



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 21, 2011

The Unending Battle over Nativity Scenes

Lately it seems that there is nothing more contentious or detestable to some people than the sight of a Nativity scene, regardless of the seasonal inspiration for its presence. At an Occupy Wall Street protest in Washington, D.C., for example, several people staged a live Nativity scene and bore a sign that read “Occupy Christmas,” provoking varying and bizarre responses from the rest of the crowd. Meanwhile, in Warren, Michigan, a group of atheists is threatening legal action if the local government does not agree to place an anti-God sign in the midst of Nativity scenes and Christmas messages.



At the Occupy Wall Street protest in D.C., videographer Benny Johnson was curious to see the reaction of the protesters to a [live Nativity scene](#).

“What happens when you put a nativity scene in the middle of an Occupy camp?” Johnson asked in the introduction of the video. The video reveals two actors (Mary and Joseph) sitting next to a manger where Baby Jesus is lying. In front of the couple, a sign reads “Occupy Christmas,” followed by a Bible verse from the Book of Luke: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. It is Christ the Lord.”

The responses varied. One man said to the group, “This ain’t a church, man.” Another was overheard asking, “Is that legal?” — to which another responded, “No check — Go check.”

Meanwhile, another demonstrator was captured on video lecturing the actors. “I wouldn’t get up here and start preaching Islam to people,” he said. “I wouldn’t because it’s not my place. It’s not your place either.” That same man later reappeared and admitted, “I’m a follower of Islam. I just think it’s in bad taste. The atrocities of the Christian faith ... ravish humanity.”

Johnson posed the question to the demonstrators, “If 76 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians, as a populace movement, wouldn’t the Occupy Movement be for a nativity scene?” A protester answered, “It goes against what our Founding Fathers created in this country.”

Still, not every demonstrator was offended by the presence of the live Nativity scene. One protester told Johnson, “I think it’s beautiful. I think it’s right on time. Christ is the reason for Christmas. I don’t know why [the other protester] would be offended.”

In Warren, Michigan, the [response](#) to Nativity scenes has been more confrontational. Atheists are threatening to take legal action against the local government if the following sign is not posted among Christmas signs and Nativity scenes inside Warren’s City Hall:

At this season of the Winter Solstice, let reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.



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Freedom From Religion Foundation's Douglas Marshall has attempted on several occasions to place the sign inside city hall, but it has been removed. According to the FFRF, the city of Warren is guilty of discriminating against atheists and nonbelievers, as well as illegally censoring them. Thus far, Warren's Mayor Jim Fouts has ignored requests to post the sign.

However, Fouts cannot ignore the group much longer. The group contends that if the mayor does not respond to the request, he will be the subject of a lawsuit.

A Nativity scene posted at an [Arkansas elementary school](#) provoked just two complaints, but apparently they were enough to prompt the superintendent of the school district to demand the removal of the Nativity scene. Fortunately, local residents and school counselor Kay Williams fought the decision and ultimately compelled the superintendent to permit the Nativity scene to be displayed. He declared, "'I think it's due to the fact that most of us are Christians, and this is a Christian community. We just decided if we are going to offend someone, we would rather not offend those who have Christian beliefs. The majority of people wanted us to take a stand, and that's what we're doing.'"

A similar battle over the Nativity scene is currently taking place in Madison, Wisconsin, at the [State Capitol](#). Anne Gaylor of the Freedom from Religion Foundation declared that the Nativity scene did not belong in the Capitol Building, even as the city is celebrating "Interfaith Awareness Week," which provided an opportunity for a number of different religious traditions to be showcased. In response to the Christian Nativity scene, Gaylor warned that her organization would be posting its own "Nativity scene," one that is a "slightly blasphemous, irreverent tweak on the nativity scene."

In Texas, the Attorney General had to [weigh in](#) on a controversy caused when the Nativity scene was placed near the Henderson County courthouse in East Texas, prompting the Freedom From Religion Foundation to place an anti-religion sign directly next to it. The sign was removed but the Nativity scene remained. The FFRF claims that because the Nativity scene is the focus of an entire corner of the courthouse lawn, it violates the Constitution by endorsing religion. In a letter of support for the Nativity scene, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott says Henderson County has no legal obligation to take the scene down.

When the Travis Air Force Base near Fairfield, California, [placed](#) a menorah and a Nativity scene at the base, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation wrote a letter to base authorities claiming that the displays amounted to religious endorsements and asked that the items be removed. An Air Force Judge Advocate General, however, decided that the displays, "as part of a broader, secular holiday seasonal display," did not violate the First Amendment's freedom of religion clause.

Americans are increasingly being forced to stifle any spiritual references to Christmas, leaving just the commercialism and shallowness of the holiday season. But Christians are prepared to fight. For instance, in a letter to the editor found in *The Dispatch* of Lexington, Kentucky, one writer asserts, "If they tell me I can't say 'Merry Christmas,' I will say 'Merry Christmas' all during Christmas and all through the year. I don't care what these people think." Also, there is a growing nationwide movement to "Keep Christ in Christmas."



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