

A Christmas Tree as a Secular Symbol

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I have received some inquiries regarding some of the holiday decoration of the College Center, as well as some of the students' entries in our Window Painting Contest in regard to whether or not they are in violation of laws governing religious activity/expression in public schools. Specific concern has been expressed in regard to visual presentation of religious symbols and imagery.

In decorating the College Center, deliberate attention was given in the selection of secular decorations. The courts have ruled (*Allegheny County v. American Civil Liberties Union*) that Christmas trees are permissible in public schools because they are a secular symbol of Christmas and do not carry any specific religious meaning. In putting up the tree, we intentionally chose not to adorn it with anything but white lights, multi-colored bulbs, and secular hand-made Christmas ornaments made by children from our daycare center. We however chose not to adorn the top of the tree with an angel or star (despite repeated requests that we do so.) Other decorations hanging in the College Center are also secular in nature.

The Window Painting Contest was designed to promote healthy competition among students and student organizations, as well as support the educational perspective and nature of this year's Winter Festival Breakfast which sought to expose participants to a variety of holiday celebrations including Christmas, Hannakuh [sic], Winter Solstice, Los Posados, and Kwanza. It was designed to be celebratory in nature of the diverse world in which we live, as well as the diverse beliefs that exist in regard to spirituality and holiday celebration.

I know the Christmas season is about to begin and the merchants' drawers will once again be filled to overflowing. To bring what little sense we can to the holiday season it is appropriate to examine what Christmas has become in the modern world. The above words seem to belong to one B. David Galt who is the Director of Student Life at Normandale Community College in Bloomington, Minnesota. These words "seem to belong" to B. David Galt because he is the all too stereotypical administrator who dutifully carries out the ruling of the court as

they apply to the state's educational institutions.

I do not for a moment suppose that B. David Galt is opposed to Christmas trees, any more than he is opposed to the celebrations of the Saturnalia, or that B. David Galt would worry if a group of Mexicans had their Los Posados on the 16th of December by reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging and upon completing their search celebrate with food, fireworks, pinatas and . . . midnight mass? (well not on his campus, unless, that is, the courts permit a secular mass); or that B. David Galt would be against the Jewish students greeting one another with a hearty *hag orim same'ach* (Happy Feast of Lights! Happy Hanukkah!). The Jewish students will even be permitted to follow the ceremony of illuminating the Hanukkah lights, if, that is, they first agree that

. . . [candles] are permissible in public schools because they are a secular symbol and do not carry any specific religious meaning.

And by all means, B. David Galt will enjoy Kwanza, which if a little older than the celebration of Woodstock, was a festival created by Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966 for Afro-Americans as a response to the commercialism of Christmas.

B. David Galt is not against Christmas anymore than he would be against Hanukkah, the Winter Solstice, Los Posados, and Kwanza. In fact the B. David Galts of the world are not against anything. He is simply an administrator who represents the interests of Normandale Community College. Do not be surprised if B. David Galt permits the students of the Aryan Brotherhood to paint swastikas on the windows of the Student Union, seeing that they are "secular symbols and do not carry any specific religious meaning." B. David Galt is like anyone of the administrators of the Third Reich working for the "final solution" at Auschwitz. His final solution this time, however, is not the restoration of Aryan purity but the celebration of

. . . the diverse world in which we live, as well as the diverse beliefs that exist in regard to spirituality and holiday celebration.

"Oh happy day!"

But what does it mean to say, "Christmas trees are permissible in public schools because they are a secular symbol of Christmas?"

A tree by nature is a tree. A tree becomes a symbol if someone or some group sees it as representing something else. A man by nature is a man. A man, like a symbol, can represent someone or some group's concerns and interests if he is entrusted to do so by that person or group. In this case, B. David Galt represents the interests of Normandale Community College.

Trees, unlike administrators, have long been objects of worship, symbols of strength, growth, permanence and even of promise.

Trees have played a prominent part in the symbolic history of man. Many trees come to mind, the Tree of Porphyry, the Tree of Jesse, the Tree of Buddha, the Liberty Tree and the tree which set the whole of man in motion: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The worship of trees has an ancient history. Amongst the Celts there was the oak-worship of the Druids. The Iroquois believed that each species of tree, shrub, plant, and herb had its own spirit. The Wanika of Eastern Africa fancy every tree, and especially the cocoa-nut tree, has its spirit; the destruction of a cocoa-nut tree is regarded as equivalent to matricide, because that tree gives them life and nourishment, as a mother does her child.

