

Crèches, Crescents, and a Caduceus: Oh My!

by Nikolai Stem

On a cold winter night several weeks before Christmas, administrators from a federal courthouse decided to erect a crèche, or nativity scene, on the grounds in front of the building to celebrate the coming holiday. A week passed and the crèche went unnoticed as the weather grew colder and colder with the passing of each day. Finally, one night, a black-clad stranger paused to take note of the familiar scene of baby Jesus surrounded by the three wise men, the Virgin Mary, her husband Joseph, and the animals of the manger. Unbeknownst to him, another man, younger, was observing him from a bench a few feet away while reading a book.

"It's about time," remarked the old man, tired from a long walk out in the cold. "It's about time our government recognizes the real origins of Christmas and the real reason for the celebration. None of this crap about Santa Claus delivering presents to good little boys and girls. I'm glad they finally know what's what. Maybe our country will be heading in a better direction soon now that we've got that fact straight!"

"What are you talking about?" stated a tall, young woman. "Not everyone believes in the divinity of Jesus, you know."

"Well, just because not everyone believes in Jesus' divinity doesn't mean he isn't really the Son of God! At least our government seems to be learning that slowly, even if you haven't. I was just saying to myself that it's good we're headed in that direction."

"I personally find it frightening! I'm Jewish and to me, Jesus is hardly anything worth celebrating! If our government really is run by a bunch of Christians who probably have no respect for Jews, I'm not being represented in this country! That crèche makes me feel *so* uncomfortable. I am beyond offended! Where's *my* representation? Where's a menorah? Where's the Star of David? Tell me that, will you?"

"Christmas isn't a Jewish holiday! The display even says 'Merry Christmas' on it!"

"I celebrate Hanukkah around this time too, though! Why can't I have a menorah displayed on these grounds if you can have a nativity scene? This goes against the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment."

"What about the First Amendment?"

"The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution says that the government cannot pass a law respecting an establishment of religion. That crèche gives a healthy dose of respect to Christianity!"

"No law was passed to put that crèche in front of this courthouse, woman."

"But it's on public property, *old man!* That nativity scene obviously shows that whoever works in that courthouse is Christian, and I'm not comfortable with Christians judging me, the Jew!"

As the argument escalated, several people passed by, shaking their heads. The young man on the bench chuckled to himself quietly, letting the gears spin in his head as he formed an argument to their argument.

Soon after, a man of Arabic descent walking down the street became intrigued by the topic of the debate and approached the crèche and the arguing Jew and Christian. The voices got louder and louder as he approached the scene, and he waited for a lull to offer his own input.

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't help overhearing your rather heated discussion," said the Arab man calmly.

"Blame the Jew. She's the one who started it," protested the Christian.

"How could I keep my mouth shut with you touting your high-and-mighty 'Christian beliefs ought to be the foundation of our government' mentality?" snapped the woman.

“If I may be so bold, I’d like to offer a potential solution,” continued the Arab man. “Being a Muslim, I often also feel poorly represented when it comes to public religious symbols. I think all religions—every single one—should be represented if a single one is represented anywhere. Everywhere a school hangs a cross, it should be bordered by the omkar, the green man, a pentagram, the Islamic star and crescent, yin and yang, the star of David, the Jain hand, the Masonic compass, a blank spot to respect atheists, and a question mark to represent agnostics. The Ten Commandments must be accompanied by the Vedas, the Qur’an, the Svetambara, the Tanakh, the Book of Mormon, the Kojiki, the Tao Te Ching, the Sutras, the Satanic Bible, a blank sheet of paper, and another question mark. Paintings or other images of Jesus must go with the Buddha, Shiva, Mohammed, Abraham, Thor, the Devil, Osiris, an empty frame, and yet another ambiguous question mark. Although most public spaces wouldn’t have any space for anything but religion—let alone the public itself—under these conditions, at least everyone would see the representation of their faith—or lack thereof. We would achieve equality of religious expression like this!”

“Except I would never abide the Ten Commandments sharing space with anything from the Qur’an!” shouted the old man.

“You *would* say that!” retorted the young woman. “I, for one, agree with our Muslim friend. That method would surely be the only way to fairly represent every religion, and I think it’s a great solution to this issue.”

“I appreciate your openness to my idea on the issue, ma’am,” answered the Muslim.

“You are most welcome, sir. I personally think the Star of David would perfectly complement the Islamic star and crescent. Though, now that I think about it, being bogged down by so much religion isn’t exactly what I would hope for....”

“But you agree that it would be the only way—”

“Ha! Even *this* woman thinks it would be a crazy undertaking!” interrupted the Christian.

“There’s one thing the two of us can agree on. No one wants to be bogged down—”

“But it would be the only—” rebutted the Muslim.

“But too much expression is almost as bad as—” added the Jew.

“I still think my faith is the only one—” replied the Christian.

And so the bickering in front of the peaceful, serene, and plastic baby Jesus and his plastic family continued further on into the night.

