



ST. OLAF COLLEGE

Peace and Justice News

Merry Christmas to All? Rethinking the American holiday tradition

By Carl Schroeder '05

This holiday season, Americans will spend about 200 billion dollars, much of it on gifts and festivities celebrating an ancient holiday whose sacred and secular sides have become increasingly blended. How did the birthday of an anti-materialist come to be celebrated in this way? What costs and benefits does this celebration entail for our culture today?

Is the American Christmas good for American society?

"In the long run, the way we celebrate Christmas is not healthy, but I think what we're trying to do is important," said James Farrell, Professor of History at St. Olaf College.

In Farrell's recent book, *One Nation Under Goods: Malls and the Seductions of*

American Shopping, [see excerpt, page 3] he examines the history, merits, and perils of America's modern consumer culture, focusing on the evolution of America's shopping malls. Recently Farrell spoke with *Peace and Justice News* about the history of Christmas and its place in today's culture.

"Some parts of the way we celebrate Christmas are problematic," said Farrell. "Gift-giving is important, so I'm in favor of that, but Christmas as a whole gets people trained for patterns of consumption." Another problem with Christmas, he adds, is that "like so many things in our culture, it focuses all the love on the nuclear family."

According to Farrell, the American Christmas is an

"invented tradition" with origins in an early nineteenth-century "battle for Christmas" between the discontented working class and society's wealthier classes. In some cities, mobs of young workers gathered at the homes of the wealthy on Christmas Day to demand gifts. In an effort to reclaim the holiday, the middle class responded by creating the icons and traditions of the American family Christmas. Gradually saturating literature and advertising, these images of Santa Claus and the idyllic family gathering eventually made the transition from mythology to national ideal.

Since being declared a national holiday in 1890, the American Christmas has become a central event in religious, social and economic spheres. Today, 25% of U.S. consumer spending occurs between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Is there anything wrong with giving Christmas such a prominent role in our culture?

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Gift ideas for the conscious consumer

When you do your holiday shopping this year, you can make a difference by buying gifts that are environmentally friendly and promote the well-being of people around the world.

The Conscious Consumer Marketplace has dozens of fair trade, organic, and environmentally friendly gift ideas for the holidays: fair trade coffee and chocolate, organic clothing, and larger items like energy-

efficient, less toxic computers. Check it out at www.newdream.org/consumer/.

If you don't find what you're looking for there, check out the Green Pages Online, where you can search for all kinds of products made by socially and environmentally conscious businesses. Clothing, food, books, appliances — you name it, they've got it. Point your browser to www.greenpages.org.

- Sarah Burrige '04

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Peace and Justice News is a monthly publication of the **Peace and Justice Resource Network**, an official student organization at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

The views expressed in this newsletter do not implicitly or explicitly represent official positions and policies of St. Olaf College.

Civil Liberties Debate: A Perspective

By Sonja Tengblad '06

On Tuesday, Nov. 18, St. Olaf students got a taste of a few of the true controversies that face America today, presented by two individuals on its heated political forefront: American Civil Liberties Union president Nadine Strossen and former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan.

The topic of their debate, sponsored by St. Olaf's Political Awareness Committee, was civil liberties, particularly the PATRIOT Act and domestic actions taken by our leaders in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001.

From the debate's outside, it was clear that both debaters' positions were firmly rooted in ideology as well as facts. In sum, Strossen wants to repeal sections of the PATRIOT Act, saying it deprives American citizens of their basic civil liberties. Buchanan supports the PATRIOT Act and its efforts to protect us from further attacks on our home soil. Strossen stressed her conviction that the American government ignores the roots of the problem of terrorism, taking unnecessary measures to protect its people and harming them more than helping. Buchanan answered that in such desperate times some measures must be taken to ensure public protection.

I am not writing to discuss the logistics of the debate (for that, check out the Manitou Messenger's review of the debate, available online at fusion.stolaf.edu/messenger). My aim is to discuss the true underlying conflict that faces people all over the world: the idea that many times, both sides are right. This is what struck me most while listening to Strossen,

Buchanan, and students discuss what must be done to best serve our country and world. How can one action, one decision, one 'side' truly be best?

