

Ben Carson and the 'War on Christmas'

An absurd but popular complaint on America's Christian Right is that Christmas is under attack despite the nation's extraordinary month-long birthday party for Jesus. But, ironically, one Christian Right favorite, Ben Carson, may oppose this celebration of Christmas, as Nat Parry notes.

By Nat Parry

Ben Carson, the neurosurgeon turned Republican presidential contender, may have a skeleton in his closet that could disqualify him from leading the United States of America in the eyes of millions of his supporters.

No, it's not the fabrications of significant chunks of his life story that he's told, nor his opposition to Muslims being president, nor even his reprehensible views on keeping Guantanamo open into perpetuity. No, it's something much more serious than that at least, more serious as far as the average Fox News-loving Republican voter is concerned.

As a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is a strong possibility that he does not support the month-long birthday party for Jesus known as Christmas.

What's that, you ask? How could a leading figure in the Republican Party one who was pulling ahead of frontrunner Donald Trump in support from the key demographic of Christian evangelicals possibly be an opponent of the so-called "sacred Christian holiday" of Christmas? Well, it turns out that the religious camp of Seventh-day Adventism to which he belongs not only insists on observing the Sabbath on Saturday, but also, perhaps more controversially, rejects the celebration of Christmas.

As explained on their website, "Seventh-day Adventists do not celebrate Christmas or other religious festivals throughout the calendar year as holy feasts established by God." As strict adherents to the teachings contained in the Bible, they correctly point out that the "historical reason for adapting December 25 as the birthday of Jesus has no biblical foundation, but is due to the change of year from darkness to light, which happens in the midst of the winter in the northern hemisphere."

In fairness, although Adventists do not celebrate Christmas, they go to great pains in explaining that they don't oppose the Christmas holiday *per se*. In fact, numerous articles written by members of the Church offer rather thoughtful, nuanced and historically informed analysis on this controversial topic, emphasizing that while Adventists should not personally engage in this

pagan tradition, the Christmas season is nevertheless a useful opportunity for adherents to the Church to “speak with other people about the gospel.”

But considering the lack of nuance or historical understanding on this topic among many Republican voters who are all too eager to pounce on any perceived slight to their Christmas celebration as evidence of religious persecution, it is not clear how the Adventists’ anti-Christmas narrative will go over with the GOP base.

After all, entire websites are devoted to documenting an alleged liberal-secularist conspiracy to rob conservatives of their God-given right to say “Merry Christmas” and force their religious views on everyone else for the whole month of December every year.

Glenn Beck’s TheBlaze, for example, has a “War on Christmas” [page](#) with horror stories of Nativity scenes being banned from public spaces, and Fox News’ War on Christmas [blog](#) has led the charge this year against Starbucks’ red and green holiday cups, which have been [deemed](#) insufficiently Christmassy by many right-wing Christmas warriors.

So, will we be seeing denunciations of Ben Carson and his Church in the conservative blogosphere any time soon?

There is a wealth of material for the self-appointed defenders of Christmas to choose from, such as the Adventist Biblical Research Institute’s totally factual [claim](#) that “that Christians adopted and adapted a pagan feast,” designating Dec. 25 as Jesus’s birthday and ensuring that Christmas would be forever “connected with the Roman cult of the Invincible Sun.”

According to this account, this was done partially because “God, in His providence, chose not to preserve for us a record of the day of Jesus’ birth.” (The lax record-keeping of Roman officials in First Century Judea apparently had nothing to do with it.)

In a recent [interview](#) with The Associated Press, Carson expounded on his religious beliefs and responded in particular to Trump’s efforts to paint him as part of an unconventional faith, i.e., not a true religious conservative deserving of evangelical support. During a rally last month in Florida, Trump noted that as a Presbyterian, his religious views are “middle of the road.” He then added, “I mean, Seventh-day Adventist, I don’t know about.”

Unfortunately, Carson’s views on celebrating Christmas did not come up in the AP interview, but he did address the issue of an end-of-the-world prophecy held by many Adventists. Ellen White, who together with husband James helped found the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1844, predicted that the government, with the

help of Christians who observe the Sabbath on Sunday, will eventually persecute Seventh-day Adventists for their Saturday worship, leading somehow to the End of Times.

“I think there’s a wide variety of interpretations of that,” said Carson. “There’s a lot of persecution of Christians going on already in other parts of world. And some people assume that’s going to happen every place. I’m not sure that’s an appropriate assumption. If you look at what’s going on today with persecution of Christians, particularly in the Middle East, I believe that’s really more what’s being talked about.”

Regarding the Adventists’ perceived anti-Catholic prejudice, which White expressed in her Nineteenth Century writings, Carson rejected that claim. “I love Catholics. My best friend is Catholic. I have several honorary degrees from Catholic universities,” he said.

One wonders, however, what he might think of the recent comments of the world’s pre-eminent Catholic, Pope Francis. In a powerful sermon at the Casa Santa Maria, the Pope told churchgoers that, although the holiday season is nearly upon them, now is not a time for celebration.

“We are close to Christmas. There will be lights, there will be parties, bright trees, even Nativity scenes, all decked out, while the world continues to wage war,” Pope Francis said. “It’s all a charade. The world has not understood the way of peace. The whole world is at war.”

Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.* [This story originally appeared at Essential Opinion, <https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com>.]
