

BUDDHISM

Bodhi Day remembers the enlightenment

By Rev. Shuji Mintzmyer
Grand Rapids Buddhist Temple

The date many Buddhists celebrate Buddha's Enlightenment day is Dec. 8.

This is the day when Siddhartha Gautama became an enlightened being and teacher, whom we now call The Buddha.

Many think Buddhists believe The Buddha is a god to be worshipped. This is not the case. First known as Prince Siddhartha, The Buddha was a seeker.



Mintzmyer

At the age of 29, he embarked on a quest, a journey of introspection that sought to answer two questions: What is the meaning of life and of death? And, why do humans suffer?

After six years of fasting and meditation as an aesthetic, Siddhartha realized he was not getting any closer to understanding the human condition. He was on the verge of starvation, when a young woman brought him milk and rice. He ate the meal and then sat under a Bodhi tree, committed to not moving until he found the answers to these questions.

Fanciful stories surround this time under the Bodhi tree. Birds made a comfortable seat for Siddhartha to sit and a seven-headed serpent protected him from rain. On the seventh day, Mara visited and tempted him with the princely treasures he left behind. She then sent him nightmares of fighting demons.

Mara (which means destruction in Sanskrit) is often depicted as the Buddhist devil or some equivalent — an evil force outside of us.

In reality, Mara represents our ego that sometimes gets in our way of doing what's best for us.

In response to Mara, Siddhartha touched his hand to the ground, and said "I have the right to sit here. I have the right to understand the meaning of birth and death."

He then looked up and saw the morning star as it rose and he became enlightened. At that moment, he became The Buddha, the enlightened one. Central precepts of Buddhist teachings, The Middle Way and The Four Noble Truths, came from this awakening.

To commemorate the day of The Buddha's enlightenment, those who practice Buddhism spend extra time in meditation for the first week in December.

On Dec. 8, Buddhists around the world have a joyful celebration. The Grand Rapids Buddhist Temple hosted a celebration of our children so that they may embark on the path of wisdom and compassion. This is our celebration of lights, freedom from suffering and the connection with all beings in this world.

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Celebrating Christmas light and recognizing other traditions

By Douglas Kindschi
Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

There is no doubt that we are in the holiday season. It's all around us, in television programs, store advertisements, holiday lights throughout the city and frequently on homes and while shopping for presents.

Even those who do not send out Christmas cards, often send "Happy Holiday" cards.

The dominant holiday in December, obviously, is Christmas, but it is not the only religious holiday being celebrated this month. Our Jewish

neighbors celebrate Hanukkah, Buddhists celebrate Bodhi Day, Muslims celebrate the birthday of Muhammad, and Hindus also have a holiday they recognize. Each of these is described in the accompanying articles.

It should also be noted that many of these traditions use a lunar calendar for religious events that differs from the standard Gregorian calendar. Hence the celebrations are not always on the same day from year to year.

The Christian celebration of Easter, in a similar manner, is not on the same date each year, since it also follows a lunar calendar tied to the Jewish holiday of Passover.

The celebration of Christmas also is not the same for those in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where it is celebrated Jan. 7.

Actually, Christmas was not a part of the early church calendar, since there was no mention in the Bible about the time of Jesus' birth.

The official date of Dec. 25 was not designated for Christmas until 350 C.E. by Pope Julius I. After the Protestant Reformation, the day, which refers to "Christ Mass," was banned for many years in Scotland and also by the Puritans in America.

Picking the date in December is probably related to the Winter Solstice as well as the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, which was very popular in ancient times.

Candles and torches represented the fading sun, whose return would begin to bring new light. Evergreen plants and wreaths reminded people of the coming spring, when green would again predominate.

Gift-giving was a part of the festivities.

Christians decided not to fight the festival spirit but just join in and celebrate Jesus' nativity as well. After all, Jesus said "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

In the Sermon on the Mount, he even said to his followers, "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14)

On this, the darkest period of the year, a celebration of light is most appropriate.

Looking forward to the green of spring was like looking forward to the festival of Easter. Giving gifts to each other represented God's gift of the Christ child to the world.

Christians are often critical that Christmas time has become too commercial and has lost the "true spirit of Christmas."

But maybe our secular society is just returning to the pagan style of trying to bring light and hope to the shortest day of the year.

We celebrate the season of light with our other religious neighbors.

At this time of seeming darkness in the world and in our nation, where fear, conflict and even violence are too prevalent, let us come together seeking understanding and peace.

