



IS THERE A WAR ON CHRISTMAS? by Bob Waldrep

Since the 1980s certain events have led some to believe there is a “war on Christmas”. For over a decade, Fox News and, once Fox host, Bill O’Reilly led the charge promoting its existence. However, by 2015 O’Reilly proclaimed the war against Christmas was over—the good guys had won. Christmas was saved—or, was it?

In declaring victory, O’Reilly left room for a “part 2” stating, “So give yourselves a well-deserved pat on the back for defeating the Grinches, at least for the moment. But don’t get too comfortable because they will almost surely be back.”¹

So, was there a war and, if so, was it won? Regardless of how you answer this, without question a significant number of Americans believe there is an increasing secularization of Christmas. The evidence often cited is the, seemingly, growing emphasis on changing “Merry Christmas” to “Happy Holidays”—especially in the market place—and the banning of Christmas displays on government property. (O’Reilly often cited both as proof of the Christmas war.)

A blatant example of the latter recently occurred at a Nebraska elementary school where, principal, Jennifer Sinclair banned all Christmas or holiday specific themes. Her ban included: Christmas trees, making Christmas ornaments as a gift (she said this assumes the family has a Christmas tree when they may not), reindeer, singing/playing Christmas music, and Christmas movies or characters from Christmas movies.

Her list doesn’t seem to indicate an attack on the religious basis for Christmas. In fact, she said her intent was to make the school “inclusive”. Maybe it just reflected her own bias as “being inclusive” also included banning candy canes—which she explained is a symbol for Jesus. She believes the candy is shaped like a “J” to stand for Jesus, the red swirl represents the blood of Christ and the white is a symbol of the resurrection. One can find this origin of the candy cane on the Internet but is not rooted in history as it first appeared many years after the candy cane came into existence.

Keep in mind a candy cane is merely a peppermint stick with a crook on one end and long before candy cane existed peppermint sticks were associated with Christmas. Most likely the candy cane version was made as a way to use the sticks as a tree decoration, as well as a treat. Whether associated with Jesus or not, Ms. Sinclair believed it was and clearly banned it for that reason.

She also included a list of acceptable items which was as odd as the banned list. It included snowmen such as Olaf, from the movie Frozen and, even more strangely, Yetis—abominable snowmen—which are basically the Asian variety of the mythical “big-foot”.

Fortunately, more thoughtful educators and parents stepped in and overturned her action. Unfortunately, hers is but one of many

attempts to remove Christmas from public recognition or displays.

For over thirty years there have been attempts, primarily led by the ACLU and atheist groups, like the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), to have public displays with Christian themes removed from public/government property. For example, in 1995 the ACLU took Jersey City, NJ to court over the city’s placing a creche, or nativity scene, in front of City Hall. This was a tradition that had been in effect since the 1960s.

They claimed it violated the First Amendment’s prohibition against government establishing religion. To resolve the case, the city added nonreligious plastic figures—a Santa and a snowman—and the judge ruled the addition rendered the display constitutionally okay.



What happened in Jersey City had been occurring since the 1980s and still happens today. Just this year (2018) the Village of Elmore, OH found itself in a similar situation. For decades the Village had displayed a nativity scene at Walter Ory Park. However, in 2017 the FFRF threatened them with a lawsuit. As a result, this year’s nativity included a few additional characters to make it legal. Added alongside Joseph, Mary and Jesus were an elf, the Little Drummer Boy, a kneeling Santa, and candy canes – which, of course, would not have made the cut had Principal Sinclair had any say.

It may seem strange that these cities feel compelled to confuse the real meaning of Christmas, which is found in Jesus, with fictional characters and events. How can adding a fictional character to a nativity scene/creche make it acceptable? Blame that one on the wisdom of our Supreme Court which first got involved in this issue in 1984 in the case of Lynch vs. Donnelly.²

Briefly, the facts of the case involved the City of Pawtucket, RI putting up a Christmas display that included nonreligious items such as a Christmas tree and Santa’s house, along with a nativity scene. A citizen, Mr. Donnelly, objected to the display and sued the Mayor of the City, Mr. Lynch, claiming the city had violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

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The Court ruled 5-4 in favor of the nativity scene finding that if viewed in light of the holiday season there was no violation. Justice Sandra Day O’Conner blurred the distinction between the religious celebration at the core of Christmas and the fictional characters that have become associated with it. In her opinion she wrote:

“The display celebrates a public holiday, and no one contends that declaration of that holiday is understood to be an endorsement of religion...The creche is a traditional symbol of the holiday that is very commonly displayed along with purely secular symbols, as it was in Pawtucket.”

Justice William Brennan rightly took exception writing:

“To suggest...that such a symbol is merely ‘traditional,’ and therefore no different from Santa’s house or reindeer is not only offensive to those for whom the creche has profound significance but insulting to those who insist, for religious or personal reasons, that the story of Christ is in no sense a part of ‘history’ nor an unavoidable element of our national ‘heritage.’”

