

## Sorry Fox News, there is no War on Christmas and Santa isn't White.

As the holiday season continues, so does commentary on the supposed 'War on Christmas'. [David Kyle Johnson](#) looks at the recent history of Christmas controversies, including the claim made this month by Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly that Santa Claus "just is white." He argues that the War on Christmas is a fiction, invented by Fox News, to promote a narrative of victimization common in conservative circles, and that, even though Santa isn't necessarily white, Santa's whiteness is protected for the comfort of white Christian conservatives.



Once again it's time for a good ol' fashioned "War on Christmas" – a war that seems to have been going on forever. Truth be told, it hasn't. Most Christmas traditions, even though people think they've been around for centuries, are relatively new. Christmas trees, buying gifts for children, Santa Claus, Rudolph—all have been around for no more than two hundred years. And, like most Christmas traditions, they were either invented by media, or became popular because of media. Christmas trees were popularized by short stories in the 1800s, Santa Claus was invented and popularized in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by a [poem](#), [Thomas Nast](#) and [Coca-Cola](#), and Rudolph was created by [Montgomery Ward](#) in 1939.

### The Fictional War on Christmas

The War on Christmas was invented in 2005 by Fox News, when Bill O'Reilly started complaining about retailers saying "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" on *The O'Reilly Factor* and John Gibson (of Fox News radio) published *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought*. Now when I say the war was "invented," I do mean invented. They were not reporting actual events. Everything they complained about either never even happened or was completely exaggerated.

For example, no school in Plano, Saginaw or Orlando banned the colors red and green; the schools produced their records to [prove it](#). Ridgeway Elementary didn't change the lyrics to "Silent Night" to eliminate all reference to religion; in [reality](#), a church choir director changed all the lyrics in the play he helped write to make them easier for kids to learn. And, while it's true that Governor Lincoln Chafee (D-RI) didn't call the statehouse tree a "Christmas tree" in 2011, it's [also true](#) that when the Republican governor did the same thing for the previous 8 years—including calling it a "holiday tree" in 2009—Fox News didn't make a peep.



Is there really a war on Christmas? Credit: cuttlefish (Creative Commons BY NC)

And every year Fox News comes up with a new not-so-true story demonstrating a liberal war on Christmas. This year included complaints about a school in [Frisco](#) (or is it [Waco](#)?) banning Christmas trees and the colors red and green. The story was [debunked](#) almost as soon as it was reported.

To be fair, it is true that in 2005 Wal-Mart “encouraged” their employees to say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,” in an attempt, [they said](#), to include all their customers, whether they be shopping for Christmas, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or New Years. But, [then again](#), in 2005, the Bush White House wished everyone a “Happy Holidays” in their “holiday card” and O’Reilly himself was selling “holiday ornaments” to hang on your “holiday tree.” Of course, Bill O’Reilly thinks non-Christians would have to be crazy to be offended by a two word phrase like “Merry Christmas,” but wouldn’t that mean that Christians would have to be crazy to be offended by “Happy Holidays”? After all, the phrase predates “the War on Christmas” by at least [60 years](#). (Perhaps we should ask the woman who slugged [Kristina Vindiola](#), a bell ringer for the Salvation Army, for saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,” in front of a Phoenix Wal-Mart.)

Ironically, I agree with Bill on this one; although Wal-Mart’s desire to be more inclusive is laudable, if a non-Christian is offended by people saying “Merry Christmas” and calling indoor decorated pine trees “Christmas trees,” that person is a bit oversensitive—but only because the word “Christmas” is no more indicative of Christ and Christianity than the word “Sunday” is indicative of the sun and sun worship. Both words do have a religious origin, but words find their meaning in their connotation and use, and the word “Christmas” has been almost completely detached from its Christian origin (which first referred to the Catholic midnight mass of December 24<sup>th</sup>, Christ’s Mass). As I discussed in my [last blog](#), December celebrations were originally pagan celebrations that the Church tried and failed to Christianize. The church started calling the holiday “Christmas” in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but the celebrations stayed secular, and remain so to this day. Consequently, the word Christmas conjures mainly non-Christian images, such as Santa, decorated pine trees, gifts, and feasting.

Christmas is a cultural juggernaut. It’s the only holiday with its own pantheon of songs and movies and to which entire radio stations and TV channels are dedicated. It defines the success of our economy. Black Friday is called black Friday because Christmas shopping pushes business out of “the red” and into “the black.” In fact, Christmas takes over all of the western world for a month every year—and just keeps getting bigger. (This year, it [swallowed Thanksgiving](#), and I heard my first Christmas ad in mid October.) Yet Christmas is being attacked and is in danger? Supposedly, [47 percent of Americans](#) say they believe there is a War on Christmas, but if there is, it’s the most unsuccessful war in history.

