

# 'What's Christmas without chopsticks?' How other faiths celebrate December

25th

By **Eric Marrapodi**, CNN Belief Blog Co-Editor

(CNN) - Two days before Christmas, Imam Mohamed Magid, the executive director at the [All Dulles Area Muslim Society](#), preached about Jesus at Friday prayers. "We live in a country with a majority of Christians, where Christmas is a major holiday... It's a reminder we do believe in Jesus. Jesus' position in Islam is one of the highest prophets in Islam," Magid said, adding that Muslims view Jesus as a prophet on par with Abraham, Moses, Noah and Mohammad.

Often when he says the name of Mohammad or Jesus in conversation, Magid adds the Islamic honorific "Peace be upon him" after his name. "Jesus is a unifying figure, unifying Muslims and Christians," he said. The Quran, the Islamic scriptures, makes specific mention of Jesus and of his mother Mary. "It's very interesting that there are many places where the prophet (Mohammad) is quoting Jesus."

Christmas has a way of bleeding into other faiths in America. The Christian holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger in Bethlehem 2000 some odd years ago is ubiquitous across the country, even if the American tradition has leaned away from the sacred and toward the secular. Christmas at every corner can be somewhat problematic for those who are not in the estimated 246 million Christians living in the United States. But for some faiths, the season brings reminders of their own traditions.

Magid said Muslims believe many of the same things about Jesus that Christians do: Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, he lived a sinless life, he raised the dead, and he preformed miracles. He also said many Muslim scholars believe that Jesus will one day return to the earth, using the Christian vocabulary of "the Second Coming."

"Certain aspects of our theology are different," he carefully notes, pointing specifically to incarnation, the Christian belief that Jesus was divine. Muslims are perhaps the most ardent monotheists in the world, making them at odds with Christians theologically over not only the Christian doctrine of incarnation, but also belief in the Trinity, that God the Father, the Holy Spirit and Jesus are three in one.

The All Dulles Area Muslim Society is one of the largest Muslim congregations in the country with ties to 5,000 families in the Washington area. Some of the families do put up a Christmas tree and exchange gifts, which one member suspects is often more about cultural assimilation than religious observance. "I think Muslims, although they believe in Jesus, they give respect to this as a Christian holiday, so they don't pretend to celebrate this in a religious way," Magid said. "A Muslim would not expect a Christian to celebrate his holiday."

At the [Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery](#) three hours north of San Francisco, there is a small Christmas tree set up near the statue of the Buddha. "Normally we just have flowers, incense and candles, but now we have a tiny Christmas tree. It's really cute," Ajhan Yatiko, a monk in residence who is originally from Canada, said. "It's more like a traditional thing, respecting and appreciating the culture of where we live."

During the holidays, Yatiko said, "The senior monk might give a talk to the lay people which might draw parallels between the Christian faith and the Buddhist faith, as well as the differences, because I think both of those are important aspects of interfaith harmony. "Sometimes in the West these days there's a kind of tendency to clump all the religions together and say, 'We're all climbing the same mountain,' and I think the intention there is nice. There's a harmonious intention there. But I think it's much nicer to say, 'Let's respect the differences and love and appreciate the differences of the other faiths,'" Yatiko said.

For the monks at Abhayagiri, life is spent in meditation, community, celibacy and work. They practice Buddhism in the Theravada tradition or the Thai Forest tradition. In their faith tradition, monks cannot handle money, grow their own food or trade, so they live entirely off of the generosity of others. That means every half moon, about once a week, they head into town for alms rounds, where they walk around in their saffron robes with alms bowls to collect donations. The new moon this week fell on Christmas Eve. "Everyone we see is going to be wishing us a Merry Christmas, and we'll be doing likewise," Yatiko said a few days before

Christmas. "We don't touch money and live a very simple lifestyle, so the Christmas tradition of exchanging gifts doesn't work so well for us," Yatiko said.

Yet Buddhists are called to live generously at every chance, be it in material things or spiritual ones, so at Christmastime the monks bring a truckload of fire wood and a fruit basket to a neighboring Ukrainian Catholic monastery.

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"We do have some rather revered traditions for Christmas Day," said Rabbi Rick Rheins. "I'm not sure if it was Talmudic or not, to visit the movie theater followed by a Chinese dinner," joked Rheins referring the collection of ancient rabbi teaching called the Talmud. "What's Christmas without chopsticks?" joked Rheins who is the head of Denver's Temple Sinai, a reformed congregation of about 1,100 families. "We acknowledge the importance of this day for our Christian neighbors and for my Christian colleagues. And so we don't celebrate Christmas as Jews, but we do thrill for our Christian neighbors," he said. Rheins said the celebration of Hanukkah simultaneously at Christmastime this year will mean he won't be bringing in any Christmas metaphors into services on Friday and Saturday.

As for the Christmas Day itself, including the popcorn and chopsticks, he said, "We encourage our members to do special volunteer work to relieve our Christian neighbors of their responsibilities, whether it's at hospitals or emergency services, to give them the opportunity to spend this time with their family and celebrate this sacred day for them. "Christians and Jews, especially over the last generation, have really worked so hard to build bridges, not just of tolerance, but also have generated true mutual respect and cooperation," he said. He cited working to fight hunger and poverty together. "These are the expressions of a society where the differences in religion and the expressions of one's faith are less divisive than they are enriching. "I don't think that was the case a generation ago," Rheins said.

Christmas has a way of seeping into Hindu traditions, as well. At least the tree and presents part. "Because of the children," Uma Mysorekar, the president of the Hindu Temple Society of North America said. "The children say, 'Oh, there's a tree in my friend's house. Why not in my house?' So they will get a small tree, a symbolic tree," Mysorekar said. "We do look up to Jesus as one of the deities of Christianity," Mysorekar said.

At the Hindu Temple Society of North America in the Flushing area of Queens, New York, Christmas Day will be filled with worshipers coming in and out. Unlike other faiths, Hindus do not have a set day for communal worship. The temple is a key part of Hinduism for prayer, worship and offerings. Christmas will be busier because of the three day weekend, Mysorekar guessed.

Their temple even had a holiday party for the children. "We have a holiday party for them, and we give them gifts and tell them what it's all about. You know the Hindu festival of Diwali, it is more or less the same, where we give gifts and we meet with friends... So the custom is very easy to relate to." During Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, lamps are lit in celebration of good triumphing over evil. "Apart from the religious aspect of it - the concept, theme of Christmas – I think it's very much the same all over," she said.