When Europe was mostly a forest, the worship of trees by the various tribes living in the area was a common practice. There were laws among ancient Germans forbidding the peeling of bark off a standing tree. Anyone guilty of peeling bark off a tree had his navel cut out and nailed to the part of the tree which he had peeled, and he was to be driven round and round the tree until all his guts were wound around the trunk. Such is the view of the world when all is animate and trees, like men, had souls. The purpose of the punishment was to replace the skinned tree with the skin of the culprit; it was a skin for a skin. Ouch!

Can you imagine how difficult it would have been for B. David Galt and his assistants to administer a student union's "Winter Festival" when a coconut worshipper accidentally peeled some bark off a White Oak? Just try to convince the Germans that their oak tree is one of many secular symbols and ways of expressing the

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so they won't cut the navel out the Wanika student and wind him around the old oak tree.

Which brings us back to the Christmas tree as a "secular symbol of Christmas." What exactly would a secular Christmas be. "Secular" is rooted in the Latin *saeculum* which means generation, age, and in Christian Latin "the world" as opposed to the church. A secular tree would be a symbol which pertains to this generation, this age and this world. However, a secular Christmas tree would be a tree which symbolized Christmas which is not of this age, this generation or this world. The word Christmas is derived from two words, Christ and mass, neither of which pertain to this age. Any Christian knows Christ does not belong to his race, his generation, his age, his times or this world. Furthermore, the mass is the sacrament of the Lord's supper.

So if B. David Galt and the courts he so willingly serves were correct, a secular Christmas tree would be a tree which is a symbol of this age and not the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, the Wonderful, Counselor, the Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

At this point in our meeting, various members around the conference table started banging their heads against the table. The Asst. Director of Sense, Senselessness, and Plain Nonsense stepped in to explain the logic of the Winter Festival. He started with B. David Galt's statement:

In putting up the tree, we intentionally chose not to adorn it with anything but white lights, multi-colored bulbs, and secular hand-made Christmas ornaments made by children from our daycare center. We however chose not to adorn the top of the tree with an angel or star (despite repeated requests that we do so.)

Then he explained that B. David Galt wants the students and the faculty at Normandale to act as though a Christmas tree is not a religious symbol, hence it cannot be decorated with Christmas ornaments. It can, however, be decorated with lights, Frosty the Snowman, dogs, cats, Smurfs, Beannie Babies, and whatever the children at the state daycare pens are allowed to create. But the Christmas tree cannot have an angel or a star perched upon it because this would crown the tree with a symbol which is not of this world.

Notice how B. David Galt lives in the passive voice. No one put the tree up or chose not to adorn it with an angel or star but the almighty “we.” Who the “we” is we do not know, not I nor you. Anyway this Christmas in Minnesota there will be Christmas trees which are free of universal Christmas ornaments like a star, a manger, “Peace of Earth, good will to men” or an angel atop shining over the children at the state daycare pen where the inmates are busily crafting ornaments the high courts ruled permissible for the little wards of the state.

It is a great pity B. David Galt wants to offer up a piece of Christmas to the students and children at the state institution at Normandale. He should stick to his secular education agenda and not mingle with religious celebrations. No religious man believes in bits of his religion. A living thing cannot be divided without death. If you love your canary in its cage, you do not like parts of him in his cage. The more you want to find your mother at home the less you want to find a piece of her in the kitchen. Putting up a Christmas tree without a star or an angel is like reading your child the first half of Hansel and Gretel, stopping in the middle of a shower, telling half a riddle or a practical joke. In all cases G. K. Chesterton succinctly observes “you are cutting the thing off at a point before you have come to the point of it.”

In all of this I think it would be best that anyone who is responsible for administrating to the Christmas trees of state, be taken by the threads of his suit, shirt, ties, socks and underwear and wound around the secular Christmas trees so the children of the state can see what a secular symbol truly represents.

Merry Christmas! Ω