During this most recent exchange, a quiet couple—an atheist and an agnostic—were discussing their own opinion of the crèche and decided to approach the frenzy in front of the quiet nativity scene. The youth on the bench put down his book altogether to observe the growing number of participants in this religious brawl. The conversation took a new direction as the atheist and agnostic approached the threesome.

“I know about court cases that support religious symbols in this country!” proclaimed the Christian.

“Oh, really? I’d like to hear what cases you’re talking about,” replied the Jew.

“I’d be happy to share! For your information, there was a case a couple of years ago in a federal court upholding the display of a Ten Commandments monument in front of an Oklahoma courthouse.”¹

“That’s just a federal court! Our direction with regard to religious symbols hinges on what the Supreme Court has to say, not lower federal courts! I read once in *Church and State* about the Supreme Court ruling against the Decalogue being displayed in a Courthouse in Kentucky. It was a 5-4 decision, maybe, but at least they ruled against its display!”²

“I read that article too! You’re leaving out the other half! In the same day, the court ruled in favor of the Ten Commandments being displayed on the Texas State Capitol grounds!”³

“Also a 5-4 decision.”⁴

“Bah!”

“Has the Court then decided anything, really?” wondered the Muslim.

“We’ll see,” answered the Jew. “There’s yet another court case I read about in *Church and State* about this religious group called the Summum who wants to display their ‘Seven Aphorisms’ in a public park where the Ten Commandments is also displayed. Maybe this case will be the last in a long line to finally set a precedent for religious cases.”⁵

“May we offer our input?” inquired the atheist man, after a short pause in the discussion.

“Please do,” said the Muslim.

“Well, all of that legal nonsense is completely irrelevant in light of what my husband and I think,” stated the agnostic woman very matter of factly.

“Indeed, it is,” continued the atheist man. “Seeing just how ridiculous this argument over that crèche is getting makes my wife and me all the more sure of our own opinion on this matter of religious symbols.

“Why, if it is near impossible and impractical to represent every religion, do we continue trying to work out how to allow religious symbols to be displayed? Why not just do away with them altogether? Let no religious symbol be seen on public property. In fact, no religious symbol should be seen anywhere, even on private property or in clothing and jewelry that people wear. Surely the offenses taken from a crèche in front of a courthouse would proceed to offenses taken from a crucifix! I know that I am regularly offended and uncomfortable in front of people with such pieces of jewelry. This crèche here makes me think of yet another point in my and my wife’s position: why do we celebrate a lot of these holidays at all? Christmas, Hanukkah, Halloween, Easter, Valentine’s Day, and even St. Patrick’s Day all have religious backgrounds to them. And even though we try to secularize these holidays, their origins remain the same. These days bring with them images and symbols of all kinds of faith. If our country must separate church from state, this step is one that must be taken immediately!”

This brief speech brought about mixed reactions.

“You are utterly insane!”

“He somewhat has a point, but—”

“—that would never—”

“Get offended by a piece of jewelry?”

“—an outrage!”

“—no representation—”

“I don’t know—”

“Gah!”

“In fact,” said the atheist, ignoring the renewed sparks, “I’ve heard of cases where organizations are actually taking steps in the right direction. An acquaintance of mine told me about an article in the *National Catholic Reporter* about students being punished for wearing crucifixes in school.⁶ Rosaries have started to become more common as gang paraphernalia because gangs use them ‘as a reminder of protection.’ Jaime Salazar and Marco Castro were both suspended from high school because of the possibility that they were affiliated with a gang, as symbolized by their necklaces.⁷ Now *that* is the right attitude toward the issue. Religious symbols are nothing but a mess!”

“Insane!”

“For wearing a crucifix? That’s—”

“Ridiculous.”

“—unnecessary—”

“Sometimes the symbols are even dangerous!” offered the agnostic wife. “I was recently reading

a book called *God in the Classroom*, which detailed a case involving a Sikh boy named Amandeep Singh who was suspended from high school for carrying his dagger, his kirpan, around in school!⁸ A dagger as a symbol? That's absurd!"

"I heard about that story too," replied the Arab. "The boy had carried the kirpan, which was no sharper than a butter knife, since he was eight years old. That book mentioned that 'several other classroom items... were sharper and more lethal than the kirpan.' That's clearly religious discrimination!"

"Indeed it is!" added the Jew.

"Are you all so blind? Religious symbols can be offensive and sometimes dangerous! Can't you see that suppressing religious expression would solve all this?" questioned the atheist.

"No!" answered the Jew, Muslim, and Christian together.

"I think I may have something to add," interrupted the young man at last, unable to ignore the fight any longer after having witnessed the entire thing from the very beginning.

"And what religion might you be, sir?" inquired the old Christian man.

"I don't think it would be wise of me to disclose that information if I want to keep your opinions of me fair."

"Must not be a Christian. Hmph!"

