

HATE GROUP WANTS ANTI-CHRISTMAS SIGN; WASHINGTON GOV. MUST DECIDE

The Westboro Baptist Church, a Kansas-based group, has asked Washington Governor Chris Gregoire for permission to display an anti-Christmas sign next to the nativity scene in the Capitol building. The sign, "Santa Claus Will Take You to Hell," would also appear next to an atheist sign sponsored by the Freedom from Religion Foundation.

Catholic League president Bill Donohue spoke to this issue today:

"Gov. Gregoire is responsible for this mess. Having first acceded to the requests of atheists to attack Christmas, she is now confronted with the likes of the Westboro Baptist Church, a viciously anti-American, anti-Catholic and anti-gay group. There is a way to deal with this situation in a manner that is legally acceptable and morally defensible, but neither the Washington governor, nor her lawyers, have figured it out.

"The First Amendment right to freedom of speech has always been conditioned on time, place and manner. That is why gays who sought to march in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Boston and New York—for the purpose of countering the message of the parade—lost in the courts in the 1990s. In the Boston case, Justice David Souter, writing for a unanimous court, said, 'The speaker has the right to tailor the speech' and the law 'is not free to interfere with speech for no better reason than promoting an approved message or discouraging a disfavored one.'

"In other words, hate groups have a First Amendment right to freedom of speech, but they have no right to set the time and place. Moreover, freedom of speech is meaningless unless it

can prevail unobstructed by attempts to stifle it. To put it differently, Gov. Gregoire should have allowed the atheist group to display its sign in a different location, or at a different time, but not directly next to the nativity scene at Christmastime. Had she done so, she would be able to treat the Westboro Baptist bigots the same way.

“We have moved from censoring nativity scenes to neutering them. That the government was operative in both is particularly appalling.”