

Prineville's Nativity Scene Fiasco

Written by The Source Editorial Board
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America's founders knew history, and history had taught them that religion and government don't mix.

They knew that for centuries Europe had been wracked by religious wars, inquisitions, persecution of "heretics" and burning of "witches." They wanted no part of that in the new republic they were creating, so they laid down a clear rule in the First Amendment of the Constitution: Government shouldn't mess with religion.

But some people have always thought they knew better. Among them are the members of the Prineville City Council.

For decades the City of Prineville put up a Nativity scene in front of City Hall and nobody had any problem with it. But last year a group called the Freedom From Religion Foundation complained – correctly – that the display violated the constitutional separation of church and state.

That didn't sit well with some of the good Christian people of Prineville, who demanded that the Nativity scene remain. The council tried hard to accommodate them by finding a detour around the Constitution.

First it toyed with the idea of having a "holiday zone" outside City Hall where secular Christmassy stuff would be displayed along with the Nativity scene. But that didn't pass muster with the Oregon chapter of the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) .

Then the council dialed up another end-run play: It leased a space in front of City Hall to Bob Orlando (who coincidentally, or maybe not, is a member of the planning commission) and Orlando put up his own Nativity scene. It's a modest one this year, but he promises it will get bigger.

The Oregon ACLU is cool with that, but the Freedom From Religion Foundation isn't. It says the

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city is still promoting religion by providing space for a religious display.

It's hard to see it any other way. Although the city doesn't own the Nativity scene, it's standing right in front of City Hall, and the clear implication is that the city is endorsing it.

The argument that the city is just a neutral party doesn't fly either. The council may claim the city hall space will be open to atheists, Muslims, Druids or worshipers of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, but in reality it's a small area and it can't accommodate everything. The city will have to make choices, and as soon as it does it will be implicitly promoting a religion (or non-religion) and violating the principle of church-state separation.

There's no reason why this silly kerfuffle should be taking place to begin with. Most other cities don't see the need to put a Nativity scene in front of city hall. The City of Prineville gets no tangible benefit from having one. The good Christian people of Prineville are not going to turn into godless, evil, blood-drinking, kitten-strangling Satan-worshipers if the city doesn't have one.

The council should thank Bob Orlando kindly and tell him he has to take his Nativity scene elsewhere. Otherwise we're afraid we're going to have to give the council THE BOOT – and we'd hate to do that at Christmas.