"You know nothing about me, but you profess to know that I'm not a Christian simply because I choose not to share my faith. That's a laugh."

"Don't you talk to me—"

"Please don't become any more hostile than you have already during this whole conversation."

"What exactly do you want?" asked the agnostic woman.

"To propose that maybe there's an angle to this complicated issue that none of you have considered," replied the young man.

"There's nothing left to consider! All the options are laid out before us. The only difficult thing left to do is prove what the *right* solution is," said the Jew.

"Which is to allow only Christian symbols to be seen on public property," said the Christian pointedly.

"Which is to allow Jewish symbols too," added the Jew.

"Which is to allow all faiths to be represented," continued the Muslim.

"Which is to allow—" began the atheist.

"—no symbols at all," finished the agnostic.

"How about 'which is to rethink our attitudes toward religious symbols?'" said the young man as he set down his book and approached the group. "A symbol is just a symbol. Too often, the symbol for a religion is regarded with more importance than what it represents. In my opinion, writer Nick Farrantello is right to suggest that symbols often get in the way of ideas.⁹ He claims that people are more interested in protecting the symbol representing a belief rather than protecting the belief itself. Even if one's faith taught that its symbols were more than just symbols, why let those symbols be open to criticism from the public if they were really so worthy of reverence? Why let those symbols share space with what one may think is a false religion?"

"The real issue here is that none of you have gained ground, so none of you are willing to give ground. And if no one gives, how can anyone gain? You are stuck with your own ideas of what is right and what is wrong. With an issue this complicated that affects more than just one faith, how can you close your minds? No, it isn't clear what the course of action should be to solve this issue of representations of faith. But it is clear that nothing proposed so far would lead to a happy ending. More to the point, we do not respect each other's ideas as much as we should.

"The Christian won't be happy unless only his faith is represented. But why doesn't he listen to

the concerns of the Jew who worries about how her government might be run by Christians with her best interests far from their minds? On the other hand, why does the Jew worry so much and spit in disgust at the sight of a nativity scene? Shouldn't they meet in the middle?

"Representing all religions seems fair, but how many faiths are there really? Will anyone be left out? Religion would simply weigh us down in the long run. And allowing no expression whatsoever is likewise faulty. Taking away holidays and freedom of expression from the people would add to suppression rather than endorse liberty. It cannot be clearer that all sides should be heard, and all sides must be given respect. How else do we expect to gain ground as a society on this controversial issue? Are we so stubborn that we will ignore each other on this issue when we have cooperated on many others throughout history?"

Having finished his speech, the young man walked over to his bench, picked up his book, and began to walk away. He paused for a moment, turned around, and said slowly, "No, I haven't laid out the perfect plan to solve this. No, I don't think an easy solution even exists. And no, I don't think we should leave things the way they are. But all is not lost. I have faith that you can work this out. That *we* can work this out. Maybe we'll share at least that faith one day."

With nothing further to say, the young man left the atheist, the agnostic, the Jew, the Christian, and the Muslim speechless standing outside the courthouse next to the nativity scene. One by one, the men and women trickled off into the cold night away from the object of their attention for the past thirty minutes until only the old Christian man was left. He sat staring at the crèche for a long while before he, too, fled the scene, looking far older than he had when he first arrived. He turned around to look behind him one last time and just caught a glimpse of the mysterious youth as he turned the corner. He smiled and went on his way, contemplating the last words the young man said and wondering what kind of faith he had that allowed him to have faith in such stubborn people.

¹"Oklahoma Commandments Display Passes Court Test," *Church and State* 59, no. 9 (2006): 21, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=3&hid=6&sid=c4ad8c7b-1608-4400-9963-63a0e23b8978%40SRCSM2> (accessed October 22 2008).

² Rob Boston, "Decalogue Divide," *Church and State* 58, no. 7(2005): 7, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=4&hid=103&sid=c4ad8c7b-1608-4400-9963-63a0e23b8978%40SRCSM2> (accessed October 24, 2008).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Supreme Court Accepts Utah's 'Seven Aphorisms' Case," *Church and State* 61, no. 5 (2008): 3, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=4&hid=104&sid=c4ad8c7b-1608-4400-9963-63a0e23b8978%40SRCSM2> (accessed October 24, 2008).

⁶ Esmeralda Bermudez, "What's the Latest Gang Symbol? Try the Rosary," *National Catholic Reporter* 44, no. 16 (4 Apr. 2008): 15A, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=6&hid=113&sid=37e09eaf-43f7-46ab-8abf-9c42828dc591%40sessionmgr102> (accessed October 10, 2008)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R. Murray Thomas, *God In the Classroom* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2007).

⁹ Nick Farrantello, "Stickers and Slogans Be Damned!" *Humanist* 68, no. 3 (2008): 39-40, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=3&hid=101&sid=77c5182c-f8dd-49ee-95d3-f66cf1dc0ceb%40sessionmgr104> (accessed October 8, 2008)