

Welcome to Thirty Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In Thirty Brave Minutes we will give you something interesting to think about. Our topic today is the Holiday Season. Joining us are Drs. David Nikkel, Motti Inbari, Michael Berntsen, Jane Haladay, and Siva Mandjiny. Our host for Thirty Brave Minutes is Dr. Jeff Frederick, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Frederick: The average American will spend seven hundred dollars on Christmas this year, collectively contributing to about a \$465 billion dollar jolt to the economy. The day after Thanksgiving has gone from a time of family relaxation for some and finding creative ways to repackage turkey leftovers to a ritual of bargain shopping at break-neck pace, in order to make sure that the crockpot that you plan to give to Aunt Sally and Uncle George can be obtained for \$24.99 instead of \$34.99. Few Americans actually celebrate our holidays like Christmas in the 17th, 18th, or first half of the nineteenth century. Some, like many Puritans, found the concept unscriptural. Others had little time, energy, disposable income or sense of commonality to practice any of the traditions that are done today. A rural America didn't congregate often and communication and transportation made that challenging anyway. When gifts did begin to be exchanged in different traditions they were often homemade dolls, or clothing, seasonal fruit, or maybe a piece of peppermint. Of course America has always been a tremendously diverse place, meaning some had other traditions. Non-Christian, or no religious inclinations at all related to some holidays. Old World customs, tribal ceremonies of great import that didn't necessarily correspond to the 12-month American version of the calendar. Even the famed poem, 'Twas The Night Before Christmas, first published in 1823 and credited to Clement Clark Moore, has at least some scholars wondering if the authorship was really the work of someone else. Moore's poem, or whoever wrote it, if he didn't, would not have applied to many Americans in 1923 anyway. They likely hadn't seen many sugar plums, probably didn't have much of a lawn to be a place for clatter, or if they had extra stockings at all, they would have applied them to their cold December feet, rather than mount them on a fire place. Plenty of households in America pulled caricatures of pilgrims out of

the attic in mid-November as the centerpiece to the coming reality of thanksgiving in their lives. That stereotype of a 1621 event of course had multiple interpretations. Many Indian tribes were already offering thanks for harvest and other parts of life, long before Europeans arrived. Some who partook of events on that first Thanksgiving soon found themselves threatened, literally and figuratively, by the very folks who had shared food with them earlier. If you think finding the perfect gift for someone is a challenge, it is only one part of the series of conflicts to come from one reason or another at a time that theoretically has so much local, familial, personal, or spiritual meaning. The holidays can be the most relaxing, cherished festival of family, friends and sometimes faith. It can also be a giant bucket of anxiety, frustration, and materialism. For all the joy and meaning of the season, psychologists tell us that many who face mental health challenges feel more pain at this time of the year. Our topic for today: The Joy, Emotion, Tradition, Multiple-Contested Meanings, and Conflict of the Holidays.

David Nikkel is in his fifteenth year as professor of Religion at UNCP. He received his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Duke University and pastors a small United Church of Christ Congregation in Fayetteville, NC. Welcome, David.

Nikkel: Thank you, Dr. Frederick.

Frederick: What is the basis for the primary seasonal Christian holiday this time of year and how has their celebration and meaning changed over time, and across different divisions of the faith?

Nikkel: Well, the two principle holidays for Christianity are Easter and Christmas, Easter being more significant logically because of the resurrection of Jesus. But Christmas, as you have alluded to, because it is also a secular and commercial holiday, gets a lot more attention than Easter. The birth of Jesus actually wasn't observed for several centuries in the church. Only two of the gospels record anything about his birth. It is not mentioned in any other part of the New Testament, but eventually Christians came to observe his birthday on December 25th. This holiday is

paired with another holiday called Epiphany, which, at least for those churches that observe the church year of the Christian calendar, is January 6. That is where you get the twelve days of Christmas, for any who observe twelve days of Christmas.

Frederick: I have received some of those gifts somewhere along the line...there is a partridge somewhere at my house, but that is a different story. (Everyone laughs.)

