

Thanksgiving's a holiday atheists can believe in

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) Ken Guthrie and his partner will be at his aunt's house for Thanksgiving, sharing a table with his grandmother, siblings and cousins -- a veritable holiday crowd.

But when it comes time to express thanks, Guthrie, a board member of Salt Lake City Pagan Pride, will not be speaking to the Christian God his relatives might address.

"I'm thanking, first, the universe for allowing me to be alive. I'm thanking my family for being with me, and I give thanks to the turkey that gave its life, the plants on our table, to the Earth itself for being abundant."

As the Rev. Thomas Goldsmith, pastor of this city's First Unitarian Church, put it: Thanksgiving is one holiday on which everyone -- pagans and theists, atheists and agnostics -- can gather around the theme of gratitude.

"There doesn't need to be a theistic object of one's prayer," Goldsmith said. "We can be profoundly grateful without packaging it and sending a message to God."

Harvest festivals have been part of human cultures for ages, but Thanksgiving's roots date to the 1621 feast shared by the Pilgrims -- religious separatists from England -- and Wampanoag Indians at Plymouth Colony in modern-day Massachusetts.

More than 200 years later, President Abraham Lincoln issued the proclamation that set the precedent for America's Thanksgiving Day. Acting partly on a decades-long campaign by prominent magazine editor Sarah Josepha Hale, Lincoln's 1863 proclamation was explicitly religious.

It refers to the "watchful providence of Almighty God" and "gracious gifts of the Most High God."

Lincoln designated the last Thursday in November as a day of thanksgiving, but it wasn't declared an official national holiday until Congress acted in 1941.

Although the Mayflower Pilgrims had the Almighty in mind when they gathered for that first Thanksgiving, for some Americans, the holiday is now more about family, feasting and gratitude.

That may explain why it's a favorite holiday for many who don't believe in God or traditional mainstream religions' notions of deity.

Florien Wineriter, a retired Salt Lake City radio broadcaster and an agnostic, considers Thanksgiving a "great holiday."

"It brings family and friends together," says Wineriter, 85. "It's a secular holiday for thankfulness of the opportunity of living in this

great country and the people who have made it possible for the past 200 years."

A widower, he will be at his daughter's on Thanksgiving, enjoying turkey, the trimmings and "even a few libations."

Grant Larimer, a member of Atheists of Utah, likes that Thanksgiving is more relaxed, with less religion than Christmas.

"Any contention you have on Thanksgiving," he says, "has nothing to do with religion."

Larimer will join an old high-school buddy at the friend's mother's home for dinner, and he will bow his head if the group prays.

"I don't fall into that angry atheist crowd," he says. "I'm going to respect other people's beliefs ... and would hope others would respect my right to believe in what I believe in."

Elaine Ball, a co-founder of the group Secular Humanism, Inquiry and Freethought at the University of Utah, says Thanksgiving is "more of a time for family than gratitude toward a god."

This year, she and several friends will pitch in to buy a free-range turkey, because ethically raised animals and plants, she said, replenish the Earth, and gratitude to an abundant Earth leads her toward greater charity.

"Having so much food, and so much good food, makes me think of those

people who don't," she said.

Goldsmith, at First Unitarian, says that charitable impulse is one reason the holiday is his favorite.

"Thanksgiving is not just a one-way street, but a responsibility to take gratitude to the next level, which is generosity."

Patrick Orlob, founder of the social-networking group Salt City Skeptics, said that although Thanksgiving may have religious roots, it's an adaptable holiday.

"It's more about what you put into it," he says. "It's about being with the people you care about."

It's good to consider the abundance in one's life, he added, especially compared with many others in the world.

"I don't think you necessarily have to be thankful to something like a god," says Orlob, who will share a small Thanksgiving meal with friends.

Guthrie says Thanksgiving is one of his favorite holidays, partly because it's a fusion of Christianity and Native American traditions, infused with echoes of pagan harvest feasts in Europe.

"I see it as a festival that a lot of people can get behind," Guthrie says. "It's a piece of Americana. It's one day to celebrate hard work."