

# The Washington Times

## Forgetting the holy; The Feast of the Intransitive Verb

Published Thursday, November 25, 1999.

By Kevin "Seamus" Hasson

Every fourth Thursday in November work and school are canceled so that families can gather together for the day and thank - well, we'll get to just who it is they may be thanking in a minute. They also enjoy good food, good company and good football. The holiday is currently called Thanksgiving, although there is reason to think that may have to change.

Just about every other religious holiday has been stripped of its original meaning and transformed into a more secular version of its former self. Why should Thanksgiving be any different? In Pittsburgh, Christmas and Hanukkah morphed into "Sparkle Season" and then disintegrated further into "Downtown Pittsburgh Sparkles." Public school systems across the country are renaming the Easter Bunny the "Special Bunny." Even Halloween is being transformed out of concern for its rampant religiosity. In many places it is now the "Fall Festival Celebration." Surely Thanksgiving, a state-sanctioned holiday that purports to give the nation a day to thank God, cannot withstand the small, furious army of radical secularists determined to take the "holy" out of our holidays. A day set aside to thank God can hardly be appropriate when the celebration of Christmas, Hanukkah and even Halloween has become taboo. Something will have to be done.

So I have a modest proposal: Let's practice truth-in-labeling and call the November holiday that was formerly Thanksgiving, "The Feast of the Intransitive Verb." Intransitive verbs, as we all remember from those unpleasant days of diagramming sentences in grammar school, are verbs that do not require an object. Verbs in sentences like "The horse ran" and "The wind blows" are intransitive because the horse doesn't have to run anything or the wind blow anything. They can simply run and blow without any object at all. Well, what about the verb "to thank"? It's supposed to have an object. You can't just sit there and "thank." You have to thank someone. Which is why secularists don't use that word much in late November anymore. Their creed requires them to celebrate the day by being grateful while thanking no one. And it's embarrassing to have to choose between being politically and grammatically correct. So secularists prefer the circumlocution "to give thanks." It doesn't require an object. You can get away with "giving thanks" without having to be grateful to anyone in particular. It's much more comfortable that way. Thank whomever you want. Or, don't thank anyone; it's entirely up to you. Either way you can still "give thanks." That's the beauty of using an intransitive verb; it doesn't need any object.

Of course, once the object of our gratitude is out of the way it's all downhill. The rest of the day is uncommonly easy to secularize. It has none of the outward trappings of a religious holiday. There are no babes in mangers or symbolic candles to remove from courthouse steps. No one is ringing church bells that require silencing or allowing children to hunt for eggs that must be renamed. The staples of Thanksgiving - turkeys, cornucopias and pumpkin pies - in and of themselves present no real threat to the secularist ascendancy. And the football games are an absolute godsend (so to speak) for secularists. After all, the more distracted we all are the easier it is to forget about the one to whom we owe gratitude.

So let's hear it for the Feast of the Intransitive Verb. It's a worthy companion to "Sparkle Season" (formerly known as Christmas), "Special Person Day" (previously St. Valentine's Day), and the "Spring Festival," which was once Easter. Of course, if all this isn't agreeable to you, if it all seems just a little bit extreme, or even if you're just worried that turkey and cranberries may never taste the same again, you could always

be a thumb in the eye of the radical secularists. You could insist on thanking God, and not settle for generically "giving thanks." You could tell your neighbors that you're grateful to God for all He's done for you. You could even go so far as to tell your children to do the same - to make sure that amidst all the construction paper turkeys they fashion in school they get the message across that they, too, are thanking God.

Defending the public integrity of our holidays is not just petulance. Cultures are built, and eroded, by a succession of public acts both great and small. Everything from the arts we exhibit to the table manners we display makes a difference in building up or wearing down our culture. Public holiday celebrations are particularly potent engines of culture - which is why the secularists have poured so much energy into changing ours. Pittsburgh's "sparkle season," for example, has done great damage, not only to Christmas in Pennsylvania, but to our culture nationally. But the fight is far from over. So this weekend enlist in the culture war and thank God.

*Kevin J. "Seamus" Hasson is the president emeritus of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.*