

## Happy Holidays: Creating Common Ground in the “War on Christmas”

Richard K. Olsen and Julie W. Morgan  
University of North Carolina, Wilmington, Eastern University

### Abstract

This article analyzes the “War on Christmas” that is often a seasonal theme in FOX News coverage and some conservative Christian/Family organizations. The authors apply concepts from Jurgen Habermas to diagnose the controversy. This analysis reveals that much of the controversy can be traced to the unclear status of the salutation “Merry Christmas.” They then use the work of Pearce and Littlejohn to explore possible solutions and offer a sample dialogue to model how readers of this article may become agents of peace in this controversy.

“Where the state is either ignored or broken down into a mosaic of localized and partial entities, politics too winds up obliterated. Symbols and images become far more important than concrete struggles involving rival claims to power, economic interests, and visions of a better society”  
(Carl Boggs 1997, 768).

[1] “Hi, how are you?” is a question often asked in social settings, but rarely answered with an authentic reply. Social conventions dictate that one reply with a response such as “Fine, how are you?” Primarily, people use such functional communication to facilitate social interaction, not to advance a position or invite serious reflection. “How are you doing?”, on the other hand, is a syntactically similar utterance that is typically a call to offer a more authentic and detailed response. The communicator is required to think more seriously about whether to engage this question honestly and begin a dialogue about positions, perceptions and ideas. To which of the above groups does the speech act “Merry Christmas!” belong? Is it the winter quarter equivalent of “Hi, how are you?” or is it a seasonal greeting that invites significant reflection on and disclosure of one’s spiritual orientation?

[2] The “War on Christmas” does not help us answer this question directly, but is fueled, in part, by the unclear status of the salutation. Jürgen Habermas, a German sociologist known for his efforts to understand how language and power work to shape society, provides a useful foundation from which to look at the controversy and then offer some potential approaches to “winning the peace” in this civil(ity) war by applying the work by Littlejohn and Pearce in the area of moral conflict. In this article, we argue that the ambiguous status of the greeting combined with unclear distinctions between the various contexts within which the phrase “Merry Christmas” is expressed are key factors in the longevity and intensity of the “War on Christmas.” Those desiring to be agents of peace and reconciliation in this “war” can do so by recognizing the role these factors play and thoughtfully applying the principles for resolving moral conflict to this case. However, before we offer our analysis it is important to briefly disclose some assumptions we have as authors.

### Some Basic Assumptions

[3] The most basic assumption we make is that speech matters. While some casual critics of this “war” may be inclined to dismiss it as trivial because it is “just an expression” we cannot do so. The opening quotation by Boggs illuminates the negative trends that can contribute to an overemphasis on the symbolic. However, there are many neutral and positive reasons for legitimate focus on issues of language and symbol. Researchers have studied the power of language to shape our perceptions and by implication, our individual and communal action. The scholarship on the power of language ranges from the conservative ideals of Richard Weaver (1948) who lamented the slippage of stable meanings that had once held society together, to the more radical insights of Jacques Derrida (1976) who believed that the fluidity of language that Weaver distrusted was an intrinsic characteristic of language that makes it open to exploitation by the powerful through such strategies as euphemism and connotative meaning. His goal was to make such power moves clear by a process he called *deconstruction*. Our position aligns more with Weaver and Berger and Luckmann (1966), who admit that the role communication plays in shaping perceptions and actions and to power issues being exercised through language.

[4] This perspective on language informs our analysis in two ways. First, we take seriously the idea that the presence or absence of an expression makes it easier or harder to invoke particular ideas, values, etc. In this sense we can agree with FOX News icon Bill O’Reilly that the presence or absence of “Merry Christmas” or other language associated with Judeo-Christian heritage can potentially have social and civic consequences. We also recognize the ways in which invoking the metaphor of “war” has been vital to the energy, longevity and unhealthy tone and direction of this controversy (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). John Clancey (1989) notes the “innate extremism” that is invoked and sustained as part of the war metaphor (Clancey 1989, 74). Calling something a “war” provides tacit permission to engage in extreme “win-at-all-costs” behaviours.

[5] Second, we assume that the “War on Christmas” is but one manifestation of a larger cultural orientation toward clash, controversy and argument. Deborah Tannen (1998) focuses her research on the way people talk with one another in social situations. Tannen offers an insightful analysis of this trend and its consequences. With the emphasis on clashing rather than common ground and reasonable compromise, it seems clear that this “war” would certainly have been another example in her text. This assumption is important because, while we want to rightly hold FOX and its principal players and other “culture warriors” accountable, we also must admit that they are operating *within* a larger culture as well: a culture that privileges and rewards (through ratings, etc.) those who choose to clash and argue loudly if not well. The lack of mainstream popularity for a less incendiary television talk host such as Charlie Rose is testament to the role that combative communication and clash play in popular media.

[6] Third, the flare-up in the “War on Christmas” is but another installment in the ongoing and legitimate struggle between the sacred and the secular. Such struggle is eternal and universal. Even the decision to bring about the elimination of religion unless in complete subordination to the state did not eliminate such controversy (for example, the early Soviet Union); nor has it subsided in the most extreme theocracies of the Middle East. Christians even have made efforts to restrict or eliminate the celebration of Christmas. Chris Durston (1985) reminds us that “When the Puritans took control of government in the mid-1640s they made a concerted effort to

abolish the Christian festival of Christmas and to outlaw the customs associated with it but the attempt foundered on the deep rooted popular attachment to these mid winter rites” (Durstun 1985, 8). This is an important reminder that the definition and status of Christmas is not, nor has ever been, unanimous or fixed even among those self-identifying as Christians. Such historical perspective is important since it illuminates the cyclical nature of many issues and problems and the general resilience of the contemporary culture of any era to incorporate and resist change. Such perspective also provides the basis for some humility in our offering of solutions. With these assumptions briefly outlined, we can begin our more explicit analysis of communication problems embedded in the “War on Christmas.”

