

Activist Organizations

January



Edison, NJ – More than 20 Jewish families in Edison and neighboring towns received anonymous mailings of “Smokescreens,” a notorious anti-Catholic book from Chick Publications which claims that the Vatican financed Hitler’s extermination of Jews. Chick Publications is the publishing arm of anti-Catholic activist Jack Chick. “This mail is clearly motivated by bias, hatred, ignorance and a desire to distribute misinformation,” said Shai Goldstein, director of the New Jersey office of B’nai B’rith’s Anti-Defamation League. Edison police labeled the mailings an anti-Catholic bias crime.

Spring

Detroit, MI – The Fund for Animals, protesting the fact that some priests in Michigan hunt deer, dressed up as priests and nuns to mock Catholics as they left Church. There were no reports of similar protests against Protestant ministers or Jewish rabbis, suggesting that either only Catholic clergy hunt deer or—more likely—that only Catholic clergy are the targets of religious bigotry from The Fund for Animals.

April

Marshfield, WI – The Freedom from Religion Foundation, an anti-religion activist organization, filed suit to have a statue of Jesus removed from a city park where it has stood since 1959, when it was donated to the city by the Knights of Columbus. Even though the site of the statue had been purchased from the city of Marshfield by a private organization, the Freedom From Religion Foundation sued both the city and the private group, the Henry Praschak Memorial Fund. In December, a federal judge rejected the lawsuit and allowed the statue to remain.

April

Republic, MO – The logo of Republic, Missouri, has a fish on it, which to the ACLU is a constitutional crisis. Labeling the fish “a secret sign of Christianity,” these anti-religion activists sued the town to have it removed.

April 10

Washington, DC – Catholics for Contraception, the latest project of Frances Kissling’s Catholics for a Free Choice, ran an ad in the *National Catholic Reporter* blaming the Catholic bishops’ “concerted assault on family planning” for the high rate of abortions worldwide. Kissling’s term is code for opposition to killing unborn babies. Her misappropriation of the Catholic label to create fissures within the Catholic community is a staple in her arsenal against Catholicism.

May

Stow, OH – Depositions were taken in a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union seeking to have a cross and Bible removed from the city seal. While city officials contended that the images helped to depict the historical background of Stow, the ACLU argued that they were divisive, and brought to the surface anti-Semitic and anti-religious attitudes.

Summer

Montgomery, AL – An article in *Intelligence Report*, published by the Southern Poverty Law Center, blamed abortion-related violence in part on “Catholic Apocalypticism.” One “strain” of this “version of Catholicism” was said to derive “from what the Catholic Church calls the miracle at Fatima. Some believers ‘consider abortion to be an affront to God’s laws and perhaps a sign that the apocalypse is near,’” the article stated, quoting a man it identified as “an expert on the Radical Right.” “There is evidence,” the article claimed—without citing any—“that John Salvi,” who had killed

two abortion clinic workers in Boston, “may have been influenced by Fatimist literature of this sort.” The “sort” of literature on Fatima which allegedly encouraged abortion clinic violence was also never specifically cited or described. Instead, the article went on to accuse a Catholic priest, Father Norman Weslin, of advocating “a religious war” (the article’s words, not Father Weslin’s), because he identified Satan as the chief obstacle to his pro-life efforts.

September

Boston, MA – The American Jewish Congress, acting through its New England chapter, asked the chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court to remove the abbreviation A.D. – for *anno Domini*, or year of our Lord—from court papers.

October 18

San Francisco, CA – The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of drag queens who dress as Catholic nuns, held a “wig drive” to benefit the American Cancer Society (ACS). While giving their usual anti-Catholic performance—parading in full habit and mocking Catholic nuns—they collected over \$1,300 and 100 wigs for women who have suffered hair loss as a result of cancer treatments. Responding to a letter of protest from the league, Patricia Fells, CEO of the American Cancer Society’s California division, said that the ACS does “not judge our donors based upon their religious beliefs or sexual preferences.” This distorted the league’s objection, which was based not on the “religious beliefs or sexual preferences” of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, but on their bigoted mockery of the religious beliefs of Catholics.

October 25

Great Neck, NY – Planned Parenthood of Nassau County joined a coalition of groups warning that educational vouchers are “an

experiment that promises to richly reward extremist special interests.” Those words, Planned Parenthood of Nassau’s coordinator of public affairs told the league, expressed the coalition’s concern that “the Catholic Church and the Christian Coalition” would use vouchers “to infiltrate the public schools.”

October 26

Westchester, NY – Polly Rothstein, president of the Westchester Coalition for Legal Abortion, blamed John Cardinal O’Connor of New York for the killing of Buffalo abortionist Dr. Barnett Slepian. Accusing pro-life religious leaders of “spewing hate,” Rothstein said that although he did not pull the trigger, “Cardinal O’Connor is accountable for these religious followers who do pull the trigger.”

