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## **A little too much political correctness on college campuses at Christmas**

*By Diether Haenicke  
December 10, 2008*

This year I spent the first Sunday in Advent collecting beautiful sea shells on Sanibel island. Gentle waves were rolling in from the Gulf of Mexico and hordes of European tourists in skimpy bathing suits were basking in the sun, exposing themselves to all kinds of dermatological problems.

My mind was as far from the Christmas season and jingle bells as it could possibly be.

But even in Florida, the land of almost constant sunshine, there is a Christmas season. The local Chambers of Commerce insist upon it. Just as on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, someone throws a switch on Thanksgiving Day, bright lights begin to glitter on palm trees along the main shopping streets in downtown Naples, the shop doors of the cathedrals of commerce are thrown open, and Christmas carols fill the air. Black Friday has come to town, the balance sheets change from red to black, and the glorious season of shopping and spending and consumption is upon us once again.

Thus Christmas has become, for many of us, mainly a commercial holiday, and the national economy is measured by consumer behavior in December. The little elves on Wall Street want to know how much new credit card debt is loaded on old debt, and how ferociously the buyers are storming the department stores' sales counters. The more reckless and impulsive the Christmas consumption, the brighter the smiles on the faces of the elf-economists.

But for other people, Christmas brings serious soul searching of the ideological sort. Florida has a legion of universities, and for public institutions of higher learning, all holidays, particularly Christian ones, are highly problematic.

What is the issue here? It is the Christmas tree whose display on campus might "offend" the 5 percent of the student population who are not Christian or indifferent to religion.

This year the annual worryfest about Christmas took place at Florida Gulf State University. Here the overzealous president, determined to win the national contest for political correctness, ordered all Christmas decorations banned from common spaces on campus and the popular annual greeting card design contest canceled. The design contest was replaced by an ugly sweater competition; the Christmas tree was to be transformed into a "giving garden," whatever that may be. "Public institutions often struggle with how best to observe the season in ways that honor and respect all traditions," the president pontificated, and "This is a challenging issue each year at FGCU and 2008 is no exception."

Given the worldwide economic crisis that erodes university endowments, given the ever-rising cost of tuition and the dire job outlook for our graduates, I can think of a lot more challenging campus issues than replacing a greeting card design contest with an ugly sweater competition. If the FGCU president wants to be politically correct and face a really challenging issue, he should cancel the paid holiday on Christmas Day, a regular weekday this year. That would really "offend" people.

The FGCU campus was less politically correct than its president. There were protests against his edict. The former president had always lighted the university's official Christmas tree and the college's child care center and the university choir performed traditional carols. Marilyn Lerner, a junior who is Jewish, said she'll miss seeing the Christmas tree in the student union. "I think it looks pretty. It's just a Christmas tree. I don't mind it."

Stephanie Tirado, a junior from New York and a Wiccan, expressed the same feelings: "Why don't they just add a menorah then?"

It strikes me as a sad moment when undergraduates show more common sense than their president. As public pressure mounted, the president withdrew his memo and, following the time-honored policy of all college presidents who are at their wits' end, he appointed a committee to study the "challenging issue."

I understand the principle of separating church and state and fully agree with it. But I don't believe that people are actually "offended" by the expression or display of religious

traditions of their neighbors. If they are, I pity them. But I do believe that people are getting awfully tired of political correctness and expect a little more common sense from those who are supposed to be leaders in tolerance and enlightenment.

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