### **Diagnosing the Problem**

[7] Jürgen Habermas offers a vast set of writings over fifty years in the areas of cultural, moral and political concerns (Finlayson 2005, *Preface*). While many of his concepts could be usefully applied to the “War on Christmas” controversy, we elaborate on only three. First, we invoke his concept of the *ideal speech situation* to help contrast the dialogue and monologue surrounding the controversy. Next, we examine his concept of *communication competence* to highlight more specific factors contributing to the dispute. Finally, we apply his concept of *the public sphere* to the debate. His clarification of the context within which the “war” takes place is a key point of transition to any efforts toward resolution of the conflict which we deal with in the final section of our article. The advantage of analyzing the controversy through the lens provided by Habermas is that his work helps us see the difficulties and challenges imbedded in the debate and the opportunity for solutions more clearly.

### **The Ideal Speech Situation**

[8] Habermas, as a witness of World War II, saw first hand the destruction that can occur when people are not allowed to disagree with the ideas of others. The ideal speech situation is a context within which communicative action could take place relatively unimpeded by barriers of ideology and strategic actions by any party. It is not likely to completely happen but is an ideal for which to strive.

[9] Communication ethicist Richard Johanessen (1996) efficiently summarizes the four assumptions that allow such a situation to manifest:

First, participants must have equal opportunity to initiate and continue communicative acts. Second, participants must have equal opportunity to present arguments, explanations, interpretations, and justifications; no significant opinions should go unexamined. Third, participants must have equal opportunity to honestly express personal intentions, feelings and attitudes. Fourth, participants must have equal opportunity to present directive statements that forbid, permit, command, etc. (Johanessen 1996, 53)

If each participant in the dialogue lives out these assumptions then fair turn-taking may occur, the ability to question the “common sense” and assumed values of others is freely allowed without defensiveness, and concessions and compromises can be offered without feeling

“vulnerable” to the opposition. These assumptions are clearly violated within mass mediated contexts because, of course, the viewing audience can do none of these things (except in their minds as active listeners). They are also typically violated within mass media programming generally and “War on Christmas” coverage specifically because of the monologic nature of the coverage. The infamous “shut up” and “cut the mic” scenes from Robert Greenwald’s (2004) *Outfoxed*, in which Bill O’Reilly is shown over and over again to tell guests to “shut up” and quip to engineers to cut the microphone of a guest who won’t comply, are compelling examples of a general tendency Bill O’Reilly has for violating Habermas’ standards.

[10] The lack of a fair and safe context for discussion makes what Habermas calls *communicative action* nearly impossible. For Habermas (1979) there are two broad categories of communicative action. The first is communication oriented toward reaching understanding such as common definitions that would inform consensual action. The second is communication that concerns consensual action. Consensual action assumes a common set of definitions of the situation and then is moving toward what can collectively be done in response (Habermas 1979, 209). In the “War on Christmas” for example, the typical pattern is to invoke an example of perceived hostility and then move directly to an action of protest or intervention. There is rarely a reasoned discussion from either side concerning an *agreed upon* account of facts, events and prioritizing among relevant values. Unfortunately, neither of these is present in the discourse about the “war.” More importantly, they do not seem to be goals of the discourse in any meaningful way. We discuss the issue of definitions in more detail in the section that follows. However, it is important to elaborate on the issue of consensual action in a bit more detail.

[11] What would it mean for current opponents in this “war” to have a common goal of satisfactory resolution rather than the current goal of “defeating the enemy?” It is clear that the leaders in the defense of Christmas have a vested interest in perpetuating the perception that cooperative or consensual action is impossible. In one example, O’Reilly does this by linking the presence or absence of “Christmas” to a larger agenda:

See, I think it’s all part of the secular progressive agenda ... to get Christianity and spirituality and Judaism out of the public square. Because if you look at what happened in Western Europe and Canada, if you can get religion out, then you can pass secular progressive programs like legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will, gay marriage, because the objection to those things is religious based, usually (mediamatters.org, 2005).

By invoking a slippery slope fallacy (if we lose this battle, all the rest of the battles are inevitably theirs for the taking too), O’Reilly raises the stakes so high that cooperative or consensual action on this specific issue is made not only unachievable, but undesirable.

[12] First, he summarizes the opposition as “secular progressives,” totalizing not only his legitimate opposition, but also his supporters: “us” or “them.” It leaves no room for anyone who might disagree with his perspective. Second, he seamlessly links Christianity to related but distinct issues of spirituality and Judaism. This move allows for the “cultural Christians” who often combine Christianity, capitalism and patriotism into a designer theology alloy to remain quite comfortable with their religious status, even though the Bible makes distinctions between

cultural wannabes and true believers (See for example Matt 7:21 and Rev 3:16). Many Christian writers make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion, but O'Reilly (strategically?) fails to do so.

[13] Third, he links the fate of "Merry Christmas" with Judaism. This link is theologically quite suspect, but rhetorically effective because it provides the basis for claims that are to come later in the passage, and broadens the cultural heritage appeal of his case. Fourth, he combines all realms of discourse and decision making into the metaphor "public square." We take this issue up in greater detail when we discuss the public sphere. However, at this point it is important to note that such a rhetorical space is important to defenders of "Merry Christmas." Finally, he links the absence of religion in this public square with a host of specific policies that are likely to be offensive to his viewers, as if to suggest that religious perspectives are either completely present or completely absent from informing public policies in the United States or other countries.

[14] The ideal speech situation is a useful critical concept that reveals several shortcomings in the rhetoric of the defenders of "Merry Christmas." If we take the passage above as somewhat "typical" of O'Reilly's rhetoric we can see that it violates each of the assumptions summarized above. First, in this particular example, there is no co-participant to have equal opportunities to initiate or continue communication. Second, by extension, no one is provided an opportunity to present counter arguments, etc. Even when guests are present, there are often significant constraints upon them to follow and narrowly respond to O'Reilly's line of reasoning. The third and fourth assumptions are also violated in this example and frequently with other rhetoric on the "war." The most important shortcoming for our discussion is the lack of cooperative intent exhibited by key conservative advocates in the "war."