Nikkel: There was something in the paper about how much it would cost to give all of those things in today's economy. Anyway, at Christmas the focus is on God becoming human. For Epiphany, it is kind of reversed. The focus is on the divinity, the glory of God being revealed in Christ. The focus of Epiphany is the coming of the wise men, the magi. That meant that Jesus was not just for Jews, but for Gentiles and their giving gifts is at least one of the explanations or excuses for giving gifts at Christmas, because the magi gave gifts to Christ. And there is also a tradition going back to the original St. Nicolaus, who was a bishop in the early church in the fourth century in Asia Minor, who was known for, at least legendarily, giving secret gifts. Most famously, there were three daughters who were going to have to go into prostitution if they didn't have some money, so as the story goes, St. Nicolaus throws some coins into their stockings, and so they are saved from a life of ill-repute.

Frederick: I have never gotten a Christmas card with that story on it... (Everyone laughs.)

Nikkel: I'm surprised. There is a season of preparation for Christmas, known as Advent, which means 'coming'. Again, at least for churches that observe the Christian year, there is four weeks of Advent and churches will light a successive candle each Sunday for hope, peace, joy, and finally, love. The Christ candle is lighted on Christmas. Speaking of candle-lighting, there is also for many churches, a Christmas Eve candle-lighting service, with the symbolism of Christ as the light of the world. Another tradition that developed is that of the Christmas tree, which goes back to pagan customs. A long time ago, there was a legend that Martin Luther put candles on the tree. It is a legend and not historical.

Frederick: Did he consult the fire department?

Nikkel: He did not! (Everyone laughs.) As maybe some historians might know, Christmas trees became popular in England and then the US when Queen Victoria's Prince brought from Germany the celebration of the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree and other evergreens like Holly, for Christians have the meaning of everlasting life in Christ. So there are just a few of the symbols and meanings in Christianity.

Frederick: There are lots of traditions, customs and culture. Motte Inbari is an Associate Professor of Religion at UNCP. Dr. Inbari focuses his research on Jewish fundamentalism, mostly in Israel, but also in the US and in Europe. He is the author of three books, the most recent being *Jewish Radical Ultra orthodoxy Confronts Modernity; Zionism and Women's Equality*. Dr. Inbari earned his Ph.D. at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and has also served as a Fellow with the University of Florida and at the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis. Welcome.

Inbari: Thank you.

Frederick: Talk about the primary Jewish holiday traditions and how does the level of orthodoxy in your faith change the way in which you might practice some of those traditions?

Inbari: OK. So the Jewish holiday that is being celebrated in December is called Hanukah. Hanukah, the literal meaning is re-dedication. Of course Judaism is a very old religion, and this holiday comes to celebrate a rebellion that the Jews have performed against the Greek empire, and which succeeded. They were able to establish small Jewish kingdom for a period of about one hundred years, so this holiday comes to celebrate a freedom in getting rid of oppression. It also comes to tell. The way in which the Rabbis understood this holiday was that God was giving the Jews the power so it was the miracle of God. There is another miracle that is associated with this holiday, which is the miracle of the Menorah, or the candelabra. According to the mythology of the Jews, when the Jews were able to re-capture the

temple and there was just one jar of oil and they used it to light the candelabra, or the menorah. It is called in Hebrew a menorah. The oil was enough for one day, but God performed a miracle and it lasted for seven days. This is why Hanukah is celebrated for seven days. In Jewish tradition, the emphasis is usually on God. God performs the miracle, gives the Jews power. God performs the miracle, gives Jews oil. It is all about God and generally speaking Hanukah is not an important Jewish holiday in the Jewish calendar because it is not part of the Bible. It is after the Bible; it is from a period after the Bible. In modern times Hanukah became an important Jewish holiday for two different reasons. First of all, for Zionism. The Zionist movement, later the state of Israel, saw in Hanukah a very interesting symbol they can use for their nationalistic identity, which is of course a symbol of Jewish power and Jewish victory, and Jewish sovereignty. So they took Hanukah, which was not an important holiday and made it a very important holiday for the Zionist myth. In America, it was Americanized. It became the holiday of lights, just like the Christians are putting lights on their houses and lighting candles, so the Jews also need to light candles. It is part of the tradition, so why not make it look similar? And gifts and so on, this is an American thing. In Israel, nobody gives presents on Hanukah. It is not a 'present' holiday at all, but this is just the Americanization of the tradition to make it suitable to the American audience. But you asked me about orthodoxy, so orthodox Jews may look at Hanukah in a very different way, just as well. It is a celebration of God's power. God gave the Jews the power to win the Greek empire, and perform miracles in the temple, so it can be understood from all kind of ways. It can be understood as a holiday of miracles. It can be understood as a holiday of national pride and identity. It can be understood as a celebration of lights and of gift offering.

