

Viewpoints

My View:

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The Perils of Christmas

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I started playing Christmas music on Dec. 2, and by December 10 I'd hung wreaths and arranged synthetic garland throughout my house.

Having never concluded whether tree farms are bad for the environment, my family buys a live Christmas tree every year, one of many annual traditions.

I love the Christmas decorations and songs that permeate offices, stores and homes. I love the legend of Santa Claus, who dedicates his life to the service of others. And I think it is important to remember and teach our kids about Jesus, if not as the Son of God, then as a most significant historical, political and spiritual figure and the cornerstone of the world's largest religion.

But each year I have increasingly conflicted feelings about Christmas and the hypocritical way it's celebrated.

Like 85 percent of Americans, I am bothered by Christmas commercialism and consumption. A 2000 Gallup poll found that 90 percent of Americans see the reason for Christmas as Christianity's commemoration of Jesus' birth, and that 75 percent feel there's not enough emphasis on this religious basis.

Nonetheless, this year Americans will spend nearly \$200 billion on presents - more than two-thirds of 1998's national defense budget (Washington Post), despite the fact that 44 percent of Americans feel they spend too much on Christmas presents (US News). Meanwhile, 9.8 percent of Americans are unemployed (U.S. Department of Labor), and the average household debt is already \$117,951 (Education Today). A November 2003 study found that 54 percent of consumers were still paying off credit card debt from the previous holiday season (Consolidated Credit Counseling Services Inc.).

No wonder most Americans consider Christmas the most stressful holiday of the year. And what tops the list of stressors? Fighting crowds in stores!

This contradiction comes as no surprise given what's on television, in stores, and in magazines this time of year. Nearly every advertisement reminds me of the people I love and how much they're counting on me to buy them something. Then there are the things I didn't know I wanted, the food I didn't know I craved, and the pressure I feel to give my family an ending just as happy as the holiday scripts and specials dominating the airwaves.

Given my chemistry degree, I also can't ignore the biological effects of shopping. Recent studies demonstrate that shopping has a direct effect on the brain's pleasure centers, eliciting the release of a rewarding neurochemical called dopamine, not unlike what happens when a drug addict gets a fix (Psychology Today, 2006; Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2007).

It stands to reason that the holiday shopping season is a peak time for home burglaries, thefts, and muggings. Domestic violence also increases this time of year, by 17 percent during Christmas and 32 percent during New Year's Eve (University of California at Berkeley and U.C. San Diego).

Add to this the increased consumption of alcohol, a depressant commonly used to survive the year's worth of family time condensed into Christmas festivities, and it's no wonder that many otherwise content people suffer depression during and immediately after the Christmas holidays. Nor is it surprising that MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) estimates that "each year nationally, more than 1,000 people typically

die during Thanksgiving to New Year's in drunk driving crashes" (MADD, 2006).

If he were in our world today, Jesus would trash our retail centers the same way he ransacked the Jerusalem temple. Indeed, when I see images of the mobs on black Friday, I can't help but equate it to a modern pilgrimage (of Capitalism rather than Christianity).

If reading this column threatens to add you to the growing number who suffer from Christmas depression, there's still hope. The first recommended treatment for holiday depression is to avoid being alone, especially by volunteering to help the needy - at a soup kitchen, for example. Many valuable programs need volunteers well before the holidays, and participation lessens one's feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem and low self-worth.

Plus you'll be helping others in the spirit of selflessness defined by Jesus and Saint Nicholas. Isn't that what Christmas is really all about?

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