



How Do We Address the December Dilemma?

Discussion Guide

Discuss

JillAnn described some of the religious holidays that may occur in the winter months: Hanukkah, various Islamic holidays, Diwali, the Lunar New Year, and Yule, in addition to Christmas, Advent, and Epiphany. Why do you think so many religious traditions celebrate a holiday at this time of year?

Are there other cultural or religious holidays occurring in the winter that are meaningful to you?

How does your unit acknowledge the holiday season, if at all?

What does religious diversity look like in your unit?

How do you ensure that everyone contributes to the planning?

Practice

Suppose most people in your unit want to host a secularized Christmas celebration. What actions can be taken to ensure that the event is inclusive of people who don't typically celebrate Christmas or who only celebrate the religious aspects of Christmas?

What would an inclusive holiday party mean for the decorations? The food? The activities?

Is there a way to be inclusive that celebrates differences, instead of neutralizing or minimizing them?

Go Deeper

Many of the European traditions surrounding Christmas—decorated trees, wreaths, caroling, mistletoe, and Santa Claus—are rooted in ancient Pagan practices. This is an example of syncretism, the combining of different beliefs and practices to form a new, distinct system. Syncretism is common across cultures and religions. If you are a practicing Christian, how do you feel about the origins of these symbols? If you are a practicing Pagan, how do you feel about the appropriation of these symbols?

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

In 1966, Maulana Karenga held the first-ever Kwanzaa celebration. Karenga said 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.

What do you see as the difference between a cultural holiday and a religious holiday?

As more Americans profess to be nonreligious, can we expect to see more holidays like Kwanzaa emerge?

Resources at Virginia Tech

Visit www.dos.vt.edu/interfaith to find an Interfaith Calendar of major holidays for the next four semesters. You will also find the Regional Multifaith Resources page to connect students to nearby religious communities, dietary accommodations, and on-campus meditation spaces.

Do you want customized professional development on interfaith issues for your unit?

Contact JillAnn Knonenborg (jillann@vt.edu) to schedule a workshop or presentation.