### **Communication Competence**

[15] For Habermas, the ideal speech situation is best understood as a hypothetical ideal to be strived for rather than something easily achieved. However, communicative competence is a more achievable set of characteristics for an individual communicator to acquire and enact. Habermas (1979) asserts that the competent communicator can engage in communicative action that pursues truth. One might imagine this as the next step in creating understanding and moving forward toward consensual solutions. If the ideal speech situation eliminates external constraints on democratic communication that produces rational outcomes, communication competence addresses internal abilities and choices by individual participants. Habermas builds his case from a very basic level: that the communicator must have command of the basic structures of language and purpose of communication. The competent communicator also must be a competent thinker and be able to put such thoughts into expression in rhetorically effective ways without invoking harmful rhetorical techniques that are associated with what he calls strategic communication—communication intended to persuade through manipulation.

[16] This seems like a rather minimal standard upon first glance. Yet Habermas elaborates on the analytical implications and suggests that a competent communicator should be able to analyze discourse at several levels as well. These levels include sensitivity to the general limitations of language and expression such as the struggle to communicate ideas that defy easy

expression, as well specific situational constraints such as specific relations between communicators and thinking through the implications of the assertions being made (e.g., “what if this is really true?”).

[17] Our application of the ideal speech situation to the rhetoric of the war on Christmas debate revealed several problems. The one most deserving of our attention is that the key spokespeople in defense of “Merry Christmas” lack the most basic commitment needed to carry out ideal communication: the commitment to seek agreement through a communicative process. Likewise, the concept of “competent communicator” also reveals many problems on both sides of the debate. However, our analysis will focus on the one we find most important to the debate: the lack of common agreement over the meaning of Christmas and, by association, the phrase “Merry Christmas!”

[18] Ruth Marcus (2005), a *Washington Post* correspondent, attended a Heritage Foundation talk by John Gibson, who was discussing his book *The War on Christmas*. Marcus, a self-identified “nice Jewish girl”, then wandered over to a nearby retail center called Union Station. She recounts her experience:

A huge You Know What tree, with presents wrapped in red and green underneath, stood in the hallway, near a placard announcing “Norwegian Christmas at Union Station.” A high tech player piano was playing “Go Tell it on the Mountain,” proclaiming the birth of You Know Who; the next selection was You Know Who Else Is Coming to Town. The most generic element was a small sign reading “Happy Holidays” but even then the words were bracketed by reindeer—and let’s just say, they weren’t eating latkes. It was beginning to look a lot like You Know What (Marcus 2005, ¶ 3).

This passage reveals the kind of communicative shortcomings that make proponents on either side seem foolish themselves or make the other side look foolish and thus unnecessarily perpetuate the debate. It also raises the question: Are the debaters in this “war” really arguing over the same thing? Marcus moves seamlessly from a song proclaiming the birth of the single most radical figure in human history to a song about a mythologized fictional creation of Madison Avenue as if they are semantically equivalent and equal figures in the debate. She later notes that “Santa’s a nice guy, honey, but he’s not for us [Jews]” (Marcus 2005, ¶ 6). She suggests that reindeer (perhaps because of all those seasonal TV specials) strongly imply a Christian orientation to the formerly generic “Happy Holidays.” Such an unsystematic combination of theology, folklore, commercialism and popular culture makes any useful discussion of the proper status and role of “Merry Christmas!” impossible.

[19] Alternatively, Gibson’s title implies a definition of Christmas as a “sacred Christian holiday.” Devout believers would apparently prefer this definition over the broader cultural catch-all offered by Marcus and others. However, the American Family Association president Donald Wildmon called for a boycott of Target because “they don’t mind offending Christians who celebrate the birth of Christ” (quoted in Marcus 2005, ¶ 10). Is going to Target or other retail outlets part of the “sacred Christian holiday”? Such comments suggest that there is also significant confusion over the definition of Christmas even among “Merry Christmas!”

advocates. Gibson's expresses equal concern about the banning of the play *A Christmas Carol* and of the colours red and green in his book in schools. Hence, even Gibson is guilty of confusing the sacred and the secular in his arguments.

[20] Communication competence calls for an awareness of the powers and limits of language. So first, we recognize that language is fairly stable but not completely static. "Holidays," which now can stand for any special day, civic or religious—or even a personal vacation—is derived from "Holy Day," which has clear religious implications. We have secularized that term rather than creating a new one. Both sides in our current debate seem to accept this gradual shift in meaning.

[21] Communication competence also calls for awareness of the specific situational elements that inform our quest for truth, understanding and consensus. Here is where a significant breakdown occurs. None of the popular commentary seems to offer a consistent definition of "Christmas," and thus the terms and the debates oscillate from discussing sacred religious celebrations to climbing on Santa's lap and asking for a "an official Red Ryder, carbine action, two-hundred shot range model air rifle, with a compass in the stock ..." (*A Christmas Story*, Shepherd 1983). Lincoln Dahlberg (2005) notes that, "a certain amount of agreement, or at least mutual understanding, is presupposed when interlocutors engage in argumentation. All communication presupposes mutual understanding on the linguistic terms used—that interlocutors use the same terms in the same way" (Dahlberg 2005, 125). Not in this case.