Strossen called on the audience to search for what is true. If I took one bit of knowledge from that evening, it is this: What is true for everyone is essentially the same. We are all working for the good of our surroundings. The only difference is our perspective. We often think our vision, or the vision of the party we are affiliated with, is what is needed for all. Truthfully, we are only improving the status of our world when we take as much as we can from each vision and piece it together. An impossible task, it may seem at times.

Last week in Chapel, the United Methodist Liaison to Jerusalem, Pastor Sandra Olewine, shared with a story of a Palestinian Muslim and an Israeli Jew. One had lost a child and the other a brother due to constant war and violence in Israel. Despite the tension and hatred between their people, both men came together to form an organization to help Palestinians and Israelis who are victims of such violence. It was not so impossible for them.

We are all challenging the opponent for the greater good, whether that be liberals and conservatives, soldiers and pacifists, or even governments and terrorists. Next time we engage in debate, let us look at our 'opponent' and know that they are, plain and simple, just as right as we are. As Strossen and Buchanan proved, we are all fighting for the Constitution, for our basic human rights, and for peace and justice.

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ACLU President Nadine Strossen and 2000 Presidential candidate Pat Buchanan came to St. Olaf on Nov. 18 for a civil liberties debate.

Recommended Reading

December 2003

* Noam Chomsky, *Survival or Hegemony*. America's leading intellectual activist argues that the war on terrorism is merely an excuse for continuing a decades-old US foreign policy of global economic and political domination.

* Bryan Lindsley '03, *St. Olaf Activist Manual*. Ideas and resources for action from a St. Olaf alumnus. Available online at www.stolaf.edu/depts/cis/wp/lindsley/.

* George Orwell, *1984*. Classic cautionary civil liberties tale.



Time Travel, Dogs, and Social Satire: A Book Review

Regardless of how compelling the reading for your classes might be, if you're in my position right now, something like *The Roots of Evil* by Ervin Staub might be missing what you really need (besides a little well-placed comic relief): PLOT. To put some zany yet ethically compelling narrative into your homework-packed life, pick up *The Sirens of Titan* by Kurt Vonnegut.

The odyssey of the hero, Malachi Constant, from a life of all the wealth and prestige that the Earth could offer, through space and time, tremendous suffering and finally remarkable contentment, is raucous, yet unsettling.

Constant's journey begins with a prophecy from a gallant and stylish man named Winston Niles Rumfoord who materializes

on Earth in a chrono-synclastic infundibulum that he and his dog, Kazak, ran into while flying their space ship to Mars. Rumfoord tells Constant that he will get married on Mars, to Mrs. Winston Niles Rumfoord, and have a son. He tells Constant that he will travel not only to Mars, but also to Mercury, back to Earth, and to his final home- Titan, a moon of Saturn.

As his life unfolds, Malachi becomes a poor man, a slave soldier, a space wanderer, a savior, a martyr, a husband, and a father. The process through which he becomes all of these things reveals as much about both his imperfections and his beauty as it reveals about the imperfections and beauties of humankind.

-Carolyn Albert '05

Rethinking the American Christmas

Christmas continued from page 1

It all depends who you are, said Farrell. "Christmas is something that works well for well-to-do people, and because it's such a national holiday, it tends to marginalize the people who can't participate."

Non-participation is the theme of the Media Foundation of Canada's annual "Buy Nothing Day" campaign. Founded in 1997, this initiative urges consumers to avoid making purchases on the day after Thanksgiving, traditionally America's busiest shopping day, and instead reflect on life's basics. Billed by the Media Foundation as a "celebration of consumer

awareness and simple living," Buy Nothing Day has generated worldwide discussion of the benefits and shortcomings of consumer culture.

