

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

The holiday season during the pandemic



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Yes, the holiday season is here, but different this year than any in memory. There are the increasing COVID-19 cases and record numbers of deaths. Most celebration events are online, restaurants are closed, and even private meetings are discouraged given the rapid spread of the virus following Thanksgiving and the anticipated spike during the December holidays.

And yet there is good news with the beginning of the approved vaccinations taking place, even though many of us will have to wait months before they become widely available. It is not the time to let down our guard, or for a few more months at least.

While the winter darkness joins with the dark immediate outlook on the health scene, it is also a time for the various religious communities to seek light.

This week, the Jewish community celebrates Hanukkah, which began last Thursday evening and continues for eight days, culminating the evening of Friday, Dec. 18. The tradition goes back to the second century B.C.E. with the rededication of the Temple after it had been defiled by invaders. The menorah was lit but there was only enough oil for one day, and yet the flame continued for eight days. This miracle led to Hanukkah being called the Festival of Lights.

Hanukkah is not considered a major religious holiday and is not mentioned in the Torah. It has become, especially in America, more commercialized due to the commercialization of Christmas. It should also be noted that this year, the first night of Hanukkah, Dec. 10, was also the International Day of Human Rights. Perhaps it should also be a reminder that just as the origin of Hanukkah was the re-establishment of the Jewish Temple following its capture, it should be the human right for all religious communities to worship in freedom. Earlier this month, on Dec. 8, Buddhists of the Zen tradition celebrated Bodhi Day, the day Siddhartha Gautama experienced enlightenment and thereby became the Buddha. The Sanskrit term for enlightenment is Bodhi and expresses an internal coming of the light. Because Buddhism spread from India and Nepal 2,500 years ago, it was contextualized by the cultures that began to engage with it. As a result, Buddhism in Tibet is somewhat different than Buddhism in Japan or Buddhism here in the U.S., and so there are often different days in the year that Bodhi Day is celebrated.

Buddhist homes will often have a ficus tree they decorate with beads, ornaments, and multi-colored lights similar to the way Christians decorate Christmas trees. Buddhism also strives toward the realization of interconnectedness of all beings, thus seeking to promote the deep responsibility to all.

As the days darken, more than a billion Hindus, Sikhs and Jains have celebrated Diwali, also known as the Festival of Lights. The word Diwali comes from the Sanskrit word deepavali, meaning "rows of lighted lamps."

Many of these celebrations occur near the winter solstice when in the Northern Hemisphere we experience the shortest day of light. It is of interest that this year on Dec. 14, one of the longest days of sunlight in the Southern Hemisphere, a total solar eclipse was visible in parts



A Nativity scene welcomes visitors inside Bronner's Christmas Wonderland in Frankenmuth in 2017. Despite the pandemic, people of faith celebrate religious holidays with as much passion and hope as ever. *MLive.com files*

of Chile and Argentina. A partial eclipse was also seen in other locations of southern South America, southwest Africa, and in parts of Antarctica. It was a short time of darkness in the middle of one of the longest days for that part of the world as well.

Other religious holidays occur at other times of the year, and not all religions use the same solar calendar as is common in the West. The Islamic Lunar Calendar is shorter than the solar calendar, and the religious holidays thus come approximately 11 days earlier each year than the previous year. Accordingly, Ramadan, the month of fasting from sunrise to sunset for Muslims, begins next year on April 13, about one week after the Christian celebration of Easter.

Fasting entails no eating or drinking, but more importantly, it requires abstaining from impatience, anger, judgment and the plethora of bad deeds that might have been present throughout the year. It is a time to reset practices, clear thoughts and work toward practicing all that is good and right. It is a time of reflection that could be compared to the Christian practice of Lent that occurs the 40 days prior to Easter. Ramadan ends with a major celebration for Muslims called Eid al-Fitr. The day starts with prayers followed by a lot of feasting and visiting with

friends and family.

During this dark winter season, Christians also celebrate with light by lighting candles each of the four Sundays of Advent, and decorating with lights on Christmas trees and with other decorations. The victory of light over darkness also represents the victory of knowledge over ignorance and understanding over prejudice. Especially in this year when the darkness of the days is combined with the COVID-19 threat of more deaths, we must also use it as a time for renewal and hope.

During these dark winter days, all religious communities need this time to celebrate a season of light. At this time of darkness in the world and in our nation where fear, health challenges, conflict and even violence threatens, let us come together seeking understanding and peace. Knowledge of other traditions and getting to know others who celebrate differently helps us come together as community. Interfaith understanding does not mean that all religions are the same or that the differences do not matter, but it does mean that we recognize our common humanity and pursue "peace on earth and goodwill to all." Let this be our commitment.

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