[22] Another component of competence, according to Herrick (2005), is that the speaker adapt to the hearer's worldview. That is, that the speaker admits and integrates some understanding that different values, assumptions, etc. may be informing the other person's position and try to shape one's own arguments to "translate" between those differences. This is clearly not the case for either side either. Many devout Christians would find Marcus's summation of the holiday generic and impotent to the point of irreverent. Proponents such as O'Reilly, Gibson and Wildmon seem to offer little awareness of how non-Christians might interpret the phrase "Merry Christmas" if they, in fact, do take the utterance seriously and not in the way that Marcus interprets it. If I am a devout Jew and respectful of the Christian faith, how am I to respond to a phrase that suggests that I co-celebrate in the birth of a person whose core claims are heretical according to my faith? I must either bleach the phrase of its specific meaning and treat it like "Shalom!" or not take the speaker of the phrase seriously (he doesn't really mean *Christ-mass*) or even renounce my faith and become a Christian. Certainly, norms of civility allow us to negotiate awkward situations such as this every day. ("How do I look in these jeans?" "I think Keanu Reeves is a brilliant actor, don't you?" "America, love it or leave it, you know what I mean?" "I know you generally don't eat meat, but try this smoked pork loin just once"). But we don't have national movements and debates over those situations. We do have one over the phrase "Merry Christmas!"; so clearer definitions are needed.

## **The Public Sphere**

[23] So far we have demonstrated two key dysfunctions in ongoing dialogue about "Merry Christmas!" as an utterance. First, we have shown a lack of commitment toward resolution through communicative action. Second, we have shown the lack of clarity over even the

definition of Christmas as a cultural event that is inseparable from Santa, reindeer, wreaths and ribbons or as a religious holy-day focused on the birth of God's only begotten son, Jesus. Both of these shortcomings serve to make the debate seem silly to many outsiders. In this final section of diagnosis, we examine the implications of Habermas's concept of the public sphere.

[24] Habermas pulls together the unreachable but guiding standards of the ideal speech situation and the characteristics of competent communicators to envision a rare but achievable engagement with ideas that he calls the public sphere. This public sphere offers a point of interface between the private life and the issues of state, community and public life. It is the place where public opinion is constructed. It can also be a real place where competent communicators work hard to carry out communication designed to build common ground and reveal truths that neither party might have uncovered otherwise. Dahlberg (2005) illuminates this connection of roles and rules well: "The criteria of ideal role taking act to exclude or repress coercive forms of discourse such as propaganda, deception, strategizing, dogmatic ranting, and emotional blackmail" (Dahlberg 2005, 120). He further notes that commitment to these ideals can and has worked to resolve even the most challenging controversies.

[25] This public sphere is a broad conception where any statement can be called into question and evaluated on its own merit without regards to author and other constraints. Dahlberg is further notes that, "The public sphere norm calls for 'coercion-free communication' and not power-free communication." (Dahlberg 2005, 122). There is room in this sphere for the productive clash of ideas as individuals and communities struggle toward the truth of a matter. James Jasinski (2001) clarifies that, for Habermas, the sphere "is both real and ideal" and that, "As a descriptive concept, the public sphere tries to identify and characterize a range of historically real political and social conditions that both enable and constrain public discourse within a given society" (Jasinski 2001, 474). Both sides of the debate would need to recognize the historical relationship between church and state within the United States and the misunderstandings that have arisen around this relationship in order to gain a recognition of the public sphere within the "war on Christmas" debate. There would have to be recognition of who has traditionally been given media time and time in the public sphere. We would have to debate the current issue with awareness of the trend toward politicizing Christianity that occurred during the early 1980s. These are but a few of the various factors that might be taken into account to discuss and debate this "war" appropriately.

[26] While many of these standards could certainly be usefully integrated into private conversations, we are concerned with how such roles and rules inform public debate of public issues. The specific case of how a couple chooses to celebrate Christmas in their home is a private sphere discussion. How a town chooses to celebrate Christmas is public sphere discussion.

[27] Even within the public sphere, however, there are logical and socially constructed divisions. Some of these logical divisions might include special audiences such as children (Sissela Bok, 1989). Similar divisions are relevant to our discussion of the "War on Christmas." Dominique Mehl (2005), in her insightful analysis of talk shows, notes that a lack of distinction between the public and private spheres can be problematic in talk show discourse.

One of the consequences of this subjectivisation of the public sphere and of the acquired prominence of the discourse of the uninitiated is the decline of the expert. As the television studios conducting discussions on society fill up with people recruited to talk about their everyday lives, the role of those who devote their time to making presentations of their knowledge, involving their expertise, defending their ideas and making the case for their positions becomes increasingly secondary (Mehl 2005, 24).

Mehl's point is that the public sphere (of TV) is better served as a forum for expert opinion and not in the naïve celebration of subjective experience and uninformed opinions no matter how colourfully or forcefully expressed. More broadly, Mehl demonstrates that confusion within and among various spheres (in her case, public and private) has demonstrable negative impact on the discourse that takes place. Below we look briefly at two spheres that seem to contribute to the confusion in the "war."

[28] Thomas Hollihan and Kevin Baaske (1998) remind their readers that the formal and informal rules for establishing proof can vary across contexts (Hollihan 1998, 141). These contexts include fields such as law, politics, business, etc. Such distinction would seem "common sense" among most trained communicators. The United States Constitution also makes legal distinctions between various forms of speech, including distinctions between protected speech and commercial speech. "While commercial speech is entitled to First Amendment protection, the Court has clearly held that it is different from other forms of expression; it has remarked on the commonsense differences between speech that does no more than propose a commercial transaction and other varieties" ("Commercial speech"). This distinction is often not clear in the "War on Christmas" debate. The implications of this confusion are closely tied to confusion of definitions over the phrase "Merry Christmas!"