November

Little Rock, AK – A private citizen voluntarily excluded a nativity scene from a holiday display he was donating to the city, after the American Civil Liberties Union expressed concern. Although the display included other Christian and Jewish religious symbols, and was to be placed in a city park, where courts have upheld religious displays as free expression, Jennings Osborne said he “didn’t want the city to waste any money defending a lawsuit over the Nativity scene.” An ACLU spokeswoman suggested that since there are people of many different faiths in Arkansas, no religious displays should be permitted on government-owned property. In her comment to the Associated Press, however, it was only the Christian symbols that she singled out for criticism: “The Nativity scene and the church are clearly religious, Christian symbols, and the city should not be in the business of promoting religion.”

November 8

New York, NY – A group calling itself “Shalom International”

targeted the Vatican, Pope John Paul II, Pope Pius XII and Polish primate Cardinal Josef Glemp during a demonstration in front of the Polish Consulate protesting the placement of crosses at the site of the Auschwitz death camp. Michael Preisler, a Polish Catholic survivor of Auschwitz who tried to speak to the group, said later that he had underestimated its anti-Catholic sentiments. "They were angry at me," reported Preisler, co-chair of the Polish American Congress Holocaust Documentation Committee. "That's because they didn't want to hear that Christians also suffered in Auschwitz."

November 9 – 13

Chicago, IL – At its annual convention, the National Council of Churches began consideration of a proposal that would put it on record against voucher programs or tuition tax credits that would secure parental choice in education. The proposal explicitly declares that "public monies should be used only for public schools" and that "public education should have the full and conscientious support of Christians and Christian churches." The resolution justifies itself by suggesting that supporters of parental choice are really part of a sinister conspiracy out to undermine public schools: "Public education has been under attack for two decades by persons representing religious, cultural, and economic views which offer little or no support for public schooling."

November 30

Somerset, MA – A U.S. District Court judge ruled that Somerset's 1997 holiday display was unconstitutional because it included a creche—and thereby promoted a particular religion. So the city decided to balance this year's display by adding a Santa Claus and a menorah. That didn't satisfy Gil Amancio, regional director of American Atheists, Inc., who had brought the original suit. After consulting with the ACLU, he concluded that not only does Santa Claus promote Christianity, because it is a depiction of St. Nicholas, but so do the

menorah and a Happy Hanukkah sign—because Christianity uses the Torah as its Old Testament. The American Jewish Congress echoed Amancio's sentiment that having no religious displays would be preferable to an inclusive, pluralistic display. The AJC accused Somerset officials of adding a menorah "not for the purpose of celebratory inclusion, but to add protective coloration to a Christian display that might otherwise be impermissible." In the end, a crèche was erected.

December

Port St. Lucie, FL – The leader of Atheists of Florida, suggesting that religious expression should be confined to "the privacy of...homes or houses of worship," protested the display of a menorah and creche on city-owned property. The American Civil Liberties Union predictably joined in the protest and threatened a lawsuit to have the religious display removed. City officials, however, insisted that the display, at a community center, complied with court decisions which have held that religious expression is protected in those public spaces made available for free expression of ideas by private citizens. City Councilman Glenn Magrane noted that Atheists of Florida "should feel represented because if they don't believe in anything and they don't have anything displayed, they're represented."

December 8

Little Rock, AK – The leader of the Arkansas American Civil Liberties Union criticized Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee for suggesting that spiritual themes should be included in public yuletide displays. Gov. Huckabee, in a speech that was warmly applauded by more than 1,000 delegates to the Arkansas Farm Bureau's annual convention, made clear that it would be wrong for government to promote a particular religion. "But it is not improper, not even by a little bit, to simply recognize that the origin and the nature of the day itself is related to a spiritual theme," he said of the Christmas holiday. Arkansas

ACLU executive director Rita Sklar, not content to disagree with Huckabee, accused him of not recognizing or accepting “the value of the First Amendment of the Constitution.” As to the governor’s willingness to place a menorah at the state capitol to commemorate Hanukkah, Sklar, herself Jewish, arbitrarily declared that Jews wouldn’t want that.

December 9

St. Ann, MO – Following a challenge by the American Civil Liberties Union, a federal judge ended St. Ann’s 50 year tradition of displaying a nativity scene on the front lawn of City Hall. While succeeding in having the creche removed, the ACLU’s concerns about government endorsement of religion did not extend to challenging the presence of a menorah in a City Hall window. That Jewish religious symbol, ACLU lawyer Denise Lieberman reasoned, was constitutionally innocuous—and so it was allowed to remain on display.

December 15

Albuquerque, NM – The American Civil Liberties Union once again teamed with American Atheists, Inc. in an attempt to block display of a nativity scene on public property. This time the target was the Eddy County, New Mexico courthouse, which featured a creche as part of a larger, non-sectarian Christmas panorama which included a thirty foot Christmas tree. The ACLU threatened to sue to overturn the unanimous vote of the five member County Commission to maintain the nativity scene, which has been on display at the courthouse for the past twenty years.