"I think periodic abstinence [from consumer culture] is a good thing," said Farrell, while noting that Buy Nothing Day falls on "a day that makes it hard for many people to participate."

Given the choice between keeping or casting off America's Christmas traditions, Farrell carves a middle way, suggesting that we keep intact the idea of gift-giving while learning to "give beyond the normal."

"I think Christmas ought to be a catalyst for justice," he said, returning to the theme of expanding the celebration beyond the nuclear family. As an example, he noted that each year his family gives him a gift that helps combat world hunger: a pig, donated in his name to a poverty-stricken farming family through the Heifer Project (www.heifer.org). "It's the perfect gift," said Farrell. "It's my pig, but it's somewhere in the third world."

This holiday season, the average American family will spend over \$800 on gifts and festivities. What will be under your Christmas tree this year?



"I think Christmas ought to be a catalyst for justice."
- James Farrell
Professor of History, St. Olaf College

An excerpt from *One Nation Under Goods*

By James Farrell, St. Olaf History Professor

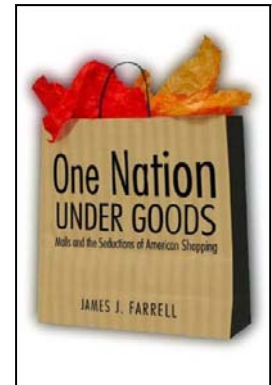
(From Chapter Seven, "Christmas Shopping.")

Ecclesiastes tells us that "to every thing there is a season," but in America's malls, it's always the shopping season. From New Year's Day to New Year's Eve, shopping centers tell us that now is the time to buy. "We are invited to buy to honor Abe Lincoln and George Washington, to get ready for Easter, to celebrate summer, and to prepare for school," note authors Robert Holsworth and J. Harry Wray. And, of course, our biggest shopping spree is the Christmas holiday season...

The commercialism of Christmas may be overdone, but it provides a way for Americans to do important personal and cultural work, espe-

cially concerning our ambivalence about consumption and materialism. For many Americans, Christmas ties consumption to religion and family. It defines the circles of family and friends in American culture and socializes children for consumption. It provides an outlet for traditional winter festivals of light and, with New Year's Day, provides twin celebrations – one retrospective, the other prospective. Christmas is a grand American complexity... Despite the commercialism of the season – and perhaps because of it – Americans still get "Santamental" about Christmas.

- James Farrell, *One Nation Under Goods*, © 2003 Smithsonian Institution. Reprinted with permission.



One Nation Under Goods, a new book by St. Olaf History Professor James Farrell, examines the history of American shopping malls and their effects on today's society.

[Read an excerpt at left.]

Textbooks for Africa Drive

Peace and Justice is organizing a textbook drive as part of our Africa campaign. Students who have studied abroad at colleges and universities in African countries have noticed that library resources are outdated and unhelpful for studies. Often, students are not even able to find texts required for their classes. Textbooks are especially difficult to acquire in such countries.

After the last day of classes (December 10th) we will be collecting used and new textbooks around campus from students and professors who are willing to donate. We are looking for books that are fairly recent and applicable to university level

classes. Books will be boxed and sent to the University of Ghana via students studying abroad there next semester. We will also be accepting donations to help cover postage costs.

Watch for tables outside the cafeteria and boxes around campus during finals week.

Please direct any questions you may have to Rachel Preisinger (preising@stolaf.edu) or Kaitlin Boyce (boyce@stolaf.edu). Thank you for your assistance in making this campaign possible!

Peace and Justice News

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Peace and Justice News welcomes peace and justice-related articles, article ideas, news items, book reviews, commentaries and other contributions. To contribute material, receive P&J News free by e-mail each month or if you have questions, e-mail PJNews@stolaf.edu.