Frederick: So some different holidays and traditions which can be interpreted significantly differently based on the perspective one might be coming from. Dr. Michael J. Berntsen is an Assistant Professor in the English, Theatre, and Foreign Language department and is serving as the Interim Director of the Writing Center. He is the advisor for UNCP's Paintball team - I need to hang out with ya'll more often, and the Secular Student Alliance. His greatest accomplishments include completing the

Boston Marathon in 4 1/2 hours (impressive!), beating the Outer Bank's Rooster Challenge (also impressive); and co-habiting with an internet-famous cat named Awesome Pawsome (perhaps the most impressive of all). Mike, how do the non-religious, or atheists and agnostics feel about all of the attention surrounding these holiday traditions? Do they sometimes celebrate the Americanization of some of these holidays, but detach the faith-based portions?

Berntsen: A lot of different reactions. Many of us embrace it because it is an excuse to put lights on the house and it is a wonderful time. We get to buy things for other people, buy things for ourselves. Others become skeptical of how, especially the government in public spaces, celebrate the holiday. Most of us are generally apathetic. Really, as secular thinkers, it is not what we do. It all depends kind of on the personal experience, personal preference. We become reactionary when, if we say "Happy Holidays" to the woman in Dollar Tree, she yells at us and says, "No! It's Jesus' birthday! This is the only holiday that matters." We say, "No, Madam, there are about twenty-five different holidays being celebrated within about four weeks." And that's when we become reactionary, because we get that a lot, in many areas of the country. A lot of us are in, I think, the two major groups. Holidays are very tragic (for some). One group is the people - and I never realized they used these terms until I started advising the Secular Alliance on campus - they use the same terms as LGBT. There are Closeted Atheists and there are Out Atheists. For Closeted Atheists it gets more anxious than other peoples' experience, because they are in the house with their family, but they can't really talk. They know that they have limits in the conversation and they know their dad is going to say something like, "Hurricane Matthew was caused because America is not praying more," and instead of saying, "Well, Dad, I don't know if God is really a TV producer and treats prayers like ratings..." We can't really have that discussion, right? So it silences them or it becomes a holiday where they really can't speak their mind in front of their family. The other half that is really tragic are the ones who are out and they have no family left, and we actually have UNCP students like this. They decided they were questioning Christianity, not even becoming an atheist and they got kicked out of

homes. I work with a military atheist group at Ft. Bragg and half of them have no family any more. So, for a lot of secular people the holidays can be a very sad time because it shows them that their family did not have unconditional love for them. Just because of a philosophical difference they lost family and friends. Then it becomes very tragic. They become nostalgic for a time when they believed that their family could love them unconditionally. That being said, though, we have a Winter Solstice Celebration with the group and a lot of us, if we are in the situation where we lost family and friends, we form our own family. So I have about eight different parties in the next three weeks to go to with all secular people. Atheists, Humanists, all sorts of secular thinkers. And so we have thought about reinventing and just re-embracing the meaning of a holiday. We have pretty much turned it into what we need. If we need family time, that is what we do. We have a big dinner; we decorate a Christmas tree, ironically; we have a zombie nativity scene. There are numerous ways people appropriate different behaviors. Others, like me, are what we call a Secular Christian. So I celebrate Christian holidays. I have a lot of friends who are Buddhist, and who are Jewish, so I just kind of embrace all of the holidays. If there is free food, I am going for the free food. I was a grad student, so I know about how important free food is.

Frederick: Good stuff. Jane Haladay is Associate Professor of American Indian Studies and a member of the Esther G. Maynor Honors College Faculty. She has received awards for both outstanding teaching and for excellence in service. Dr. Haladays research focuses on Native American literatures and sustainability issues. Hey, Jane!

