

Lies My History Teacher Told Me

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Last year about this time Jonathan D. Sarna, Professor of American History at Brandeis University wrote a piece for Newsweek/Washington Post that I caught on-line titled “Once Christian-Only, Thanksgiving Now for All Faiths.”

Professor Sarna wrote:

“How can a good Jew celebrate Thanksgiving?” a fervently Orthodox Jew asked me some years ago. Thanksgiving, he pointed out, is not mentioned in the Bible, the Talmud, or any of the Codes of Jewish Law, and had its origins among Christian Pilgrims in New England.

For a Jew to celebrate Thanksgiving, he insisted, is no different from a Jew celebrating any other non-Jewish festival. It is a sin.¹

Sarna’s article went on to describe how the Governor of South Carolina issues a Thanksgiving proclamation way back in 1844, but with a distinctly Christian setting, mentioning Christ in the proclamation and South Carolina’s Jews didn’t celebrate the Thanksgiving for years nor did Jews elsewhere join in when Thanksgiving celebrations intentionally excluded them.

This article drew many on-line responses. Typical of the comments was

¹ http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/jonathan_d_sarna/2006/11/_how_can_a_good.html

this one by Risa Lapidow:

Personally, I have always felt that Thanksgiving was the one American holiday that we could all celebrate equally. My siblings and I were raised in the only Jewish family in a small New England town, where Christmas and Easter were celebrated in the schools (that has changed now). We always felt uncomfortable with public holidays, except for the 4th Thursday in November. Thanksgiving transcends social and religious boundaries. The blessing that thanks God for allowing us all to be together in celebration seems especially appropriate.²

This attitude, expressed by Ms. Lapidow is not uncommon. The Boston Globe expressed much the same opinion not too many Thanksgivings ago in an editorial, noting that Thanksgiving is wonderful because is it *not* over-commercialized and doesn't involve gift giving, and isn't bound by religion and everyone can join in the celebration.

The problem with this attitude is that it's just plain false. Thanksgiving is, at its heart, a religious celebration. The religion it celebrates is the American Civic Religion. Thanksgiving is as bound to religion as is Christmas or Passover because in many ways the celebration of Thanksgiving is a ritual re-enactment of one of the foundational stories of the American Mythos. Thanksgiving, like the Creation Story in Genesis or the story of the Flood or the Giving of the Ten Commandments or the Birth of Jesus or the Easter Story or the angel reciting the

² http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/jonathan_d_sarna/2006/11/_how_can_a_good/all_comments.html

Koran to Mohammed or the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi Tree and entering a state of enlightenment is a grounding, starting point, bedrock story upon which a faith is based. In the case of Thanksgiving, the faith that was built upon it is the American Civic religion. The Revolution, the Constitution, The right to vote, Democracy, the stars and stripes, the bald eagle, The White House, O Say Can You See, - All built upon Plymouth Rock – the cornerstone the builders did not reject.

In his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Book Got Wrong*, author James W. Loewen points out that “Thanksgiving dinner is a ritual, with all the characteristics Mircea Eliade assigns to the ritual observances of origin myth:”

1. It constitutes the history of the acts of the founders: the Supernaturals.
2. It is considered to be true.
3. It tells how an institution came into existence.
4. In performing the ritual associated with the myth, one “experiences” knowledge of the origin” and claims one’s patriarchy.
5. Thus one “lives” the myth, as a religion.

Loewen notes that it is the job of Civil Religions to hold society together according to Robert Bellah. Even when the founding stories are myths, lies, and half-truths. It is more important that the national religion be upheld than to question the suspect theology holding it up.

There is no historical evidence for the Puritan separatists, who never called themselves Pilgrims, landing at Plymouth Rock. They first landed at what is now Provincetown and there is considerable debate about whether or not they ever intended to actually aim for Virginia, which was supposed to be their destination. When they came ashore at what is now Plymouth, there were rocks there, but according to Nathaniel P. Philbrick in his book *Mayflower* the rock now known as Plymouth Rock wasn't identified as the landing place until 1741 by then 94-year old Thomas Faunce, the son of a Mayflower passenger. The rock has since been moved into town and back to the shoreline.

