we know, could not entirely abandon those same cultural influences that shaped Judaism and Christianity. A learning and healing opportunity is lost every year by separating these holidays in library book displays, school lessons, ethnic organization and government-sponsored holidays, displays, etc. that could be unifying if edifyingly inclusive.



The lessons here are that whatever our religious or non-sectarian beliefs, we are all products of larger cultural influences that given the big historical picture are remarkably similar in origins and development. Stepping back to see the big picture enables us to see our human connections, patterns, and similarities. Our religions and cultures adapt to the kaleidoscopic forces of history, geography, climate, demographics, politics, etc. of which they are an integral part. If the colorful pieces or refractory lenses of the kaleidoscope become dysfunctional, cultures try to adjust. They sometimes adjust well and sometimes counterproductively. We can all help the kaleidoscope of humanity to maintain a harmony and beauty.

Some examples of how cultures and religions have worked symbiotically to adjust the out-of-sync holidays include the cases of Hanukkah, Diwali, and Kwanza. Hanukkah has little to do with the traditions of a spring, new year holiday. Hanukkah is a minor Jewish holiday celebrating a victory and is not one of Judaism's four new year's days. But feeling "left out" at the popular Christmas season, the minor holiday got bumped up to a culturally competitive holiday that could make Jews feel more a part of the larger culture. Similarly, Kwanza helped African-Americans feel included with a celebration at this festive time more attuned to African traditions. Diwali, a festival of lights, celebrated regionally in south Asia and beyond, picked up local and sectarian cultural meanings depending on the sub-region and religion that wanted to be a part of the popular festival. So people from diverse religions of Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist and diverse regions with different histories can all feel a part of the unifying celebration of Diwali.

Hero holidays can likewise become celebratory to some while alienating to others – unless we can step back and see the big picture from outside of our race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, etc. Columbus Day, Pulaski Day, Lincoln's Birthday, and Martin Luther King's Birthday are examples of holidays that can work either functionally or dysfunctionally to unite or to divide us. As we did with the religious holidays, we can look for what unites rather than what paradoxically makes us simultaneously feel closer as a group, but unwittingly sets us apart from others.

Hero statues, street names, and school names are now flash points of divisiveness. Our awareness of cultural icons long accepted by at least parts of our larger culture as symbols of pride, to others are symbols of oppression or, at minimum, insensitivity. Columbus Day may make us feel proud as Italians, but considering Columbus's mercantilist intentions and enslavement of local Carib inhabitants, it cannot

and should not be a source of pride. Yet to single out Columbus Day also makes a cross-culturally wall-building statement. How can we begin to diffuse the hurt and emotion of such culturally divisive “antiheroes”?

Many such similar ethnic conquests, subjugations of others and their celebration need to be *simultaneously* relegated to edifying museums, libraries, textbooks, teachers, and preachers and re-categorized, not divisively by country, continent, race, or religion, but as “Missed Opportunities for *Human Harmony*.” Glorification of war heroes glorifies war and violence as an admirable and legitimate means of solving problems. War heroization degrades nonviolent, more humane, and socially functional solutions. Napoleon for the French, Peter the Great for Russians, Ghengis Khan for Mongolians, or Alexander the Great for Greeks all were master organizers and accomplished military victories that greatly expanded their territories – but they were certainly not revered by those that they impoverished both in their own populations or those that they killed, plundered, enslaved, raped, etc. in territories that they conquered.



We must work very hard at war-related holidays such as Memorial Day, Veterans Day, Pulaski Day and Independence Day to not inadvertently glorify war, focus on the soldier victims alone, nor

to unwittingly portray war as an inevitable and respectable method for solving the world’s problems or winning the zero-sum game. We must use such opportunities to ask, “How then can we promote peace, harmony, positive-sum

thinking? What other approaches than killing one another might be preferable and possible? What can we do preventatively?”

Even our American war heroes fighting with much less ruthless blood thirst and more equalitarian goals such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Dwight D. Eisenhower all represent the use of violent solutions for the achievement of economic or political problems that society had failed miserably to solve by more peaceful means. All have mixed records, at best, on slavery, civil rights and integration. War and violence are always solutions based on failure to achieve positive-sum goals that benefit all by expanding the pie. War heroes are societies’ pawns who do their dirty work, because those societies are incapable to work together to find peaceful solutions to creating and sharing a larger pie.

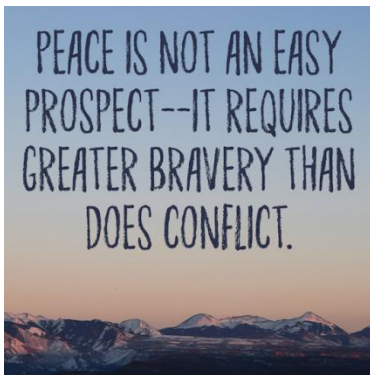
Even heroes with a commendable reputation can be unwittingly divisive if they become perceived as national, ethnic, racial heroes.

Such heroes provide a culture and its constituents a sense of false or hollow pride. Idealizing ethnic heroes does not give people a sense of pride from within themselves. Healthy and abiding pride must be attained through one’s life achievements and one’s life-skill competencies, not through superficial glorification of heroes that does not increase one’s own self-worth. Ethnic- hero teaching distracts from precious time for teaching those precious life skills for individual development, the basis of true self pride.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, as much as King should be celebrated, has become a Black holiday. So how do we make it a *universal* holiday? How do we include and welcome people from outside the tent who otherwise may not be as enthusiastic as those inside? Answer? Include *with* King a *unifying* celebration of Peace Keepers and Human Rights

activists around the world honoring Nelson Mandela, Mala Yousafzai, Lech Walesa, U Thant, Mahatma Gandhi, Mikhail Gorbachev, Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, and many more from every continent, culture, tribe, country, race or religion. Dr. King, I believe, would approve.