[29] While it is true that many conservative Christian supporters of "Merry Christmas!" see the issue as a freedom of religion issue, the boycotts of retailers moves the status of the phrase from a "freedom to engage in private religious practice" issue to a public speech issue. In these cases supporters seem to defend the phrase as an essential expression of Christian faith and draw from the "freedom of expression" rights of the First Amendment. This definition, though, has implications for where such weighty messages ought to be incorporated. The mere presence of a Christian symbol is not universally considered positive by conservative Christians. For example, musical artist Madonna came under attack when her NBC music special was to feature her performing on a mirrored cross with a crown of thorns. Her spokesperson argued that it was meant to symbolize the theme of confession, but many religious leaders were angered and found it to be a publicity stunt in bad taste ("Madonna Cross Controversy"). While clearly a more extreme example, it serves to clarify the faulty logic embedded in the common argument of conservative defenders of "Merry Christmas!" The cross is considered too significant a symbol to be used in such a sensual and secular way. The critics saw Madonna as using the cross to inject false significance into her somewhat carnal but otherwise ordinary popular music. Yet, many of the same critics threaten and carry out boycotts to get "Merry Christmas!" *into* the Target flyer that sells "Santa's Helper" lingerie, colour-coded storage bins, a Madonna CD, and the latest version of Baby Wet-Wet. It is our contention that the presence of "Merry Christmas!"

is also being used here by corporate/commercial performers to inject false significance into the consumption of sensual and mundane but otherwise popular products.

[30] The distinction between the commercial and the public sphere is imperative to our argument. The commercial sphere is built upon consumption, which requires perpetuating discontent and a basic logic that things one can buy can solve one's problems (Brummett, 1991). Arthur Berger (2007) quips that, "America's great genius has been to spread consumer lust to the middle classes, and for some items, to the lower classes" (Berger 2007, 40). This orientation makes the commercial sphere quite powerful in ways that were heretofore limited to civic, political and religious sectors. The sales flyer or the mall become as important as the civic and religious "space" they have replaced. To some culture warriors, the exclusion of "Merry Christmas" from such spaces seems equivalent to being censored from the more traditional arenas of ideas.

[31] The distinction between the two spheres above becomes all the more difficult because we live in a consumer culture. This expansion of the corporate sector and the *logic* of business as the default logic of other non-corporate spheres have even permeated politics. The evolution of the sound bite is indicative of this consumptive orientation. It is an attempt by political groups to become more easily consumable in an age of information overload. However, it has now become the stand-in for significant ideas and in some cases, replaced or become the significant idea. By extension, for those battling for Christmas, the theological sound bite of "Merry Christmas!" must be preserved since that is now "significant discourse" within the sphere that seems to matter most. Joseph Staats (2004) rightly concludes the following:

The corporate sector with this kind of power can do much more than intrude upon lifeworld [our total life experience among the various spheres]. It can as well transform lifeworld in its own image, wielding power of such consequences as to be constitutive of citizenship itself. What I mean here is the power of the corporate business sector to cause citizens and their political leaders to think of themselves primarily as creatures of economics—the citizens first and foremost as consumers of goods and services ... What December goes by without the entire country being obsessed with whether consumer spending will be sufficient to make for a "good Christmas season?"

[32] In light of the expansion of the commercial sphere and its infiltration into others, it should be no surprise that many advocates of "Merry Christmas!" might confuse or combine the commercial sphere with others. In fact, it is not unreasonable to imagine that some might privilege the commercial sphere over others. Media personalities have a vested interest in promoting the significance of the commercial, mediated sphere. Within a perspective that lacks distinctions among spheres, exclusion from the local Wal-Mart is exclusion from O'Reilly's "public square" and, by implication, the entire marketplace of ideas. However, it should be clear at this point that there is a vast and meaningful difference between the marketplace of ideas and a literal marketplace of mundane things. The dilemma for advocates of the phrase "Merry Christmas!" is that they want to simultaneously preserve the integrity of the phrase and its presence in a sphere that directly challenges—indeed undermines—that same integrity. The

commercial sphere commodifies (turns into sellable goods) all that it touches and religious identity (and patriotism when it's July 4<sup>th</sup>) is no different.

[33] While there are many problems within, surrounding, and illustrated by the “War on Christmas” debate, we have chosen to apply some of Jürgen Habermas’ thinking to illuminate three of them. First, there is a lack of a cooperative aim among the participants that violates the standards of the ideal speech situation and discourse generally. Second, there is an utter lack of clarity regarding the meaning of Christmas as an event, symbol, etc. that reveals the lack of communication competence by both sides. Finally, there is significant confusion and conflation of relevant spheres of discourse which unnecessarily raises the stakes of the debate to an “ultimate showdown” among key players. Without reasonable distinctions among the spheres, to be eliminated from one is to be eliminated from all.

[34] Jane Braaten (1991) notes that most of Habermas’ concepts can be understood as diagnostic in focus. His work is useful for clarifying problems but not for offering solutions. The concepts above do point generally toward a direction of healthy discourse but they are not filled with specific behaviors or ideas to embrace when talking with a co-worker. In the second section of this essay, we introduce concepts that are more suitable for crafting a potential solution to the debate both in terms of a more useful communication process and some possible points of common ground made easier to apply the analysis above.

### **Are There Solutions to the Problem?**

[35] Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) observe that “when these social worlds collide ... each finds that the other constitutes a repudiation of that which it holds most dear ... The results are familiar patterns of reciprocated diatribe, in which each side rudely tells the other what is wrong with it. Useful discussion of the ostensible issues becomes a casualty of the bickering” (14). While there are different kinds of conflict and different dimensions to the “War on Christmas” conflict, we focus our analysis, on the “war” as a moral conflict. Viewing the “War on Christmas” as a moral conflict raises two important questions. How should conflict be conducted when deeply held philosophical issues are at the heart of the matter? And, how might we create productive dialogues in place of shouting matches and monologues that currently dominate most mediated commentary on the “war?”