Where were the Indians when the Mayflower arrived? The Puritan separatist came ashore onto territory called the Dawnland by its original inhabitants, the Wampanoag, members of a larger ethnic-linguistic group, the Massachusett. As a group, the Massachusett who lived along the coastal regions were called People of the First Light. But where were they when the Pilgrims waded ashore at Plymouth? They were already dead.

The town we know as Plymouth was called Patuxet by the Wampanoag. It was a large village of thousands of people. The Wampanoags were trading with Europeans and controlling access to Indians goods from inland groups such as the Narragansett and Nipmuc for decades before the Separatists arrived in 1620. All the more sad for them because this contact brought with it contact not only with Europeans, but with European germs including smallpox and influenza.

When a Patuxet named Tisquantum (and there is some argument as to whether that was his real name or name he gave himself as in his language it means Wrath of God) left home in or about 1614, captured by captain John Smith the village was thriving. By 1620 when the people we call Pilgrims arrived it was empty. An epidemic had wiped them all out.

Disease would be the white man's greatest weapon against the Indian. Indeed he would think it a great divine gift. John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts Bay wrote in 1634 "But for the natives in these parts, God hath so pursued them, as for 300 miles space the greatest part of them are swept away by the smallpox."

In his book *Invisible Armies: The impact of Disease on American History*, Howard Simpson reports the Pilgrim accounts of the effect of disease on the Massachusetts Indian villages: "The Villages lay in ruins because there was no

one to tend them. The ground was strewn with the skulls and the bones of thousands of Indians who had died and no one was left to bury them.”³

The fact is that Thanksgiving is our most ethnocentric if not overtly racist holiday. More so than Christmas or Easter or Memorial Day or Veterans Day or the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving leaves out an entire people from the story or if it includes them, it includes them in red-face, the Native American version of Black-face from the minstrel shows.

The memory so many of us have of grade school Thanksgiving plays is a religious ritual from the American Civic religion liturgy. Pilgrims in black hats invite Indians to dinner and share their food with them. The story is backwards. When the Pilgrims arrived, the first thing they did was rob the graves of the dead of Patuxet for anything valuable they could use. They went through the houses and set up shop in an already abandoned village. They didn't need to clear the land, they didn't need to lay out a town – it was already there and they took it over. The same thing in Deerfield and Springfield and Greenfield. Towns with accompanying fields already environmentally landscaped for habitation by a population decimated by unintentional germ warfare.

If it hadn't been for disease, perhaps our civic religion never would have

³ Simpson quoted in Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me pg 72

emerged because the native population would have been too strong to overcome. It's a distinct possibility.

When Massasoit walked into the Patuxet compound in 1621 to make a deal with the newcomers he was being shrewd, not a friendly Indian. His people were destroyed by disease and he wanted a treaty with the ugly, inept, smelly white people against the Narragansett so he could continue to control inland trade and provide for his people. He wasn't a dope. He wasn't Tanto. (What a stereotype Tanto means stupid in Spanish).

The people of the First Light, the inhabitants of the Dawnland were a proud people. They were shocked to need to be in league with these incompetent newcomers who had trouble with such commonplace tasks as finding and growing food, making shelter, and personal hygiene.

I wonder what they thought of each other, both of these groups on that harvest feast they shared - two completely exotic cultures mixing and mingling with absolutely no reference points. As is often the case when cultures clash, even when you think you are being understood, sometimes you're not.

There's an interfaith joke about the Pope and the chief Rabbi of Rome that illustrates this.

Centuries ago during a time of Jewish persecution, the Pope decided that all the Jews had to leave the Papal States.

Naturally there was a big uproar from the Jewish community. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a debate with the Chief Rabbi of Rome; if the Rabbi won, the Jews could stay; if the Pope won, the Jews had to leave. The Pope insisted the debate be in Latin. The Rabbi in Hebrew. Eventually, they settled for sign language and hand gestures.

