



HOFW NEWSLETTER

November 29, 2008

Message from the chair:

Our meeting on Dec. 10th will be a social gathering. If you would like to volunteer to bring food, refreshments, or songs, please email me at slittle71@gmail.com. We could also use a piano player. I enjoyed singing *Walking in a Winter Wonderland* and other favorites last year. Hope to see you there!

From www.atheists.org:

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF *BEING SEEN*...

Like arguments for prayer in schools, the issue of Christian, Hanukkah or other religious displays in the public square at "Christmas" time underscore the insistence of some groups *to be seen by others* in the act of worship.

Come the Christmas season, and separationists take to the courtrooms and editorial pages (as we should!) to denounce the unconstitutional display of religious artifacts such as nativity crèches and Menorah lights on public property. Such displays often involve complex issues, but over the years governments have gradually abandoned the practice of overtly sponsoring these religious symbols by constructing or maintaining them at taxpayer expense. The task of unpacking plastic statues of New Testament figures and illuminating them for all to see is now left to "private" groups or "volunteer" labor in order to supposedly minimize the entanglement between government and religion. More recalcitrant communities -- Jersey City, N.J. comes to mind -- will do just about anything to ensure that these religious displays remain standing, though, even if requires a shoddy attempt at sanitizing and "secularizing" such symbols by including Frosty the Snowman, Santa and some enormous Candy Cane figures.

There are 350,000 churches, mosques and temples throughout the nation; many of them sit on valuable swaths of real estate and have spacious open lawns on which they can (and sometimes do) display the symbols and scenes peculiar to their faith. "Living Nativity" scenes have even caught on as a sort of Christianized performance art, with dedicated members of the congregation shivering in the winter night cold dressed in period costumes and re-enacting the supposed events of the birth of the Christian Messiah. Historians debate the historicity of Jesus,

of course, and there is some evidence to suggest that if he did indeed exist as a historical personality, he probably was not born on a "cold winter's night" but possibly in the spring. Cultural mores, scanty accounts excavated from a few verses in the New Testament, and some wishful thinking, however, have led many to believe that those "Living Nativity" displays -- even the ones using plastic or wood -- reflect accurately some marvelous event of 1,997 years ago.

Alabama freethought activist Al Faulkenberry, that courageous foe of courtroom prayer and religious display by Judge Roy Moore, has reported that his wife and some friends recently traveled to one town where they counted 18 churches. Most, if not all, of these churches were vocal supporters of last week's ceremony on the footsteps of the State Capitol where Christian "prayer warriors" decided to erect a nativity crèche. Ironically, says Al, only a couple of the churches had bothered with similar displays on their own property.

We often and incorrectly assume that the battle over religious displays on government property, or religious rituals in public schools, is "just" a state-church separation issue. It is that, of course, but it is also more -- much more. School prayer is not just about balancing the "rights" of believers and non-believers, but involves deeper philosophical questions which many find disturbing. What about this peculiar act of prayer? Who, or what, is being prayed to? If this entity exists, why exactly does he, she, it or they require these supplications? What social, psychological and political needs are being met by this curious exercise?

The same may be asked of seasonal religious displays on public land. Religious groups, from aggressive Protestant fundamentalists and Roman Catholics to the Jewish Lubavitcher sect, are not content with erecting and confining their religious displays to the grounds of their own property. They insist on mingling their particular symbols with those venues and institutions which Americans clearly identify with the power and authority of the state. As the experience of the Faulkenberrys suggests, that one nativity crèche on the grounds of the State Capitol is more important, more poignant and more significant than any "living nativity" kitsch or private display. The identification of government and the public square with religious symbols is primary.

We should appreciate something else as well. Many contemporary "prayer warriors" (often ignoring the complex history of these writings) delight in citing chapter and verse from religious books have been selected, translated and often sanitized by the world's leading clerical authorities. We might suggest, among all of the public posturing, praying, singing and clamoring for religious exercise in the public square, that these same believers might read all of their own works, and heed the advice of St. Matthew in Chapter 6, verses 5 - 6. He wrote, "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues

With over 350,000 churches and other "houses of worship" throughout the United States, religious groups -- especially Christian -- might consider heeding the words in the Bible as espoused by St. Matthew, when it comes to erecting nativity scenes in the public square...

"And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men... But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret..."

--Matthew 6:5-6

and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men...But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret..."

That might be good advice considering the rising culture war fervor about demonstrating and testing "religious rights" in the public square. Ralph Reed, are you listening?

Indeed, much of the impetus for public prayer in schools, plazas, official events -- and for gaudy, conspicuous religious display on government land -- have to do with a desire not just to pray, but, but importantly, TO BE SEEN while praying by others. After all, Christians, Moslems, Jews and every other religious group are free to build their own temples of faith and do just about anything inside which they deem to be necessary in propitiating the deity or deities of their choice. They can pray, burn incense, sing, dance, pass the plate, build nativity scenes, display candles, kneel, supplicate, gyrate, confess, handle prayer beads and engage in other behaviors which attract the attention of their cosmic host.

But at Christmas, however, it appears that isn't enough.

It is the important act of being seen by others, and of identifying religious ritual with the power of government, which -- judging by the admonition of St. Matthew -- apparently supersedes a rule concerning how one is to behave. "Being seen" supposedly exercising one's religious rights has, for many groups, become a narcissistic ritual. Freud spoke of the "narcissism of small differences," something which may account for why so many diverse religious groups -- Catholic, Protestant, Islamic -- are now aggressively moving into the public square. Baby Jesus now competes with 32-foot high menorahs from the Lubavitcher sect, and we know of at least one effort to include Islamic symbols in one public display. It won't be long before other sects join in, ironically transforming this "sacred setting" into a sort of religious swap meet.

Courts are agonizing over how to accommodate this outburst of religious display; the latest strategy seems to involve assigning only those portions of government land and buildings which have historically been venues for the exercise of free speech. It is ironic, of course, that many of the groups taking advantage of this, such as the Catholic League for Civil Rights, are no friends of the free expression portion of the First Amendment. But it has become the act of *being seen* which transcends for these religious movements most legal considerations, civil decorum, and in some cases, even the advice of a saint.

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