

REFLECTIONS

Modeling the virtues of Christmas

What do Barnes & Noble, Foot Locker, L.L. Bean, Old Navy, Office Depot and Radio Shack have in common? They are all against “Christmas” — at least according to the American Family Association, which has compiled a list of “naughty or nice” businesses. These companies — and others like them — who speak of “Christmas” only sparingly in promos and ads are deemed naughty, while those who use it frequently are applauded as nice.

In cahoots with the AFA, Liberty Counsel has launched its 10th annual “Friend or Foe Christmas Campaign.” Using the naughty or nice compilation, the sponsors aim to pressure these retailers — indeed even encourage boycotts — when they use the more inclusive “holiday” language instead of, or in addition to, specific Christmas language.

These are private businesses, not government bodies. They are free to speak of the approximately one dozen religious holidays between Thanksgiving and the New Year as they please. If they choose as a matter of business strategy to speak and advertise more generally or inclusively, then so be it. Merchants should not be penalized for seeking to embrace the diversity of religious celebrations in December in this country. They should be applauded for it.

This goes for private individuals, too. Yes, Christmas is Christmas and a tree is a tree. And there’s nothing wrong with calling it what it is: a Christmas tree. And it is perfectly appropriate to extend specific Christmas greetings. But it is also quite acceptable to wish one another “happy holidays” or “season’s greetings.” It is not political correctness run amok, but just a matter of good manners and common courtesy. If I am talking to a person whose religious affiliation I do not know, I may employ a more general greeting. None of this discourages the celebration of Christmas one iota or diminishes my enjoyment of it in the least.

Another perennial issue in the so-called “December dilemma” has to do with crèches or Nativity scenes on public property. If government bodies sponsor or pay for the display, constitutional issues can arise. The rules are pretty straightforward. Government may not sponsor thoroughly religious symbols, like freestanding Nativity scenes. However, it may sponsor a holiday display that includes a Nativity scene if secular symbols — such as a Christmas tree, Santa Claus and reindeer — also are included. Private citizens cannot display a Nativity scene on government property if it is made to appear that the government is speaking

the message or embracing the symbol as its own. But, private citizens can usually display religious holiday symbols on public property — like parks — where expressive activity is allowed for all and it is clear that government is not speaking.

These are some of the issues being raised in a recent California case. For six decades, churches have put up Nativity scenes in a public park in Santa Monica, Calif. So far so good. Last year, atheist groups wanted to put up their display, too. The city set up a lottery to negotiate new requests from all parties; secular groups won the right to use 18 spots, while two went to traditional Christmas displays and one to a Hanukkah display. This is OK too, right? Common fairness and arguably the First Amendment require opening the forum to all, not just to one or some. But bickering, recrimination and even vandalism ensued and continued. This year the city decided to shut down the forum altogether, banning all displays to help allay the acrimony. A group of mostly churches sued the city to force it to re-open the forum, and the U.S. District Court denied the churches’ demands.

Does anybody see anything wrong with this? If you insist upon your right to speak in the public square — especially on public property — you must allow people who disagree with you to speak as well. And why insist to the point of being boorish that government accommodate your speech on public property when you can proclaim the same message — far more effectively and virtually without limitation — on private property that is in full public view? A crèche in front of every church and a menorah in front of every synagogue — without having to share the space for an opposing message while helping keep the peace — sounds like a win/win to me! In fact, after the court’s decision in Santa Monica, Nativity scene proponents staged the displays on private property — but in public view — elsewhere in the city.

No, we do not need government promoting our religious holidays to the exclusion of others. Nor do we need a corps of purity police trying to dissuade our efforts to respect the religious diversity that is the hallmark of contemporary America.

What irony and how sad to be picking fights over how to celebrate the season in which many experience the hope, joy, peace and love of Advent. We who observe Christmas would all do well to model these virtues for others, friend and foe, regardless of religious belief.



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