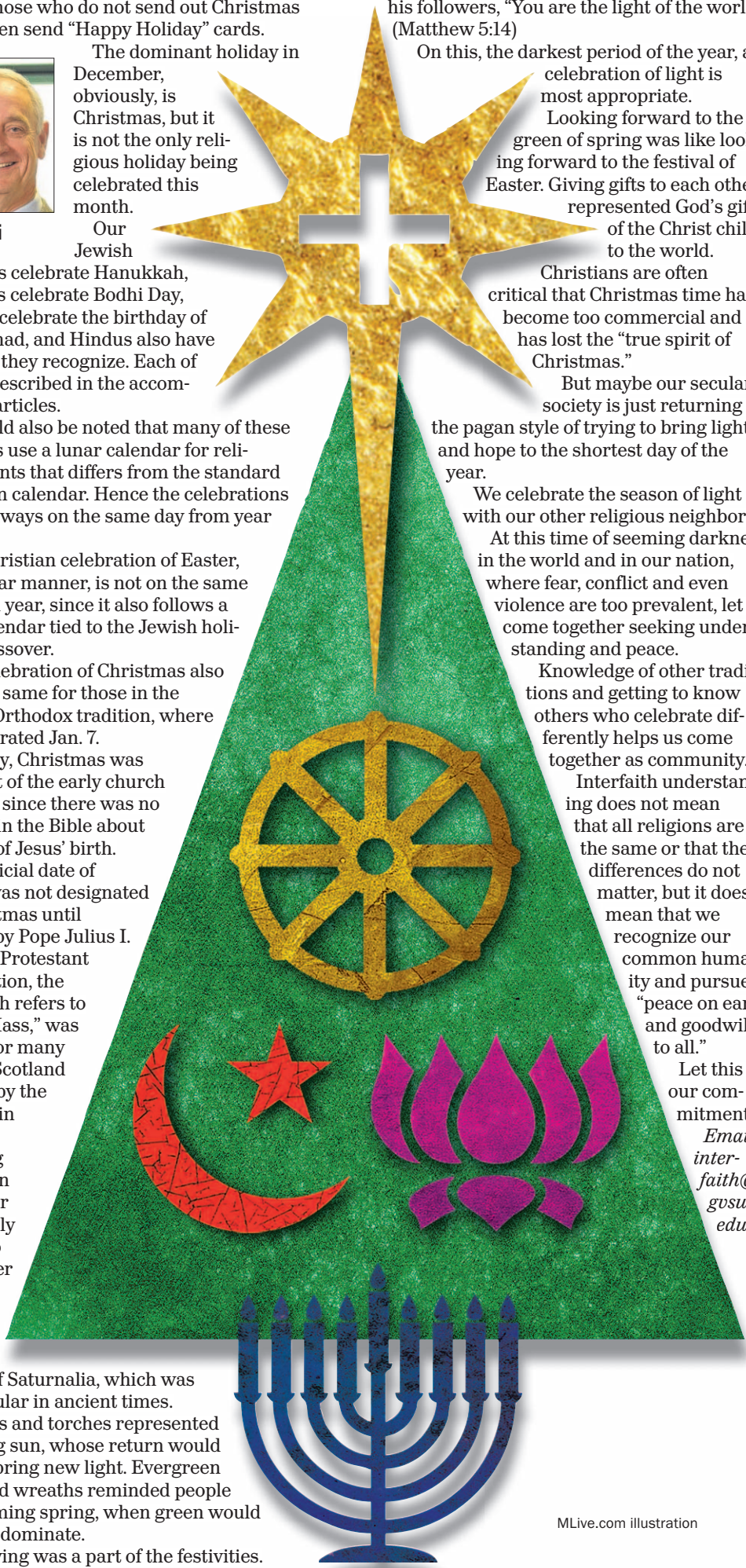
Knowledge of other traditions and getting to know others who celebrate differently helps us come together as community.

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.
Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu



Kindschi



MLive.com illustration

HINDUISM

Dattatreya's story shared among Hindus

By Fred Stella
Pracharak of West Michigan Hindu temple

On Dec. 25 this year, due to this particular lunar cycle, Hindus will join their Christian friends to celebrate the appearance of divinity in flesh.

Their celebrations will retell the story of Dattatreya, whose birth was, to say the least, an interesting one.

Dattatreya was believed to be "divinity descended."