The Court established that any displays on public property that had a religious symbol must also include secular items associated with the holiday. Not surprisingly, it became known as “the reindeer rule”.

As strange as it may seem to find Santa bowing at the manger with a snowman nearby and Rudolph standing in for the sheep and camels traditionally found at the manger—for many today it makes perfectly good sense. For them, Christmas is merely a “cultural” experience or celebration—Jesus is no more real than the Santa that bows to him.

A December 2017 Pew Research poll³ found only 46% (a drop from 52% in 2013) of Americans believed Christmas was more of a religious than cultural holiday. 33% said it is more a cultural holiday. A poll conducted in that same month by Rasmussen Reports⁴ found that 68% of Americans believe Christmas should be more about Jesus while 18% believe it should be more about Santa. Another 14% were not sure—apparently torn between loyalty to Jesus and loyalty to Santa. Pew also found 66% of Americans favor Christian symbols, such as nativity scenes being allowed on government property.

Seemingly, these polls indicate a significant number, a majority, still support Christmas being identified strictly with its religious roots. Maybe O’Reilly was right, or maybe he wasn’t.

Of the 66% favoring Christian symbols being allowed in public displays, 29% favor it only if it also includes symbols of other religions. This means only 37% actually believe it is acceptable to view Christmas as a “stand-alone” Christian event. The overwhelming majority want their Christmas displays to include Santa, reindeer, snowmen, etc., or the elements of other religions or celebrations – such as Hanukkah, Kwanza or even the Wiccan celebration of the Winter’s Solstice—which typically occur during the same time frame.

Because of this nativity scenes today are surrounded by Santas, elves, snowmen and the like. Or, they include other religious symbols such

as a Menorah, or a symbol of Islam, or maybe even the “flying spaghetti monster”—emblem of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. And, yes, that is a real church that has applied for and been approved to be part of nativity scene displays.

It seems obvious that whether people say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays is not the biggest problem Christians face during the Christmas season. Rather, it is the underlying cause—the increasing rejection of Christ in modern culture—the desire to find God by some other means, some other religious or non-religious experience that we must recognize and address. Never was the need greater than now to share the message of Christ with those around us.

As Bob Dylan observed in lyric concerning the 60s, “...the times they are a-changin’”. We are no longer the society that decades ago embraced the gospel message and clung to the faith of those who built our nation. This change is clearly reflected in the views of those born after 1980, the so called millennials, when contrasted with the baby boomers born from 1946 to 1964. Consider the following statistics related to Christmas from the December 2017 Pew poll:

73% of boomers believe Jesus was born of a virgin. Only 55% of millennials believe this.

75% of boomers believe an angel announced the birth of Jesus. Only 54% of millennials believe this.

75% of boomers believe wise men visited Jesus. Only 57% of millennials believe this.

83% of boomers believe Jesus was laid in a manger. Only 65% of millennials believe this.

Only 65% of boomers believe all four of the above statements compared to only 44% of millennials.

What this indicates is the number of Americans who believe in the actual elements of the Christmas story are growing smaller with each passing year and from generation to generation. It is little wonder they find no reason to object to the comingling of the Christian message of Christmas with fantasy and other traditions and religions.

So, is there a war against Christmas? Must you assert the right to say “Merry Christmas”? Each one can decide that for themselves. But when wishing someone a Merry Christmas, be sure it is more than just words or a phrase. Also be sure to share the story behind it, the message of the One who makes it more than just merry—the story of the one who came to die that we might have life. It is the story of the one from whom Christmas gets its true meaning—Jesus.

“For today...there has been born for you a Savior!”⁵

No greater words were ever proclaimed. Don’t keep them to yourself, **share them**. Oh, and, Merry Christmas!

End Notes

1. www.billoreilly.com/newslettercolumn?pid=46907
2. Lynch v. Donnelly www.oyez.org/cases/1983/82-1256
3. 2017 Pew Report on Christmas (full report) www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2013/12/Christmas-survey-2013-full-report.pdf
4. www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/lifestyle/questions/december_2017/questions_jesus_or_santa_december_4_5_2017
5. Luke 2:11

Culture Tracks — MORE CHRISTMAS FACTS

33% of Americans plan to spend \$1,000 on Christmas gifts; 3% will spend less than \$100 (Gallup Poll taken 10-18)

Republicans more likely to say Merry Christmas (87%) than Dems (58%) and Inds (61%) (Monmouth Poll taken 12-17)

For Die Hard Fans, 25% of adults think it’s a Christmas movie, 62% say it isn’t. (Morning Consult/Hollywood Reporter taken 12-18)

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer most beloved holiday film with 83% favorable rating. (Morning Consult/Hollywood Reporter, 12-18)