CENTER VALLEY (December 10, 2006) – ‘Tis the season, and in this month most folks easily imagine the reference. Trees and lights, melodies and parties aid our senses in knowing what time is upon us. When each year it rolls around, children of all ages get especially gleeful at what awaits them.

Why, then, does it seem more difficult each year to name it? If “Christmas” signals this time of good cheer, why does uttering the word aloud create social consternation?

Chicago provides this year’s case in point. City officials with the mayor’s office of special events objected to showing movie trailers from “The Nativity Story” as an advertisement at the Christkindlmarkt in Daley Plaza. Never mind that the festival has been taking place there, with city approval, for more than a decade. Never mind that the ornaments on sale there are traditional to a specific December day. Never mind that the name of the event (“Christ-child market”) has the same root word in its title. Nonetheless, the Nativity story must be declared out of place there.

Ostensibly, that decree conforms to an ordinance that bars any “blatant commercial message” from the plaza. Movies studios are commercial enterprises. Showing clips from a film could be considered a blatant attempt to convey an enticing message (to buy a ticket and see it). But if this is the real objection, why are posters for this film prominently displayed elsewhere on city property?

The director of the events’ office voiced another reason: advertising a religious movie would “be insensitive to the many people of different faiths who come to enjoy the market for its foods and unique gifts.” Culinary talents and exquisite craftsmanship do engender delight, but the uniqueness of these products remains associated with something more; they enhance a story, the very story the movie portrays. Besides, espousing civic sensitivity sounds more like political speak for fear of civil litigation.
To be sure, the Nativity story is not the only story, as Hanukkah and Kwanzaa and other religious tales are likewise narrated in December festivities. Nor is this the only “reason for the season,” since the cyclical changeover to increased sunlight has been celebrated by pagan civilizations from time immemorial.

But the Christmas story is what it is. The Nativity has an historical reference point, despite the chronological controversies that keep scholars speculating about it. Whatever day it occurred, in whatever year it happened, a child named Jesus was born into human life. Later adored as the Christ, that child is believed to be fully human and fully divine, a unique epiphany in the course of human history.

Germanic cultures have celebrated that birth with food and handiworks characteristic of their way of life. The “Christ-child market” that thrives each December, even here in Bethlehem, recalls that bounteous tradition. Other cultures have their own variations.

None of these particular customs would exist, though, were it not for the historical reality known as Christmas. Others might, but they would be based on a different story.

This connection also accounts for musical arrangements and ornamental displays that abound this time of year. We sing Christmas carols and put up Christmas decorations in neighborly solicitude, as a sign and stimulus to good cheer for all. Some people further choose to include these in a church, where they then become properly religious accoutrements.

Believing in the story of God’s birth remains a matter of personal choice, as is faith in any tenet of every religion. Many do so believe and have done so for millennia. That belief has shaped their culture, and ours. And belief also differentiates us.

And therein lies our social and political discomfiture with regard to the Nativity story. Beyond marketing guidelines or sensitivity concerns, the personal greetings and public displays typical of this season reflect profound religious differences amid the distinct cultures that have arisen with them. Sadly, we think that’s an obstacle to social life. Chicagoan Dennis Byrne’s commentary identifies the problem with sardonic wit: “To foster our diverse society, we must not allow anything that reminds us of our differences, especially if that reminder comes in a public place, and most especially if it is about religion.”

But to strip our cultural celebrations of their religious association is to evade or ignore history. Without historical foundations, society is reduced to merely self-styled abstractions.

Public structures should, of course, be open to all beliefs. But civic openness does not mean sanitizing religious expression. Only by respecting our differences, rather than denying or banning them, will our cultural marketplace remain a festival of good cheer.