So instead of such war-focused holidays, let's put on our calendars September 21, World Peace Day to celebrate such heroes. We can still mourn, but for the hundreds of millions who suffered from the bloody mercenary, mercantilist, ethnocentric, sectarian or racial-driven conquests, not in one country or another, but throughout history and the world. We can recognize that we have all been both perpetrators and victims at various times in history.



World Peace Day then goes far beyond just a day celebrating our own veterans or war heroes -- who are also victims of violence and pawns in humanity's universal zero-sum game. World Peace Day provides an opportunity not just to lick our wounds, grieve for our losses, beat our chests as victors, or celebrate human sacrifice as necessary to achieve that victory, or that ever-tentative peace and superficial fragile harmony. The day better allows reflection and reexamination of where we perpetually go wrong, and what we can do to end the vicious cycle of hate and violence to better achieve peace, harmony, and universal prosperity and welfare.

Such a day does need to include, not celebrate, the *anti*-heroes of many cultures throughout history such as the Alexander the Greats, Napoleon Bonapartes, Genghis Khans, Mao Tse-tungs, Joseph Stalins, Adolf Hitlers, Tamerlanes, Montezumas, and Robert E. Lees -- for starters. *Every* culture must come to recognize that their histories are not perfect, in fact, filled with imperfections. In this way, we have removed our dysfunctional need for one-upsmanship upon which we build often misplaced hateful scapegoating, arrogance, and inter-racial, inter-ethnic, international, sectarian rage. Furthermore, the alteration of history by glorifying a seriously flawed person is educationally dishonest and pedagogically misleading to adults and children alike. White washing and selective history is just what empowers racism, ethnocentrism, sectarianism, classism, etc.

Simultaneously, we must, refrain from singling out for revilement the Nazis, Stalinists, Fascists, or Communists, as we need to include the Spanish conquistadors and their British, French and other European colonial conquerors, the Mongolians, the European Crusaders, Greeks, Romans, Aztecs, African, and Arab slave traders and even our own slave holding Founding Fathers. We are remarkably similar in our historical experiences, whether in natural disasters, persecution, or in our atrocities against each other, and in our common failure to solve problems peacefully. Understanding what made these people justify horrific massacres, enslavement and subjugation of others as less than human or deserving of death and subjugation is a discussion and self-reflection for not only Peace Day or Sunday, but for every day.

Sports heroes, we also need remember, are leftover remnants, still smoldering, however, of war, its glorification, and omnipresence. Sports promote and reinforce the enjoyment of a zero-sum defeat of others. When the defeat is by violent means or physical force, the sport becomes even more alien to the inter-human caring, love, giving, sensitivity that is required for a harmonious world.

For educators to tout self-esteem as crucial to our development, but to insist on sports that demand that at minimum one half of us are losers is disingenuous.

For educators to correctly point to the importance of developing communications skills, but then to promote activities that prevent children from verbal communication and keep children at shouting distance from one another makes little sense. To encourage activities that physically separate people rather than allowing proximity for social engagement unwittingly sabotages development. To inadvertently encourage children in a career that allows only one in some 1,600 high school students to reach professional sports level shows a misguided concern for children. Raising the level of sports to a status of “worship” amplifies the harm we do to our children. To so elevate sports, elevates morphology over emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal-intergroup sensitivity development.



Sports alter the brain and behavior by more than the tragic consequences of CTE. Stunting communication skills, imprinting or habituating violence as a solution, teaching the brain that defeating others or hurting others should be

enjoyable all distract from acquisition of the tools that allow us to resolve our differences through communication and sensitivity to others. It diverts young people from the precious few years of youth to learn the essential life skills that make that person independent, knowledgeable, and skilled in higher-order thinking and free from group crutches, coaches, and financial managers. Why not instead make our inventors, scientists, doctors, social workers, teachers, thinkers, humanitarians, Good Samaritans, and sacrificing parents our heroes?

Whether we are teachers, preachers, ethnic organizations, boards of education or legislators, a big picture, broader knowledge and perspective of history brings us together. Not confining discussions of holidays, heroes, or events to any single nation, race, ethnic group, religion, tribe, or people can bring us together. Our focus on ourselves alone as special makes others automatically not so special. We unwittingly cheapen ourselves, our culture, and our group by seeing only our distorted reflection in the pond without seeing the other shore, the people standing beside us, in back of us, even those trying to help us or threaten us. Opening our eyes also opens our hearts. When we celebrate holidays and heroes, may we all broaden our tent, broaden of views, welcome others, celebrate our peacekeepers, and with humility understand others and ourselves profoundly and with sensitivity.

This article is part of an 8 part series by Peter Porr that can be downloaded as an e-book at SouthEastAsiaCenter.org

Rebecca Forgasz “The story of Hanukkah: how a minor Jewish holiday was remade in the image of Christmas,” *The Conversation*, Dec 22, 2019.

Becky Little, “The Ancient Origins of Diwali, India’s Biggest Holiday,” *History*, Oct 20, 2016.