Haladay: Hey, Jeff!

Frederick: Clearly there is a tremendous amount of diversity among different American Indian tribes. Talk just a minute about how a few different tribes might conceptualize the concept of holiday and how that might play out into their practice.

Haladay: Your invitation to this podcast really got me thinking about what a holiday is and I think in mass American culture we have these particular ideas that are often

secular, and not necessarily just the religious ones, as some of my colleagues have suggested, have become secularized through consumption, etcetera. But, often it is a fixed day, or a fixed series of days that honors an individual or honors, originally, a god. You get the day off work, you get free food, whatever. There is really no parallel to that kind of conception of a holiday in traditional indigenous cultures. That doesn't mean that contemporary Native American people do not also celebrate any of the holidays that other people celebrate...Christmas, Thanksgiving (a very troubled holiday that I may talk about later, but won't go into detail now.) Some native people totally reject Thanksgiving because of its history. What native peoples have always, and continue to celebrate, are seasonal ceremonial cycles. These are not only in the winter months, or the fall, they are year round. So, the purpose of these celebrations and gatherings of the community are really to come together, honor the abundance of the natural world, commemorate the beginning of a planting season, the conclusion of a planting season, when plants are gathered-in and harvested. The Nez Perce, who is a Northwest tribe in Idaho, has a food ceremony. So do a lot of west coast peoples, and all native peoples. But the Nez Perce have a native food ceremony in the fall where they celebrate elk, deer, salmon, bitterroot, huckleberries, particular foods that have origin stories to their cultures that were given to them by the holy people. However their particular nation conceives of those higher powers and they celebrate those foods. They give speeches. They pray. The Iroquois people in the northeast and a lot of Southeast and Eastern peoples have a celebration for the first strawberries in spring because they are both delicious and a harbinger that spring is coming. There are green corn ceremonies that these tribes also celebrate in the southeast that honor the coming abundance of corn. Corn is universally sacred to traditional native peoples throughout the Americas. The Pueblo Peoples in the southwest have a ceremony both at the beginning of the corn planting season and the gathering-in of the corn. In traditional Pueblo homes new-born babies are given two perfect ears of corn that are called their mothers. I think that one of the main differences in the way that mass culture celebrates the idea of Thanksgiving which is to gather your family together, however you conceive of family, eat a bunch of food, be thankful for the food; Native peoples have always viewed food as their relatives; literal relatives, so that is

something to be celebrated and honored year round. Other celebrations and gatherings that Native peoples observe have to do with cleansing, have to do with healing. All, again, sort in the interest of keeping the world in balance and maintaining right relationship with the natural world.

Frederick: Great stuff. Dr. Siva Mandjiny is the chair of the Department of Chemistry and Physics. A member of UNCP's faculty since 1996, Dr. Mandjiny is an award-winning Professor of Chemistry, with experience in bio-processing, protein chemistry and crystallization, and other subjects. He is a past recipient of the coveted Board of Governors Teaching Award. Welcome, Siva.

Mandjiny: Thanks, Jeff. I am coming from India so I have to talk about holiday seasons in India mostly because I was born and brought up there. If you look at the Indian population, Hindus are 80%. You have to agree with me, David, that Christians are only 2.5%. So when I was looking at the biggest holiday seasons in India, I don't see Christmas is really that great. All I see when I was a kid there, my neighbors bring sweets. That is all the celebration in India. I see all the Christians will go to the church at midnight and they will come back. That is the memory I have about India. When it came to France, for my higher education, I really felt very happy in France. France is the place to enjoy the Christmas Day because I would call that an economic development day, because that is one day that you can sell everything there. I truly enjoyed France because everybody was giving gifts, but I don't know what is going on in my neighbors' house. But I see they are exchanging gifts and everything and they will get about a week off in the labs. They do not have to work; simply eat and enjoy your life. So that is the experience I have in France. When I came to the US in 1996, it is exactly the same thing as I saw in France. So, Christmas, to me, is enjoyable weekdays and a lot of exchange of gifts. When I was a kid I enjoyed it, but now I am a parent of two kids. I see that my pocket is going down. (Everyone laughs.)

