



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 16, 2011

Arkansas School Permits Display of Nativity Scene

Despite the excitement and anticipation for the Christmas season that pervades the nation every year, the religious element of the holiday continues to be a point of contention for some and a source of great controversy. In Paragould, Arkansas, for example, the Greene County School Board forced the removal of a Nativity scene that was displayed at one of its elementary schools, adhering to local atheists who articulated the tired maxim of “separation of church and state.” After some persistent protest and displays of heroism by the elementary counselor, Kay Williams, however, the school board gave in and permitted the Nativity scene to be put up once again.



According to *Arkansas Times*, which took a very antagonistic perspective on the issue, Kay Williams posted a scene depicting the birth of Jesus on a school bulletin board, which apparently drew two complaints. As a result, the school board asked her to remove the scene, but Williams continued to put Nativity scene displays in her classroom. She told the *Paragould Daily Press*, “We do live in the Bible Belt. One thing that really disturbed most of [the supporters] was we hear about things like this all the time in other parts of the country. But this is kind of a first for the Bible Belt, here in Arkansas. I think the people realized [this issue] is here, and we better take a stand.”

Even while the Nativity scene was removed from the bulletin board, several students posted their own artwork, which included birthday cards for Jesus that read “Happy Birthday Jesus.”

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Likewise, residents in the area bemoaned the school board’s decision to remove the display. Eventually, Superintendent Jerry Noble, who first enforced the notion that the Nativity scene should be removed, agreed to allow the scene to be redisplayed. He said, “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.”

Still, the school district’s lawyer, Donn Mixon, contends that Noble could be found out of line.

“I gave the opinion that, yes, I believe, based upon what I was told about it, that, if challenged, it could well violate the First Amendment,” said Mixon.

Likewise, the American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas has taken issue with the Nativity Scene. It’s director, Rita Sklar, said that the school is in violation of the Constitution, as it represents the school’s endorsement of a religion.

“To say that if you have to offend somebody you’d rather offend those in the minority, well that’s just



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what the constitution and the first amendment are all about not offending the minority, standing up for everybody's right to practice their religion whether there is one person in your town or a thousand. That the superintendent and perhaps others don't have respect for that, I think is very sad," said Sklar.

Williams has acknowledged that there may be truth to Mixon's assertions, but contends, "We can't obligate taxpayer money to defend something just because of our personal beliefs. But, when the community feels strongly about it, then I guess we feel like we should go ahead and see what happens."

Williams adds that she has posted the Nativity Scene display for 20 years, but that this was the first year she endured this sort of controversy over it.

The case at the Paragould school is just one of many examples of the strife that the celebration of Christ's birth creates.

A similar [battle](#) over the Nativity Scene is currently taking place in 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 capital 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."

Likewise, last year in New Jersey, the American Atheists posted a billboard just outside of the Lincoln Tunnel that featured the Nativity Scene and read, "You KNOW it's a Myth. This season, celebrate reason." This year, the group posted another controversial billboard, featuring images of Jesus and Poseidon that reads, "Tell your family you don't believe in gods...they just might agree."

Perhaps what is most ironic about the controversy surrounding the Nativity Scenes is that if one were to remove for a moment the spiritual and religious aspect of Christ's birth, the birth of Jesus remains a historical event and therefore should not provoke the animosity it does. Even among groups that do not accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah, such as Jews and Muslims, as well as among historians, Jesus Christ has been accepted as a living human being. [Harry Martin](#) of the *North American Investigative Journal* writes, "Though the New Testament has many historical errors, the fact is that many of its points have been proven historically correct. Roman historians, Jewish historians, the finding of the Gnostic materials at Nag Hammadi and now the finding of Caiaphas' burial cave establishes an historical fact that Jesus lived and died in a time and a place described in the New Testament."

In other words, protesting displays of the birth of the historical Jesus is like protesting the celebration of other historical figures like Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln. And yet it somehow seems rare that the ACLU will ever oppose those celebrations.



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