### **Conflict over Moral Issues**

[36] In order to understand how conflict should be conducted when deeply held philosophical issues are at the heart of the matter, we must first explore what it means to have a moral conflict. Next, we must examine the relational dimensions of the participants and the characteristic markers of moral conflict. Littlejohn (2006) defines a moral conflict as “a clash between opposing parties based on differences in deeply held philosophical assumptions about being, knowledge, and the world” (Littlejohn 2006, 395). The “War on Christmas” has opposing parties clashing around deeply held, though often not clearly defined or expressed, philosophical assumptions. Both sides in this “war” will see the other as aggressor based on a large set of assumptions. “Liberals” are fighting the good fight against historically oppressive voices of tradition. “Conservatives” are fighting the good fight against historically rebellious voices of

unbridled liberalism. Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) suggest that moral conflicts are made more complex because participants clash from unique social worlds with distinct values and rules:

Because ways of dealing with conflicts are a part of one's social world, when these conflicts do occur, they lack a common a procedure for dealing with them. Actions taken by one side to be good, true, or prudent, are often perceived the other as evil, false, or foolish—perhaps even sinister and duplicitous. The intensity of moral conflicts is fueled when such actions are treated as malicious or stupid by the other side. (Littlejohn 2006, 50)

[37] Typical attempts to communicate in moral conflicts are inadequate because opposing sides filter the language of the other in such a way that the words inflame arguments. Opposing sides both speak the same language (for example, English) and yet at the same time do not speak the same language. Where “freedom of religion” means one thing to one group, it has a different meaning to another. Definitions—and “reasonable” applications—of words like “freedom” and “right” are often significantly different depending on who you ask. Because of this, any attempt at debate ignites more anger rather than building common ground. For example, O'Reilly frequently uses “political correctness” as a jousting partner on his show and yet, Gunn (2005) notes that folks like O'Reilly are “demanding that everyone accept one *politically correct* version of ‘Christmas’” (Gunn 2005, ¶ 8, emphasis added). This illustrates that many terms, not just “Christmas” as discussed earlier, are sources for additional misunderstanding and conflict within the unique context of a moral conflict.

### **Relational Dimension to Moral Conflict**

[38] Ethicist Martin Buber (1971) stressed the need to emphasize the strong ties between participants in a conflict. He focused on the quality of their relationship rather than the pattern of choices and outcomes. He suggested that participants examine the mutual effects on the relationship between the participants in the conflict when evaluating various communication options. Communication theorist Walter Fisher (1986) suggests that we can assess the quality of an argument by asking about the character of the audience that would believe and act on it (Fisher 1986, 85). Buber parallels this by suggesting that we can assess the quality of our process of argumentation by examining the quality of relationships it fosters among the participants.

[39] Pearce and Cronen (1980) conclude that quality of life and quality of communication are directly related (Cronen 1980, 28). They believe that dialogic communication is learnable, teachable, and even contagious. Persons in conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create. The cumulative “so what?” to these perspectives is that they remind participants even in the most heated debate that enhanced relationships and improved social worlds are possible and, indeed tied to the communication choices made during such debate.

[40] The relational implications regarding the “War on Christmas” are rather bleak. Within mediated conversations regarding the “war,” guests are rarely treated as equals and rarer still as someone from whom we might learn or consider alternative positions. Though O'Reilly may claim to be on friendly terms with many of his guests, the dialogue nevertheless rings of mere

instrumentality and not of mutuality and respect. More importantly, the relationships modeled and implicitly or explicitly promoted through conservative media when discussing the “war” is not one that Buber, Pearce or Cronen could support. They are often marginalized and trivialized, as “Kool Aid liberals” or demonized as conspiratorial agents who have already ruined Europe. The audience is not provided with the models, perspectives, or vocabulary for enhancing their relationship with their neighbours with whom they may disagree on “Merry Christmas!” or any other issue.

### **Additional Characteristics of Moral Conflict**

[41] Ongoing moral conflict is often intense and difficult to resolve because of the embedded worldviews and the relational connections among the participants. Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) elaborate on their definition by offering the following markers that identify a moral conflict. We highlight some of those important markers.

[42] One marker for moral conflict is that “the participants describe themselves as locked into opposition with each other” (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997, 68). For example, in his December 7, 2005 show, O’Reilly says that his show is “rooting for the traditionalists [versus the secular progressives]. So the battle lines are drawn. Too bad Christmas has to be in the middle of it” (“*What Christmas Controversy?*”). O’Reilly describes the “participants” in the battle as locked into opposition. Either one is for traditional family “American” values or one is for the secularization of America (which signifies “anti-American”).

[43] Two additional markers also help to identify this as a moral conflict. Pearce and Littlejohn find that moral conflict can typically be identified when “the discourse between the conflicted groups contains a large number of statements about what is wrong with the other group” and “if asked to imagine a resolution to the conflict, the participants can think only of capitulation and elimination of the other group” (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997, 68). O’Reilly continually blames “them,” i.e., “secular progressives.” For example, in a November 30, 2005 interview with O’Reilly on FOX News' *Your World with Neil Cavuto*, O’Reilly continues his campaign with singular focus on what is wrong with the “secular progressives” even down to petty name calling:

O'REILLY: [Companies telling their employees to say ‘Happy Holidays’ instead of ‘Merry Christmas’] is so insane, I don't think of anything—I've seen anything this stupid in the 30 years I've been in this business ... Now, we have people who are offended by that. Well, tough, right? Tough. Some people are offended by fingernails; I'm not pulling mine out. So I'm feeling—I'm offended by everything you do, we're not firing you. OK? Offended? Too bad.

Equating deep ideological difference with those who are bothered with trivial things such as fingernails with a leads one to believe that the only way to resolve this “war” is to eliminate the “secular progressives” because they are apparently irrational and can't be interacted with reasonably. O’Reilly’s words combine to ignite or at least continue to incite the clash. This particular clash has implications within our culture that make it a moral conflict.

[44] One of the more relevant insights by Pearce and Littlejohn for our purposes is that moral conflict can be made less strident through rhetorical processes:

In our experience, deeply enmeshed members of conflicting groups usually cannot give rich accounts of the moral orders of the other group. When they are urged to do so, their accounts end rather quickly in offensive descriptions (“they are just stupid!”) or attributions (“they are evil and can’t be trusted”). They are able to give rich accounts of their own moral orders, however—if we can hear them in their own terms (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997, 75).

