



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 2, 2012

Christmas Under Intense Attack This Holiday Season

The holiday season is here again, and with it has come the predictable attacks on Nativity scenes, Christmas trees — and Charlie Brown? That's right, [Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown](#), the theatrical adaptation of a [Peanuts](#) holiday cartoon children and families have enjoyed for years, is under attack from an atheist group that caught wind that an elementary school in Little Rock, Arkansas, was going to take some of its students to see the play at a local church.



According to the [Christian Post](#), teachers at Little Rock's Terry Elementary School sent a letter home duly warning parents that the play at nearby [Agape Church](#) might "expose your child to Christianity," so "if you prefer your child to not attend the program they may stay at school."

While the musical's storyline, which finds *Peanuts* mainstay Charlie Brown in search of the true meaning of Christmas, can hardly be termed an overt promotion of the Christian faith, it does include a scene in which Linus, another *Peanuts* regular, recites the Christmas story right out of the Gospel of Luke in an effort to shed light on the beginnings of the now-commercialized holiday.

Predictably, a parent or two took exception to the school taking their children to a church, and complained to the [Arkansas Society of Freethinkers](#), a state atheist group, which ludicrously warned the school district that the innocent field trip might in fact be a violation of the First Amendment's supposed separation of church and state clause. "We're not saying anything bad about Charlie Brown," Anne Orsi, a spokesperson for the atheist group, assured local television station KARK. "The problem is that it's got religious content and it's being performed in a religious venue and that doesn't just blur the line between church and state — it oversteps it entirely." (The First Amendment states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....") In a followup prepared statement Orsi said that she and her group weren't "making war either on religion or Christmas. Rather, this is a case of a church forming an alliance with local government to violate religious freedom."

The pastor of Agape Church, the Rev. Happy Caldwell, noted that his congregation had sponsored similar free, kid-friendly programs in the past with no backlash about religion or First Amendment concerns. "We hope the complaint or question of a few does not override the opportunity for everyone," he offered in a statement. "This production also included a food drive for area pantries, and we hope that purpose is not lost as well."

Matthew Staver of [Liberty Counsel](#), a conservative legal advocacy group, insisted that the school had done nothing wrong in providing the opportunity for its students. "It's perfectly constitutional for the school to afford students the opportunity to go to a Charlie Brown play," he said, "especially when they don't require it. It's optional; parents can opt out." He added that no one has "the legal right to stop the school and the rest of the parents from participating in this program."

Meanwhile, more weighty holiday legal issues are afoot, as a federal judge ruled against a Nativity display that has graced a Santa Monica, California, park for the past nearly 60 years. Last year a local atheist erected his own godless exhibit next to the massive Christian Nativity display set up each year by local congregations at Palisades Park, prompting city officials to put a stop to the whole tradition



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rather than have it marred by acrimony between the two groups.

The church-led Nativity Scenes Committee filed suit against the city, asking the judge to grant a temporary injunction allowing the tradition to continue undisturbed this year. But U.S. District Judge Audrey Collins ruled for the city, pointing out that the churches could still continue with the Nativity scene, but must do so on private property.

“It’s a sad, sad commentary on the attitudes of the day,” reflected Hunter Jameson, head of the Nativity Scenes Committee, “that a nearly 60-year-old Christmas tradition is now having to hunt for a home, something like our Savior had to hunt for a place to be born because the world was not interested.” While the committee’s attorney, William Becker, had argued for the continuation of the Nativity display on First Amendment grounds, the city’s attorney, Barry Rosenbaum, predicted that the ban would withstand further judicial scrutiny, since the ban “did not look at the content or subject matter of these displays.”

A similar ban has gone into effect in Alsip, Illinois, this holiday season, as the Chicago suburb was the target of an attack by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) over the 30-foot cross the town has displayed on its water tower during the Christmas season since the early 1970s. To avoid the costly lawsuit the FFRF threatened, city officials decided to simply throw in the towel and drop the tradition. In a letter to residents and businesses in Alsip, Mayor Patrick Kitching wrote that he was “very saddened” by the decision he was forced to make, “and had hoped we would not have to change tradition. However, in these economic times, the village cannot afford to waste any tax dollars on a lawsuit that simply cannot be won.” He noted that other cities “have been brought to suit regarding the very same issue and have lost. We have chosen not to waste taxpayer dollars to fight a losing battle in court.”

FFRF president Annie Laurie Gaylor, who has carved out a nice living harassing individuals, communities, and other entities over contrived religious grievances, claimed that her group had targeted the city in response to a complaint by an unnamed Alsip resident. “We work to keep religion out of government,” insisted Gaylor. “We try to resolve things through education and legislation, not litigation.” But she went on to explain that in her universe towns such as Alsip “can’t put crosses on public structures such as water towers because we have separation between religion and government.” Kitching told the [Chicago Sun-Times](#) that the decision to concede to the atheist group was personally galling, but “I know we can’t win. There’s no point in fighting it.” He also said he was suspicious about the FFRF’s claim that a local resident had complained about the cross. “I doubt that,” he said. “I think they were driving down the tollway and saw our cross,” deciding to make the city its next target. Kitching said that in place of the cross, this holiday season the city will erect a lighted “holiday tree” on its water tower. “I thought about putting up a 30-foot Grinch, but I couldn’t find one,” he said.



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