

The Religious Right's Phony 'War On Christmas': Mything In Action

Religious Right leaders and their allies in the right-wing news media claim there is a “war on Christmas.” To prove their charge, they have rolled out a series of allegations involving bias against Christmas by government officials and public schools. Researchers at Americans United for Separation of Church and State looked into the most common examples of supposed hostility toward Christmas and found them largely baseless.

Religious Right claim: The Saginaw, Mich., Township schools oppose red and green clothes and prohibit singing Christmas songs.

Response: Superintendent Jerry Seese says no such policies exist and pointed out that the school’s color is green.

Religious Right claim: Watchung, N.J. they have begun referring to their Christmas tree as a “Mitten Tree” and have replaced ALL references to Christmas with “Holiday.”

Response: Mayor Albert Ellis said the “Tree of Lights” (not a mitten tree) is sponsored by the local rescue squad as a fundraiser. The tree is placed in the town green and people can buy a light in honor of or in memory of someone. The town has been doing it for 15 years and no one has ever raised an issue. The town also negotiated a holiday display policy with the two local churches and developed a policy so private citizens can erect holiday displays. There is no conflict in the community over this.

Religious Right claim: A Plano, Texas, school told the students they could not wear red and green because they were Christmas colors.

Response: A spokeswoman for the district said this is not true and never has been true. She expressed frustration that this story continues to circulate and said she does not know its origin. The school debunks the claim on its website and instructed its attorney to write to Bill O’Reilly, requesting a correction.

Religious Right claim: Ridgeway, Wisc., elementary school’s “winter program” has changed the name of “Silent Night” to “Cold in the Night.” Sung to the tune of “Silent Night,” the lyrics now read: “Cold in the night, no one in sight, winter winds whirl and bite, how I wish I were happy and warm, safe with my family out of the storm.”

Response: The school is not located in “Ridgeway” Wisconsin but is named Ridgeway Elementary School in the town of Dodgeville, Wisc. This school has several times over the past 18 years presented a play titled “The Little Tree’s Christmas Gift.” The play, copyrighted in 1988, is about a scraggly Christmas tree that worries it will not find a home for Christmas; it uses several Christmas carols with different lyrics to make it easier for children to learn the words.

The school did not rewrite “Silent Night” because of the song’s religious content. Diane Messer, administrator of the Dodgeville School District, said, “Somebody totally misunderstood and had the belief that one of our teachers took it upon herself to rewrite the words to ‘Silent Night.’ This program is well within our district’s policy which allows us the use of both religious and secular content in our curriculum and in our productions and performances.” The school has posted an item on its Web site calling the entire story “a fraud.” (See www.dsd.k12.wi.us and click on “News & Information.”)

Religious Right claim: The Glendale-River Hills School District in Wisconsin has expressly prohibited any song close to the Christmas holiday from having any religious “motive or theme.” While banning Christian Christmas songs, the district permits secular holiday songs as well as songs celebrating Hanukkah.

Response: The district says this is not true. It has posted a notice on its website reading, “Recently, there have been a number of reports in the media that the upcoming Holiday Program at the Parkway School doesn’t include songs or music recognizing the Christian religious tradition. This is simply not the case.” The school also posted the holiday program on its site. Songs being sung include “Angels We Have Heard on High” and “I Saw Three Ships.”

Religious Right claim: The Raleigh, N.C., town council has recently voted to erect a Christmas display on public property (which includes a Nativity scene, snowmen, reindeer and a menorah). Apparently the ACLU has contacted the city attorney to let him know they’d fight it.

Response: A private religious group, not the city, erected this display. North Carolina ACLU Executive Director Jennifer Rudinger says her group never threatened to sue and does not oppose this type of balanced display.

Religious Right claim: A kindergarten room-mother in Niskayuna, N.Y., was informed that the Christmas party was changed to a “Holiday” party and that no one was to send in any treats that had any religious connotation attached. No Christmas-shaped cookies, no angels. She was directed to “think snowman.”

Response: Superintendent Kevin Baughman says this is not true. He said the district is diverse and that it recognizes several holidays.

Religious Right claim: Christmas concert has songs in which the words are changed to avoid referring to Christmas and even replaces the word Christmas with “xmas” in Mine Hill, N.J.

Response: The school’s spokeswoman says this is not true.

Religious Right claim: The Jackson County, Ga., school district has prohibited teachers from wearing “any pins, angels, crosses, clothing” that contain any religious connotation or affiliation, referring to any party as a “Christmas” party, or displaying a Bible in their rooms.

Response: The district has no such policy. The superintendent sent a message to principals reminding them not to include religious material in class unless it was tied to a lesson plan. One principal misunderstood and told teachers to stop wearing religious jewelry. The district quickly clarified the policy.