

# CHRISTMAS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

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Almost all Americans (9 in 10) celebrate Christmas, and the majority (7 in 10) are Christian. So it should not be controversial to celebrate a holiday that is central to our country's history. But it is.

We've been involved in the Christmas wars for many years. From my perspective, it reached a crescendo about a decade or so ago. Both sides can claim victories and losses. We decided to up the ante this Christmas season by having two public Christmas displays in New York City.

We've erected a life-size nativity scene at the foot of Central Park since the mid-1990s, just outside the Plaza Hotel; we are doing so again. This year we are also displaying a huge digital billboard celebrating Christmas in Times Square as well.

We are doing this because we want to combat the idea that religion should be privatized. That is what the enemies of religion want. They want us to stick to saying the rosary in church and absenting ourselves from all public celebrations and events. We refuse to do so.

The foes of religion don't even talk about freedom of religion anymore; they speak about "freedom to worship." It started with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and has been trending ever since. But "freedom to worship" is not what the First Amendment is all about. It is about the free exercise of

religion, and that means the public expression of it.

Imagine if we said that everyone is free to play music indoors, such as in concert halls and arenas. But there can be no sidewalk, street or park ensembles, the kind that made New Orleans famous. No one would believe it if the sponsors of this idea said they were not against music. To privatize it would be to squeeze the life out of it.

Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI were strong advocates of the public expression of religion. No, we don't have to wear our religion on our sleeve, but we have a right to make public our Christian convictions. Freedom of religion, then, is more than conscience rights—it is also about behavior.

The Christmas billboard (see the opposite page) is a digital display. It will be shown four to six times an hour, 30 seconds each, for the two weeks before Christmas. As you can see, we are playing off the theme of “diversity.”

We know that those in the ever-expanding diversity industry, which is indistinguishable from the grievance industry, are using “diversity” and “inclusion”—the twin propaganda tools—as a political club. They are invoked to discriminate against white Christians, especially male heterosexuals, and they are employed every Christmas season to diminish its essence.

For example, the anti-Christmas folks, who pretend to be faithful to separation of church and state, like to say that December should not be about Christmas because it excludes those who are not Christian. That's pretty lame. Even though 87 percent of the country is not African American, we celebrate Black History Month each year. Should we do away with it because it is not inclusive of Caucasians, Hispanics, Asians and others?

By identifying Christmas as a celebration of diversity, we are taking a page out of the diversity playbook and using it to our advantage. This point will not be lost on those who want

to censor Christmas.

While the nativity scene is integral to the billboard, its prominent display in Central Park makes for a purely religious statement. We are given a permit by the City of New York to have it on public property because parks are considered a public forum—open to musicians, artists, et al.—and therefore they must be open to religious speech.

The number of people who come to Times Square each Christmas season is astonishing. Our billboard is just above street level, between 44th and 45th Street on Broadway, facing west. It can't be missed. The nativity scene is right at the start of Central Park, and it can't be missed by tourists and those who take the 5th Avenue bus downtown.

We want a robust public expression of Christmas. The billboard and the nativity scene both carry an inscription of the Catholic League, with our logo. This way no one will wonder who is sponsoring these exhibitions. Moreover, since most will like them, it is good publicity for us.

The ACLU, of course, won't be happy, but they can't do a thing about it. They love to say that we have to guard against religious speech because children are "impressionable." Yet this never seems to matter when they are pushing pornographic material on to children in the schools.

Similarly, when someone objects to pornography being sold or shown in public, the ACLU says we should simply "avert our eyes." That's what they should do when they object to seeing Christmas celebrations and nativity scenes in public—avert their eyes.

Believe me, we will not be driven from the public square.

Have a fun-filled and blessed Christmas.