Frederick: Economic development day continues.

Mandjiny: So in the budget you have to keep some money for Christmas and the holidays. Indian celebrations and holiday season, to learn about this is a Pongal. That is a celebration that I truly enjoy in India. Even here I do that. I don't forget those holidays here. It is a four-day holiday for us. The first day we burn all unwanted things before your house. Day 2 we make a Pongal. That means we get all the harvested food, especially rice. We take the rice, polish the grains, grind them, put in some sugar, and put in some milk. We make the Pongal and we eat the Pongal. What it is about food is that it makes you happy. Any time when you eat food you feel like you are up in the air.

Frederick: I'm hungry right now.

Mandjiny: There you go, and then the Pongal is full of sugar and milk, so it is an enjoyable thing. So, what is the idea behind this festival is to thank the farmers because we should never, ever forget the farmers, because they grow the rice. They feed you. My dad brings all of the farmers to my house. Over fifty farmers, we feed them. Make sure they are all fed nicely here, because their blessing is so important to us. If they bless us the whole country is great. So in my opinion, we should respect the soldiers, doctors, nurses, and farmers. The second thing here is that we respect the cows because in India we do not have technology. So, we use the cow for plowing the land. They give us milk and everything: milk, cheese, and butter we are getting from them. That is why we call them Holy Cow. (Everyone laughs.) I don't know why they say, but I love the cow because I don't eat...I mean I am not supposed to eat beef, but I eat it. Don't tell my mother, ok? (Everyone laughs.) So the cow is really a great thing for our country there because it is our friend. On the third day we celebrate the cow, you know. We bring the cows inside the house. We feed them, and make the cows happy, and take the cows all around the village and then we play songs. We enjoy that day, the third day. The last day we make sure that we make a point to meet all our friends and relatives, go to them and get their blessings. That is the fourth day. These four days are correlating to Christmas here. This is something that you have to all know about the holiday season, which is Pongal, which is being

celebrated on January 14. Also we call this a new year for us. Our new year starts on January 14.

Frederick: And if you know Siva, you also will know that he celebrates any time he can get his beloved Cricket on TV.

Siva: I do love Cricket.

***\*\*\*We'll return to Thirty Brave Minutes in a moment, but first thank you for listening and for your financial support of the College of Arts and Sciences. When you give before January 1st your deduction will be tax deductible for 2016 and will go to work right away to support the College of Arts and Sciences and its many programs for students in the community. The fund exists to help students and faculty to make meaningful connections to the community, the state and beyond through intellectual inquiry, scholarships, and research in the humanities, social sciences and STEM fields. Consider a contribution today. Mark your envelope: The Deans Fund, College of Arts and Sciences, UNC Pembroke, Hickory Hall, Pembroke, NC 28372 or call the College of Arts and Sciences at 910-521-6198. You can also find us on the Web. Now, back to Thirty Brave Minutes and your host, Jeff Frederick...\*\*\****

Frederick: Well, one of the things that several of you brought up is the strong connection between celebration, holiday, and food. That connection is strong in so many cultures. Talk a little bit more about how food connects formally or informally with the traditions that you either celebrate or have talked about.

Nikkel: Fruitcake is infamous for a Christmas gift. I don't know why. (Everyone laughs.)

Frederick: Infamously bad!

Nikkel: I never cared for it myself.

Haladay: Isn't that English in origin? Fruitcake with candied fruit?

Nikkel: Yes, candied fruit, currants, and dried fruit with spices. I never cared for it.

Haladay: Me, neither.

Inbari: The tradition of Hanukah is to eat only greasy food, like donuts, latkes, which are fried potatoes.

Frederick: So, you know, that fits in with me because as a southerner, and a southern historian, we fry everything anyway.

Haladay: So, do you think that some of these food traditions - I'm thinking of Pongal, too - originally are about insuring abundance? Some of us are not as concerned about doing that, depending on our financial situation now, but to eat the greasy food, that is insuring that you are going to have a little body fat and survive. The milk and sugar with the rice, I assume, would be quite a delicacy -during Pongal- and not an everyday thing for a lot of people.