Notice the simplification that takes place as we review an excerpt from the October 20, 2005 *O’Reilly Factor* that featured an interview between host, Bill O’Reilly and John Gibson about Gibson’s book.

O'REILLY: Yeah, but you see, I think you made a mistake by saying it's a liberal plot. And I'll tell you why. I believe—and I could be wrong—that most liberals are as angry about this as conservatives. It's the far left. It's the loony left, the Kool-Aid secular progressive ACLU America-haters. That's who's doing this.

While appearing to disagree with Gibson and extend an olive branch to the moderates in the opposition, he then offers labels and summaries of opposing positions and people that sustain the moral conflict regardless of what else might be said about specific positions on specific issues. According to O’Reilly, there is a world-wide conspiracy by extremists to rid the world of Christianity and Judaism from public discourse. Concomitantly, those who might describe themselves as liberal and believe that “Merry Christmas!” is not sensitive to the diversity of our current culture hate America.

### **Defusing Moral Conflict, Part One: Dialogic Orientation**

[45] How might we create productive dialogues in place of shouting matches and monologues that currently dominate most mediated commentary on the “war”? While daunting and with no guarantee of success, Littlejohn (2006) describes a dialogue of transcendence. This dialogue characterized by respect for one another seeks to redefine conflict and create common ground. Part of the dialogue must assure each participant that he or she will be heard and that they, in turn, must hear other participants (408-409). Littlejohn sees transcendent dialogue as an opportunity for “participants to move from a place of being stuck to new territory where joining places may be found” (408). This spatial reference is metaphorically and thematically consistent with Habermas’ public sphere and ideal speech situation.

[46] A commitment to this conception of dialogue addresses the relational component embedded in moral conflict highlighted above. If taken seriously and demonstrated authentically it provides the relational stability from which to begin to explore common ground and differences on particular issues. Definitions of key terms in the debate are critical. However, the most important definition one must have is of the humanity of the other people in the debate and a commitment to preserve their dignity. To apply this to the current issue one might ask the following question: “At the end of the discussion, have I conducted myself in such a way that the

other person(s) think more highly of me (and perhaps even the “group” I represent to them) because of how I’ve participated in this discussion?” Making such a commitment requires one to think highly enough of them that a relationship with them matters. But, as many romantic couples or good friends can attest, even thinking the best of another person is not enough to make conflict go away or keep a debate from escalating.

### **Defusing Moral Conflict, Part Two: Explicate the Process**

[47] Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) describe two different levels of change. The first level they describe is the activism level where one wants to achieve a “first-order change”, such as the legalization of abortion or to establish gay rights. The “second-order change” deals with how the “social order arrangements in which conflict is played out are modified” (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997, 105). For example, to be on the air with O’Reilly and debate the status of the phrase “Merry Christmas” and hope to affect a change in the opinion of the O’Reilly or his viewers is to attempt first order change. To go on the show and question a programming pattern that forces complex arguments to be truncated into twenty second exchanges so everyone on the panel can squeeze in a contrasting thought between commercials would be to question the structures and arrangements within which the arguments take place. Pearce and Littlejohn find that first-order change tends to be the sole focus while little attention is paid to second-order change. Such a focus tends lead to a conflict that becomes intractable, and all suffer the consequences because the larger rules of engagement encourage such an outcome yet are rarely questioned.

Moral conflicts are too important and the prospects of collateral damage too great to ignore the potential for second-order change ... we are describing, commending, and inviting others to join the activities of others who have become involved in specific moral conflicts not as partisans but as participants who help shape the way the conflicts are managed. By taking a referee-like perspective, we can develop the ability to intervene (at least sometimes) to restructure the way they are managed. If done well, the restructured way of dealing with moral conflict will produce a better public discourse (Littlejohn 2006, 106).

According to Littlejohn (2006) “Process talk addresses the question of *how* we communicate with one another and seeks an answer to *what* can we talk about? Areas where constructive conversation can occur constitute the joining place” (Littlejohn 2006, 401). For example, pro-choice and pro-life advocates, often bitter rivals, have sometimes been able to come together on the common agreement that neither side wants unwanted pregnancies so pregnancy prevention is something around which common ground and consensual action can take place.

[48] What might such attention to process and common ground look like within the “War on Christmas” controversy? First, we can reflect back to some of the insights from applying Habermas and begin with seeking common and neutral sets of definitions for key terms. Second, one might imagine that it would be productive to isolate this issue, as much as is possible, from related issues such as prayer in schools, the role of religion in society more generally, televangelists, the state of our public schools, etc. that can so easily become entangled in the discourse.

## Is a Solution Possible?

[49] Peter Coleman (2006) describes certain kinds of conflict as intractable because “they appear impossible to resolve” (Coleman 2006, 534). Is the “War on Christmas” an intractable conflict? We answer with a qualified no.

[50] We raised two questions at the outset of this section of our article. First, “how should conflict be conducted when deeply held philosophical issues are at the heart of the matter?” Fortunately the answer to the question is easy to articulate, though hard to enact. The guidelines of Habermas’ ideal speech situation and the practical advice from Littlejohn and Pearce would help any participants interested in resolving this issue. The second question gives us a bit longer pause.

