

Atheists Try to Short-Circuit Tree-Lighting Ceremony in Attack on Christmas

Christmas is under attack again this year—from anti-Jesus billboards in New York City to banned nativity scenes in Los Angeles. Now, atheists are complaining about a private tree-lighting ceremony in Arizona.

Alliance Defending Freedom attorneys sent a letter Wednesday to the Arizona secretary of state and Prescott city and school officials after the Freedom From Religion Foundation officially complained that their participation in a privately sponsored Christmas tree-lighting ceremony in front of the county courthouse violates the Constitution.

“It is legal to celebrate national holidays like Christmas in the public square,” said Jeremy Tedesco, ADF senior legal counsel. “Public officials should not fear attacks from atheists because their freedom to participate in community celebrations is protected under the First Amendment. The **attacks on Christmas** are part of a larger campaign to snuff out all references to our Christian heritage and are best ignored.”

The lighting ceremony in Prescott has been held annually for close to 60 years in the Courthouse plaza—a common area for **free speech** activities in Prescott. Freedom From Religion Foundation falsely claims that the Christmas lighting ceremony is government speech that violates the Establishment Clause. The Wisconsin-based atheist group also complained that government officials like Arizona Secretary of State Ken Bennett participated in the ceremony and that schoolchildren sang religious Christmas carols during the event.

As the Alliance Defending Freedom letter explains, the

ceremony is not government speech since it is “coordinated by the Prescott Chamber of Commerce, which is a private organization.” Moreover, “the speech that occurs at the ceremony is private in nature and fully protected by the **First Amendment** of the United States Constitution. Any attempt to restrict or ban this ceremony from the Courthouse plaza would likely violate the First Amendment.”

Moreover, the letter notes that the Supreme Court has established that public officials “have a constitutional right to participate in such private events in their personal capacities, and their participation does not violate the Establishment Clause.” The court has also affirmed that “public school students may hear and even sing religious Christmas carols during school activities such as choir, Christmas programs, and similar events, without offending the Constitution.”

“The secular Left should stop their attacks on Christians and allow the 9 out of 10 Americans who celebrate Christmas to enjoy their God-given freedoms,” added Tedesco. “Hopefully, they will abandon their anti-Christmas ways and allow Prescott residents to celebrate with hope and joy.”