Religious Right Stirs Up Strife In Season Of Peace, Americans United Charges

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Watchdog Group Appeals To Americans To Reject Religious Right's Divisive 'War On Christmas' Rhetoric

Americans United for Separation of Church and State today called on Religious Right leaders and their allies in the media to stop using Christmas as a vehicle for divisiveness.

As in years past, Religious Right groups are using the Christmas holiday to divide Americans and stir up animosity by falsely claiming that there is a “war on Christmas.” Americans United said it is ironic to see these groups using a season dedicated to peace and understanding to foster conflict.

“The best holiday present we could get this year would be for the Religious Right to stop using Christmas as a club to bash others,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. “The Religious Right is making a mockery of the season with a litany of stunts cheaper than dollar-store wrapping paper.”

An example, Lynn said, is an ongoing controversy in Washington state, where government officials have allowed an atheist group to display a sign promoting non-belief near a Nativity scene in the Legislative Building in Olympia. Local Religious Right leaders and their allies in the media have attacked Gov. Christine Gregoire on the issue.

Fox News Channel’s Bill O’Reilly has repeatedly blasted Gregoire on the air and did so again this week in a column distributed nationwide but O’Reilly is omitting key facts. Gregoire is merely following the law. Courts have ruled repeatedly that if religious groups are given access to government facilities to erect private displays, non-religious groups must be given the same right.

In fact, AU noted, Washington’s policy is in place because a Religious Right legal group, the Alliance Defense Fund, sued the state in 2006 on behalf of a resident who wanted to erect a Nativity scene in the building. That right must now be extended to other groups and individuals.

As the holiday season moves forward, AU asked Americans to keep in mind the following:

It is not the job of government to promote religion Christmas has both secular and religious aspects. Governments at all levels are constitutionally barred from promoting religion. People who want a religious experience at Christmas time would do better to go to a house of worship, not city hall.

***Private groups may be permitted to display religious symbols on government property if the property in question is a public forum but that means all groups must be given the same access*:** The Supreme Court has ruled that private citizens and groups can display religious symbols in areas deemed “public forums.” But this right must be granted to other groups as well, religious and non-religious. The government cannot discriminate against groups just because some people might find their message offensive.

American society is diverse, and we should strive to get along Religious pluralism has exploded in America. We have Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhist, Hindus, Wiccans, non-believers and others among our ranks. Christmas ought to be a time for building bridges of understanding. The Religious Right’s divisive campaign and attempt to take rights away from certain groups is counter to American diversity and our constitutional order.

“‘Peace on Earth’ should be more than just a slogan,” Lynn said. “But we’ll never get there if we continue to allow Religious Right groups to exploit Christmas for their own ends. I urge the American people to reject this mean-spirited campaign.”

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