According to the Bhagavad Gita, "when righteousness declines, when wickedness is strong, I rise, from age to age, and take visible shape, and move, a man with men, succoring the good, thrusting the evil back and setting virtue on her seat again."

While it is possible that Dattatreya did exist as a historical person, most Hindus have no problem with acknowledging his birth story as a sacred myth, revealing a glimpse into the relationship between humanity and God.

Hindus hold that there is only one God, known as Brahman, but that divinity has many expressions.

While the scriptures indicate the existence of millions of devas (gods & goddesses), there is special veneration given to the Trimurthi, or the "Hindu Trinity."

This includes Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver), and Shiva (dissolver/restorer).

In ancient times, there was a very pious, childless couple, Atri and his wife, Anusuya.

The story goes that one day the gods attempted to test the virtue of Anusuya. They took human form and appeared at her house when Atri was away. They wished to be fed.

Naturally, the holy woman welcomed them. But then they asked that she serve them naked. Not wishing to deny the request of guests, she obliged.

Because her consciousness was elevated, she did so with the thought, "What is the difference? I do not see three men here, but three babies." And because her thought was so powerful, the gods turned into infants.

Seeing her devotion and piety, they explained to her and Atri, who had now returned, by passing this test they would be rewarded. The three infants merged into one, incarnating all three divine aspects and became their son, Dattatreya.



Stella

JUDAISM

Hanukkah is the rededication of the Temple

By Sheldon Kopperl
Professor at GVSU

When Jews worldwide lit their Menorahs at sundown Dec. 6, they joined in the commemoration of a victory against tyranny and religious oppression carried out by the Seleucid autocrat Antiochus IV in 165 (or 164) BCE.

This festival of Hanukkah marked the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after it had been defiled by Antiochus' followers and re-purified by the Jewish priestly class. While the details vary according to the narrator, Jewish pride of the victory and thanks for God's miracles shine through.

The holiday today has different meanings to different people.

For children, the celebration gives Jewish kids a chance to compete with Christian friends for coveted December gifts. For most American Jewish adults, the celebration recalls a religious victory for tolerance and freedom, much as we

like to think of America as being a bastion of religious diversity and respect.

But unlike Christmas, which always comes Dec. 25, the date of the first day of Hanukkah varies from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

The answer lies in the complex lunar-solar calendar used by Jews for religious festivals.

Traditionally, the Jewish year is a lunar year with 12 months of 29 or 30 days each corresponding to the lunar cycle. This gives us a year of 354 days — 11 days shorter than the solar year.

The Bible (Ex. 12) tells us to celebrate the Passover festival in spring. This means that with a loss of 11 days per year, it won't be long before Passover occurs at the end of winter.

So Jews add a "leap month" to the end of the Biblical year. These Jewish leap years occur seven times in a 19-year cycle. This current Jewish year (5776) is a leap year, meaning next year, the additional month will push the start back to Dec. 25.



Kopperl

ISLAM

Mawlad marks birth of Prophet Muhammad

By Aslam Modak
Member of local Muslim community

Say: "In the bounty of God, and in His Mercy — therein let them rejoice." *Quran (10:58)*

Muslims consider that the greatest bounty, favor and mercy of God for mankind is the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

He was born on the 12th of the Islamic month of Rabi Awwal. Because the Islamic religious calendar is lunar, the dates fall differently each year. This year, the date of the Prophet's birth is Dec. 24, the day before Christmas. The Quran declares that Jesus Christ said "Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!" *Quran (19:33)*

Jesus and Prophet Muhammad are considered close and are greatly loved, and Muslims feel fortunate that the two celebrations follow one another this year.

Muslims come together joyfully to commemorate the birth of the Prophet in

different ways.

Poetry is recited, charity and food are distributed. The celebrations, also called Mawlid-an-Nabi, are purely spiritual in nature. The Mawlid is conducted only out of love and reverence for the Prophet, as a reminder that he has arrived to provide hope.

Some legalistic Muslims oppose this celebration on the grounds that it was not done by the Prophet himself.

However, Mawlid-an-Nabi is a national holiday in almost all Muslim countries. The Mawlid is celebrated at the Islamic Center and Masjid on Burton Street, the Bosnian Cultural Center, and in many Muslim homes in Grand Rapids.

A true Mawlid, however, is to reflect the Prophet's qualities of inclusiveness, God-consciousness, and mercy in all moments and all aspects of our lives.

In the words of a Sufi Muslim friend: "Whatever brings you closer to God, Christmas or Mawlid, may it be blessed."



Modak