[51] Our second question was, “how might we create productive dialogues in place of shouting matches and monologues that currently dominate any mediated commentary on the ‘war?’” For that we must conclude that we don’t have an answer. The problem is not in the first half of the question but the second. Media will not provide an answer nor offer any meaningful models of healthy discourse or resolution. This is not due solely or even mainly to the character flaws currently exhibited by O’Reilly and the current deployment of advocates by either side. Rather, it is due to the process by which producers, and to some extent audiences, select spokespeople more generally. Strident expressions of simple views garner ratings. Such perspectives and priorities are antithetical to the character, thought process, and communication standards necessary to foster dialogue and resolution to complex issues. Thus we must conclude, as former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill did, that “All politics is local.” It is up to individuals and smaller decision making bodies within advocacy groups and corporate boardrooms to choose different positions and forms of expression. This may sound trite or dismissive of the larger obligations of corporate media but, in general, such entities do not have a great track record for self-regulation or doing the right thing if it sacrifices ratings. Yet the lesson from the Public Dialogue Consortium founded in part by Barnett Pearce is that getting small groups of committed individuals around a table adhering to the roles and rules outlined in this essay yields results. These roles and rules assist participants in moving beyond the media framing of the conflict and the strategies modeled by media figures. A conservative listener of Rush Limbaugh must work hard to avoid being a “ditto head” when engaging in a dialogue about “Merry Christmas” with non-like minded Christians, secular humanists, etc. While there are no formulaic answers to solve conflict, this article has provided some alternatives to a simple exchange of angry words. Below is an example of how communicators might interact differently. The following dialogue offers an example on how the conversation might move beyond the intractable conflict.

[52] During the end-of-the-year company party, Ian, a 30-something-year old middle manager takes up a conversation with Scott, a 40-something-year old director. Both describe themselves as Christians:

Scott: “Happy Holidays, Ian.”

Ian: “What do you mean “Happy Holidays”, Scott? I’ve heard that garbage all week. Have they gotten to you too? I can’t believe they are trying to remove Christ from Christmas. This is such a slap in the face. Our country was founded on Christian ideals and now they are doing everything they can to remove God from our nation.

Scott: “Big deal, Ian. This nation isn’t Christian and I find it better to welcome all people.” (The conversation continues to devolve from there).

[53] Had Ian and Scott had a chance to read this article before their interaction, they would have learned that language is important. That the use of “Merry Christmas” versus “Happy Holidays” is more than a simple salutation like “Hi. How are you?” They would have remembered the way we talk in social situations can build bridges or can build walls. They would have recognized the conflict as one which is part of a larger struggle between the sacred and secular. As colleagues, Scott may know Ian’s thoughts on “Merry Christmas” versus “Happy Holidays.” In that case, knowing the context (the end-of-year company party), Scott would have started the conversation differently:

Scott: “Great to see you Ian. How are things in your department?”

Ian: “Not so great. We are down two people in the department and I haven’t gotten approval to rehire yet.”

The change in greeting allows Scott to interact and build trust with Ian. If Scott wants to talk about the conflict over “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays,” he takes time to build a bridge of trust and understanding that will help when the conversation gets more difficult.

[54] Let us imagine another scenario where Scott was not aware of Ian’s anger over the subject. If Scott or Ian had read this article prior to the interaction, either Ian or Scott (and hopefully both) would have tried to create an ideal speech situation where both could express themselves honestly with a full hearing. Learning from both Habermas and Pearce and Littlejohn, they would both try to reach full understanding. And if possible, they would find ways to reframe parts of the conversation that seem intractable. Perhaps they would reframe the discussion to the importance of family and traditions. Perhaps they would reframe the discussion to the importance of giving and maybe even (for)giving. They would understand that to stay with their current language, that they are destined to forego dialogue:

Scott: “Happy Holidays, Ian.”

Ian: “What do you mean “Happy Holidays”, Scott? Have they gotten to you too? I can’t believe they are trying to remove Christ from Christmas. This is such a slap in the face. Our country was founded on Christian ideals and now they are doing everything they can to remove God from our nation.”

Scott: “I disagree. I think we are talking about different ideals. Tell me a little about the way you celebrate Christmas.”

While not embracing Ian's anger, Scott manages to lead the conversation to a place where they can establish some agreements. After building some areas where there is agreement or at least appreciation, Scott and Ian can talk about the definitions of the "Christmas" and "Holidays."

[55] As competent communicators, they would strive to learn from one another, as Herrick says, adapting to the hearer's world. Maybe Scott would even learn to co-celebrate the meaning of Merry Christmas with Ian, while Ian would learn to co-celebrate the meaning of Happy Holidays with Scott.

Scott: "Merry Christmas, Ian."

Ian: "Happy Holidays, Scott."

Understanding that the public sphere can be a place where competent communicators work hard to carry out communication designed to build common ground and reveal truths that neither party might have uncovered otherwise, the conversation might proceed with the following interchange:

Scott: "You know there a number of people who are angry, just like you and don't have a place to talk about it. I sense that there is tension in the organization because there is no safe place to talk."

Ian: "Yeah. I think they fear they will lose their job if they don't side with the company on this one. They will probably get sued if they don't fall in line with the company."

Scott: "We both agree that we need to talk about the issues. Maybe we could organize an event in the cafeteria and facilitate a discussion. We would need to do a lot of training to get people ready; hopefully the end result will be more understanding and less tension in the workplace."

[56] Although this conversation example is a bit simplistic, it provides a basic vision for how the conflict might move from intractable reciprocal diatribe to productive dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

[57] Because language is important, because the war on Christmas conflict has historical and cultural significance, and because of the ongoing and legitimate struggle between sacred and secular, it is important to also ask how we might begin to engage this conflict—and conflicts like it—differently. Sadly, history teaches valuable lessons on religious conflicts that have escalated over time. While massacre or genocide may not be part of the future for this particular "war," the mass media thrives on opposition and controversy. Consequently, competent communicators must take the initiative to create safe places to engage in respectful dialogue at the local level. Approaching the conflict with a commitment toward resolution through communicative action, establishing clarity on definitions, and reframing the conflict, communicators build bridges of

dialogue rather than continue down the path of inevitable clash. The ramifications for such division extend well beyond the current skirmish, since there are numerous other social ills that ultimately require cooperation, coordination and consensual action among traditional conservative and liberal citizens alike.

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