On the day of the debate the Rabbi and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. The Rabbi looked back at him and raised one finger. The Pope waved his finger in a circle around his head. The Rabbi pointed to the ground. The Pope pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. The Rabbi stood up and took an apple out of his pocket.

The Pope stood up and said in Latin and in Hebrew, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay."

An hour later, the cardinals were all around the Pope asking him what happened. The Pope said: "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our faiths. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground and showing that god was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that god absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything! What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around the Rabbi back at the synagogue. "What happened?" they asked.

"Well," said the Rabbi, "First he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving. Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here." "And then?" asked a woman.

"I don't know," said the Rabbi. "He took out his lunch and I

took out mine and he gave up."

This joke is an excellent example of how our cultural and religious assumptions hold us captive. The Pope and the Rabbi can't understand each other (within the limits of the joke, anyway) because they can't speak each other's language. They try to communicate, but their underlying assumptions about each other make communication impossible as they hear what they mean and not what the other person says. They assume they understand the dialogue they're having, but they are at the same time trying to have a conversation and translating the conversation.

This is what happened with not only the Pilgrim contact with Native America, but all subsequent contact with American Indians and white people as promises were made, but broken by white people who then took all the land and erased the defeated people from the national history as best they could.

Then in the 1960s and 70s with the Civil Rights movement the American Indian movement began and American Indians began taking more pride once again in staking a claim to not only who they are, but to what is rightfully theirs.

The organizers of the Plymouth Community's 350th anniversary celebration of the landing at Plymouth thought it would be nice to invite a friendly Indian to

take part in the ceremony, so they asked a local Wampanoag leader named Frank James to write something and read it for the occasion on September 20, 1970.

His Wampanoag name was Wamsutta and when the organizers got a look at what he was going to say, they revoked his invitation to participate.

That Thanksgiving in 1970 marked the first year the Wampanoag gathered on Cole's Hill above Plymouth Rock for a National Day of Mourning. This year will be the 37th National Day of Mourning for the American Indian.

Thanksgiving is not something to celebrate for the Wampanoag and other American Indian groups, it marks the beginning of the end of their culture, their language and their people.

Yet I want to celebrate Thanksgiving. I just don't want to celebrate the ritual re-enactment of the Pilgrim's first year harvest at Plymouth. Giving thanks is good for the soul and I want to give thanks. Thanksgiving festivals, especially fall harvest festivals, were celebrated by the native peoples of this land, by the Massachusett. Harvest festivals in which giving thanks is a central theme were a part of the pre-Christian traditions of Europe and are remembered today as Lammas, Mabon and Samhain. The Jewish tradition celebrates Sukkot, the festival of Booths and Passover is a true Jewish Thanksgiving. The Christian rite of communion, called Eucharist gets its name from the Greek word Eucharisto –

to give thanks.

I want to give thanks. I want to mark a festival of thanksgiving and take time to recognize the bounty of the harvest and count the blessings in my life. What I don't want is history based on falsehood instead of fact. When we continue to celebrate an American history based on myth and lies, it becomes easier and easier to swallow an American present based on myth and lies that will become the future history based on lies. Lies such as there were weapons of mass destruction. Lies such as Iraq was behind the 9-11 bombings.

So today, among other things for which I give thanks is our Unitarian Universalist faith. Ours is a faith that allows me to take our Puritan forefathers and mothers and appreciate the spirit of democracy that lies within the Mayflower compact, yet recognize that the people who wrote it dismissed as inferior human beings the American Indians who made their survival possible and who they later exterminated. Ours is a faith that allows me to revel in the respect for the interdependent web of existence so woven into the Native American world-view, so alien to the Puritan. Ours is a faith that allows me to build a new Thanksgiving holiday in my free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Not a secular thanksgiving, but a genuinely religious thanksgiving, founded in my liberal faith that shines light on the left out of American history, celebrates

the bounty of the natural world, appreciates all the blessings I enjoy that much of the world goes without and encourages me to recommit myself to work for a more just and equitable world in the present day so that the history our descendants read will shine with the beauty that comes from the genuine blessings of the light of truth.