

The battle for Christmas

Kate Legge and Peter Shadbolt

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"HELP. The angel's on the move," came a voice from the sidelines as 10-month old Katherine Watson downed her halo and grabbed the stuffed lamb on the nativity set inside Melbourne's St Paul's Cathedral where cleric Howard Langmead is challenging Santa's stranglehold over Christmas.

Instead of sitting on Santa's knee for that annual Christmas picture, children can dress up as members of the nativity scene and have their picture taken at the cathedral.

Cassandra Brockman came yesterday because her two-year-old daughter is scared of Santa. "She likes him but she doesn't want to sit on his knee," she says. So the little girl stood with a chequered tea towel for a hood beside two wise boys holding myrrh and incense and one of the parish workers played with a crocodile hand puppet to tease forth smiles for the camera.

News of Langmead's bid to dethrone Santa has attracted international attention, including a call from the Vatican Radio in Rome, as churches everywhere wrestle with the supremacy of secularism amid the crescendo of ATMs and electronic cash registers.

Like the Tokyo department store of urban legend that created a giant display featuring Santa Claus nailed to a cross, Christmas is becoming a festival of confused cultural signals and misplaced sensitivities.

Church leaders might disagree on the culprits but there is consensus they are losing the war. Anglican laywoman Muriel Porter wrote in The Melbourne Age this week of friends who had taken their young son to see the Myer Christmas windows which illustrate scenes from The Polar Express – now a Hollywood movie. The child followed these scenes by heart but when he got to the window depicting Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus he drew a blank. "So what's the story here then?" he asked his parents.

Porter says the mainstream churches must accept some of the blame for what she calls "religious amnesia". She argues that the Catholic Church's ban on artificial contraception and the Anglican Church's resistance to social change and to homosexual partnerships has contributed to the dramatic decline in attendance and awareness of the Christian Christmas story.

Greg Allinson, who is Anglican vicar of Prahran's St Matthew's parish in Melbourne, blames the prevailing winds of political correctness. Last year he protested moves by several Melbourne councils to discourage Christian ministers from taking part in carol services.

"It seemed like political correctness gone mad and I think this is not so much a result of other religions but the push from secular councils and governments to stifle Christianity," he says. "It amazes me walking through the streets to see banners and flags wishing us a 'happy festive season 2004' with no mention of the Christian message. And yet members of the Jewish community have no problem driving around with 'Happy Hanukkah' on their cars. Good on them."

In the multicultural US "Happy Christmas" is often replaced by the inoffensive one size fits all greeting of "Happy Holidays".

St Paul's Langmead believes the religious groups in a multi-faith society are tolerant of each other's holy days. "My sense is that Muslim and Jewish people are not against Christians celebrating Christmas but

what is happening is that secular people are using multi-faith society as an excuse to drown out the story of Jesus," he says.

Yasser Soliman from the Islamic Council of Victoria echoes this sentiment. "It is not for us to tell Christians how to celebrate," he says. "We would not want to impose our faith on anyone, nor have their faith imposed on us."

The US diplomatic mission in Cuba has been no stranger to the politics of Christmas and this year the battle lines have been drawn afresh with a decorative display out the front which faces on to Havana's coastal Malecon highway. Surrounded by the trimmings of Santa Claus, candy canes and white lights wrapped in palm trees on the mission's seaside lawn, is a lighted sign a metre in diameter that simply reads: "75" – a reference to the 75 Cuban dissidents jailed last year.

"Our intent, in the spirit of Christmas, was to call attention to the plight of these 75," says US Interest Section chief James Cason. "We're prepared to pay whatever price for the things we believe in."

Cuban foreign ministry officials have insisted that the decorations be taken down but the US interest section has refused. The Cubans have promised "unspecified consequences".

Politics and Christmas collided with career-threatening consequences for a Bulgarian colleague on a posting to Rome during the 1980s. He sent his children to a local school and found himself in serious diplomatic trouble when they began explaining the meaning of a nativity scene to other children attached to the Bulgarian embassy – a lesson they had learned in scripture classes at the elementary school. The message soon got back to Sofia that his children were not receiving the benefit of a secular and atheist education. "And I almost got recalled over that," he said at the time.

There have been problems of a different kind in Sydney with some shoppers and retailers complaining that the Grinch has stolen the Christmas glitter from the city's streets. The Daily Telegraph has taken aim at embattled Lord Mayor Clover Moore, demanding gaudier and more expensive civic decorations. She says the Sydney City Council has spent \$900,000 on Christmas celebrations – \$300,000 more than last year.

"I think \$900,000 on Christmas decorations is more than enough," Moore says. "And I think people should remember what Christmas is all about. Christ was born in a humble stable in Bethlehem and here we're going on and on and on about decorations. The city is doing its bit. Christmas is about a spirit and Christmas is about renewal and rebirth and hope and goodwill."

Attempts to drum up similar outrage in Melbourne fell flat when the city council pointed out that the traditional nativity scene had been dropped 20 years ago.

Retailers are also split over whether to embrace the Christian message or embrace a multi-cultural salute to vaguer concepts of festivity and holiday spirit. Chief of the Oporto food chain Jeff Fisher initially took a decision to ban a nativity scene from a store, fearing it could offend ethnic minorities. "We are just trying to keep a generic approach without trying to push any one religious belief," he says. "We are cognisant of the fact that in Australia we are a very multicultural society." Judging from the queue of children lining up at St Paul's Cathedral yesterday, Langmead's attempt to elbow Santa out of the spotlight has been a small but bold public relations coup.

Brockman was delighted with her colour photograph of the wise men with angels gathered around a wooden cradle. "I used to go to church," she says in a refrain that nails the problem of religious amnesia. "I'd like to take the children to Sunday school when they get a bit older. I'd like them to learn the meaning of Christmas. When Jesus was born and died ... and all that stuff."

The Anglican vicar at St John's church in the Melbourne suburb of Malvern thinks society at last might be learning the thinness of secular celebration. Yesterday he led 700 local primary school children through a Christmas service that an Education Department bureaucrat had attempted to ban seven years ago. They sang carols and Christmas music and enacted the traditional pageant in a strong affirmation of the

Christian story. "Today I'm sitting here preparing for a large funeral and the Christmas message will comfort those who come to mourn," he says. "It is not just tinsel and turkey but a lesson in how we touch peace and joy in our lives. The Holy family was shadowed by adversity yet love shone through."

And love was shining in St Paul's where members of Langmead's parish played their part to put Santa in the shade. Eril and Lyn, who do the flowers on Sunday, stood by a rack of home-made costumes to dress the children. Rosie, the assistant priest who spent four years studying theology, proved a real ham with the crocodile glove puppet. And photographer Gavin Hansford, who is known for his magnificent landscapes, was discovering that rocks are better at standing still than toddlers, no matter how shiny their haloes.

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