

Both greetings — Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays — have religious significance: Guest commentary

By Bill Ruh

The Question of the Week was about Christmas and what terms should be utilized; Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas. It might help to have a background on the derivations of both phrases.

To understand the meaning behind Happy Holiday(s) and Merry Christmas, one must look at the origin of the words.

The word holiday is a compound stemming from the words holy and day. The word "holiday" first surfaced in the 1500s replacing the earlier word "haliday" which was recorded before 1200 in the Old English book *Ancrene Riwe*. Earlier, about 950, the word was "haligdaeg" and appeared in the Old English *Lindisfarne Gospels*. It was a compound of the Old English "halig" (holy) plus "daeg" (day). Originally the word meant a religious festival and a day of recreation, free from labor and toil. As the English language and pronunciations changed the word evolved into our modern "holiday." To wish someone a Happy Holiday was to wish them happiness for a singular day of religious significance "Happy Holy Day." To wish someone "Happy Holidays" was to wish them happiness for the many Holy Days in a particular cycle of the Christian calendar, such as Advent. Advent is a cycle in the Christian calendar which includes Christmas and concludes on the Feast of the Epiphany. Therefore, then or now, to wish someone "Happy Holidays" is to wish them happiness from the first night of Advent through the Feast of the Epiphany, including Christmas.

The word for Christmas in late Old English is *Cristes Maesse*, the Mass of Christ, first found in 1038, as *Cristes-messe*. *Cristes-messe* referred directly to the specific date set aside for the Mass of Christ, a commemoration of the birth of Christ. The word became "Christ Mass" in Middle English and then "Christmas" in modern English. To wish someone "Merry Christ Mass" or "Christmas" was to wish them to be filled with joy on the singular day set aside to recognize the birth of Christ.

Both of these greetings have deep religious significance. In a very technical sense perhaps "Happy Holidays" has the greater significance as it wishes one happiness for the entire period of Advent, while Merry Christmas sends a greeting for only one day during that period, the day of the Mass of Christ.

Personally, I wish people a Merry Christmas.

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