VISIT THE PEACE AND
JUSTICE WEBSITE AT
WWW.STOLAF.EDU/ORGS/PJRN

The St. Olaf Peace & Justice Resource Network is an awareness-raising organization whose goal is to educate ourselves and others about issues of peace and justice. Through monthly newsletters, speakers, and campus-wide events, we explore both global and local topics of concern. The Peace & Justice Resource Network also helps integrate the efforts of other campus and community groups to promote peace and justice through co-sponsorships, advertising, and participation in local events. It is affiliated with Student Peace Action Network, a national network of campus peace and justice groups.

We meet each Tuesday during the school year at 8:00 p.m. in Buntrock Commons room 142 (on the way to the library). New members and curious bystanders are always welcome! Our office is located in the Student Organization Resource Center. Contact Peace and Justice Coordinator Elizabeth Henke at henke@stolaf.edu for more information or to be added to the St. Olaf Peace and Justice e-mail alias.

The Truth Uncovered

A revealing new documentary, *The Truth Uncovered* goes behind the walls of government, as CIA, Pentagon and foreign service experts speak out, detailing the lies, misstatements and exaggerations that served as the reasons to fight a "preemptive" war in Iraq many say wasn't necessary.

In the film, more than 20 experts, including former Ambassador Joe Wilson and weapons inspector Scott Ritter, are interviewed about the reasons we were given for war and the evidence presented to support those reasons.

During Interim, Peace and Justice will be sponsoring a screening of this explosive new film. Watch for times and details, or contact PJNews@stolaf.edu for more information.

Peace and Justice News is going on a holiday break.

Watch for our next issue around January 30, 2004.

Upcoming Peace and Justice events In Northfield and the Twin Cities

Events in **boldface type** take place at St. Olaf College.

Tues., Dec. 2, 8-9pm — **Peace and Justice meeting: Buntrock Commons, Room 142**
Thurs., Dec. 4, 7pm — People for Peace and Goodwill meeting: 313 ½ Division St., Northfield
Mon, Dec. 8, 7pm — **PAC Student Debate on President Bush's policies: The Pause**
Tues., Dec. 9, 8-9pm — **Peace and Justice meeting: Buntrock Commons, Room 142**
Weds., Dec. 10 — International Human Rights Day
Thurs., Dec. 11, 7pm — People for Peace and Goodwill meeting: 313 ½ Division St., Northfield
Tues., Dec. 16, 8-9pm — **Peace and Justice meeting: Buntrock Commons, Room 142**
Thurs., Dec. 18, 7pm — People for Peace and Goodwill meeting: 313 ½ Division St., Northfield
Tues., Jan. 6, 8-9pm — **Peace and Justice meeting: Buntrock Commons, Room 142**
Thurs., Jan. 8, 7pm — People for Peace and Goodwill meeting: 313 ½ Division St., Northfield
Tues., Jan. 13, 8-9pm — **Peace and Justice meeting: Buntrock Commons, Room 142**
Thurs., Jan. 15, 7pm — People for Peace and Goodwill meeting: 313 ½ Division St., Northfield
Tues., Jan. 20, 8-9pm — **Peace and Justice meeting: Buntrock Commons, Room 142**
Thurs., Jan. 22, 7pm — People for Peace and Goodwill meeting: 313 ½ Division St., Northfield
Fri., Jan 23, 10:50-11:50am — Peace activist Colman McCarthy addresses Carleton College
Tues., Jan. 27, 8-9pm — **Peace and Justice meeting: Buntrock Commons, Room 142**
Thurs., Jan. 29, 7pm — People for Peace and Goodwill meeting: 313 ½ Division St., Northfield
Fri.-Sat., Feb. 20-21 — **Nobel Peace Prize Forum.** Visit www.stolaf.edu/nppf/2004.

Mark your calendar!

The 16th annual **Nobel Peace Prize Forum** is being held at St. Olaf this year, on **February 20-21, 2004**. This year's theme is "Striving for Peace: Roots of Change," and the keynote address will be delivered by former U.S. President and Nobel Peace Laureate Jimmy Carter. This will be an excellent opportunity to learn about human rights, sustainable economic development, and how you can help to work towards peace. Find out more at www.stolaf.edu/nppf/2004/.