Really, only on Fox News does the claim that there is a War on Christmas make any sense. Christians make up 70 percent of the American population, have always dominated political elections (including every presidential one), and enjoy universal social acceptance. (Unlike an atheist, a Christian would never be afraid to reveal their religious affiliation in a job interview.) Yet to watch Fox News, one would think that Christians are a persecuted minority in the U.S., marginalized by the “mainstream media.” Of course, the truth is, *they* are the mainstream media; Fox News has [better ratings](#), in almost every time slot, than all other news networks combined. This is just part of the narrative of persecution Fox News sells to its viewers—a narrative into which the idea that there is a War on Christmas perfectly fits.

### **Is Santa Claus White?**

But Fox’s Christmas coverage took an even weirder turn this year when Fox News’s Megyn Kelly insisted that “Santa just is white.” She was responding to Slate.com’s [Alisha Harris](#) expressed desire for Santa to be colorless so that no child of any race would be as uncomfortable with Santa as she was as a young black girl in America. (Harris suggested he be a penguin.) Megyn was trying to quell the doubts of young children watching her program (on Fox News at 9:40pm) who might wonder how one could debate what color Santa *should be* if he really exists. “We’re just debating this because someone wrote about it kids.”

Megyn didn’t lose her job (although a New Mexico teacher [might](#)), but after the media firestorm that erupted, Megyn said her comment was only an “[off hand jest](#),” taken out of context by people who see her and Fox News as “big targets”; she was just acknowledging what Harris was acknowledging: that Santa is most commonly depicted as white. But, just like the high school bully who viciously insults you, and then tells you to lighten up because he was “just joking,” it’s obvious that she wasn’t.

Watch the [segment](#), and it’s clear that that she was arguing that, as a historical fact, Santa is white because, just like Jesus, the historical St. Nicholas was a white male—and that it should stay that way. “How do you just revise

it, you know, in the middle of the legacy, of the story, and change Santa from white to black?” Megyn asked. “You can’t,” it was agreed. “You can’t take facts, and then try to change them to fit some sort of a political agenda or sensitivity agenda.” “Just because it makes you feel uncomfortable,” said Megyn, “doesn’t mean it has to change.”

The irony here is thick enough to cut with a knife.

Not only is changing facts to fit a political agenda Fox News’s *raison d’être*, but that is exactly what has been done with both Santa and Jesus. Jesus was not a white male; he was a first century Palestinian Jew, who most likely looked like [this](#). St. Nicholas would have been a Greek Bishop from what is now Turkey, and would have likely looked like [this](#). (Bill O’Reilly tried to back up Megyn with [a history of Santa Claus](#) tracing back to St. Nicholas, but even in the painting O’Reilly presented, Nicholas had [brown skin](#).) Perhaps, by the broadest [definition](#), they might be classified as “Caucasian,” but in no sense would they have been considered white—then or today. They would have looked more like Osama Bin Laden than the average “white American” or the white Jesus and Santa depicted by modern American [Christians](#) and [Coca-Cola](#). Their color has been changed to white to match the color of those that worship them—to fit a “political” and “sensitivity agenda.”



(Complicating matters further is the fact Santa is not based primarily on St. Nicholas; most of his attributes come from [Belsnickle](#), [Krampus](#), [Odin](#) and a pagan fertility god called “[claus](#)”, most of which have a [dark face](#) or [appearance](#). If you are interested, see my [research](#), or my Psychology Today [blog](#).)

Although there is no War on Christmas, Christians have been fighting to claim December celebrations for Jesus by Christianizing the holiday for roughly 1700 years. When Fox News treats any criticism of Christmas—be its hyper-commercialism or its overriding social obligations—as a war on Christmas and thus Christianity itself, it’s playing its own part in that fight. Likewise, when Megyn Kelly insists that Santa is, and should remain, white, she plays a part in the fight for white social dominance, even though she is just, as [Jon Stewart](#) put it, “expressing anger and victimization over the loss of absolute power and reframing it as persecution of real America by minorities, freeloaders and socialists”—as Fox News correspondents are apt to do.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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David Kyle Johnson is an associate professor of philosophy at King's College in Pennsylvania. He has published in journals such as *Religious Studies*, *Sophia*, *Philo* and *Think* and has done extensive work using popular culture to explain and illustrate philosophical ideas and arguments. He has edited books on *Inception*, *Heroes* and *Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture* and written articles on everything from *South Park*, *The Hobbit*, and *Doctor Who* to *The Onion*, *Quentin Tarantino* and *Christmas*. He is currently working on a book titled *The Myths That Stole Christmas: Seven Misconceptions that Hijacked the Holiday and How We Can Take it Back*.



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