Mandjiny: The difference between the ordinary Pongal and the Pongal on the January 14 is we take the freshly harvested rice and we make Pongal out of that to pay respect to the sun because the sun is everything. In Christianity you see only Jesus as your Lord, right? But in Hinduism we have a lot of gods. What is a god? God means we pay respect to one single person for some reason, so the sun? Without sun, no photosynthesis; without photosynthesis, no rice. We take that harvested rice, clean the rice, and make the Pongal for that day. If you make the Pongal with milk and sugar, you feel happy about that. To make you happy and to be happy and to speak to the community, that is our goal.

Haladay: You mentioning the sun makes me think of another ceremony for some native peoples, which is the Sun Dance that a lot of Northern Plains people, Lakota peoples, did perform, and still do perform. But that actually involves fasting, so I think that for many traditions - fasting and food - play some role. There's feasting

after the fasting, but in the Sun Dance, it is a very sacred, a very physically demanding, prayerful time that also is in recognition of the sun. It sounds like very similar reasons. Just the giver of all life basically. (Without the sun) we do not get plants and do not get fed.

Berntsen: I always see food as a connection with community. We need farmers. If you haven't grown your own food, you know that there is a community already there. Now when we are making food and sharing with others that is not only just done in a selfish way to show off your cooking skills, right? We do it to feed others, to bring everybody to a common table. We have that metaphor of the round table, and all sorts of things. I think that breaking the bread message and breaking the bread metaphor really works to bring people together over food. There is nothing like a bottle of beer with friends.

Haladay: And cheese fondue. (Everyone says yeah!)

Berntsen: All community food.

Mandjiny: That reminds me of something else. Indian tradition. Why do we feed food to the people who come for the marriage? There is a difference between a blessing without food and with food. You will see that when you feed people they bless you greatly. And if you don't feed them food, their blessing is less than 50%, I would say. So when you feed them, they bless you with a full heart. (Laughing)

Frederick: Great stuff. We could go on for some time... Let's close with this. Talk about a specific memory that you have from one of the holidays you have celebrated, or that you hearken back to at this time of year. While you all are thinking I will mention one. I grew up in Florida, so the idea of a white Christmas was really a mirage, but there was one Christmas Eve I remember when the temperature dropped and we had a sprinkler system in our yard and we had orange trees. The sprinklers came on in the middle of the night after the temperature had dropped below 32 degrees and they had sprayed all night on the orange trees and we woke up the next

morning and we looked out and there were icicles hanging down from all the orange trees. I thought we finally got a white Christmas. As a kid I thought that was about the greatest thing ever.

Mandjiny: During these holidays, Jeff, we should never ever forget those people who are living in the orphanages. During the holiday season we should help orphans, and handicapped people.

Berntsen: The poor and the hungry. Amen.

Inbari: I can say that for me, as someone who grew up in Israel and came to the US, the transformation of the holiday, the Americanization of the holiday, for me, was a process. My children were expecting to get gifts and I wasn't thinking about it.

Berntsen: For me it is about my grandpa. He would give me pretty much anything I wanted for Christmas. Big gifts that my parents couldn't afford. So he would say, "Well, I gave you the Death Star playset, what are you going to give the world?" I was like, "I don't know." I was four; I didn't know. He kept saying that and eventually when I was about eight, I was getting it. Having my family reinforce the idea that, yes, gifts are great, but you have to do more for everybody else. You have to remember the people who don't have anything, who don't have food to eat during the holidays. For me it is always that memory (and knowing that I have it pretty well), so I want to make sure that everyone else has it pretty well, too.

Frederick: To that we can all say Amen. Whatever your tradition, wherever you came from, the concept of giving being more important than receiving, I think is pretty universally understood. We all have a lot to be thankful for and a lot to feel good about. So whether it is family, or the meaning of the season or your traditions that you celebrate, the food that you are about to enjoy, and maybe just a little time off, we all have a lot to appreciate. Well, thanks for participating today and for being a part of our podcast. Thanks to all those who are listening and please pass Thirty Brave

Minutes on to someone else. Whatever you are celebrating at this time of year, I hope that it will be a peaceful and fulfilling holiday season.

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