



Atheists to install seasonal “Joy to the World” banner on Boston Common

In what has become an end-of-year tradition, members of the Boston-area secular community have raised funds and filed paperwork to install a banner sharing a seasonal message of good will in the public space of historic Boston Common. In years past, these banners have been sponsored by groups including the Concord-Area Humanists, the Boston Coalition of Reason, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard University, the Humanists of Boston University, and the Secular Coalition for Massachusetts. For 2016, the holiday greetings banner is sponsored by the Boston Atheists.

The Boston Atheists banner, designed by BA member Danielle Chapdelaine, is emblazoned with the message: “Joy to the World! This holiday season, take care of yourself, of each other, and of the world. Warm wishes from your friendly neighborhood atheists.”

The banner will be installed by a small group of BA members on Thursday, December 22, 2016, at 12 noon, near Park Street station.

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December is a season of celebration and observance for many philosophical traditions, but not atheism specifically. Why, then, would a group of nonbelievers go through the trouble of participating with their own seasonal display? To explain this, Boston Atheists organizer Dan Cusher of Grafton, MA, writes:

“We think it’s important to take even just a moment to remind everyone watching—including ourselves!—that despite the recent sense of dividedness in our society, we still have our shared humanity. We’re all in this together, whatever our religious outlook or cultural heritage. This seemed like an especially important year to wish our neighbors well with a Boston Common display.”

Jim Hurley of Foxboro, MA, a member of the Boston Atheists steering committee, got even more philosophical, noting the special significance of the Christmas holiday in motivating him to donate to the banner fund:

“Charlie Brown was right to abhor all the extreme commercialism associated with Christmas, but Linus was wrong in ascribing the true meaning of Christmas to the Gospel narrative per se. What makes the holiday season special is the sense of fellowship that it promotes. Fellowship stems from accepting and acknowledging each other, and by displaying tolerance and appreciation for the differences between us and shared humanity that unites us. Of course atheists can celebrate these values! Believe in an authoritarian god isn’t a prerequisite for fellowship—it is our innate humanity alone that brings us together. We all have the power and responsibility to promote fellowship continuously, not just at Christmas... it’s just that Christmas provides a nice spark.”

Former BA president Zachary Bos, state director for American Atheists, gives his personal motives for supporting the banner display:

“When I visit Boston Common with my family, to enjoy the display of colored lights and ice sculpture, I see a manger scene, I see a menorah. A decade ago, I felt left out, because it seemed the traditions of those communities of faith had been granted a privileged status. I didn’t feel like a Grinch, a Scrooge, or a misanthrope, but neither did I feel like I was really part of what was going on in our shared social culture at this time of year. When I see the secular holiday banner each year, I feel as if I can hold my head up higher. My people, so to speak, have a seat at the holiday table. We get to exchange season’s greetings with our religious neighbors, instead of finding a way to overlook our exclusion from the festivity. If any faith tradition gets to occupy that special prominent space that belongs to all of us, right on the Common beneath the golden dome of the State House, I think it’s only right (not to mention constitutional) that all of our traditions get equal representation.”

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Donations from 18 members of the Boston Atheists community paid for the banner display this year. In 2015, Boston Atheists members made contributions to the installation of a banner sponsored by the Secular Coalition for Massachusetts. The day after that banner was installed, it was removed and taken to a Parks Department dump by park personnel, despite the display of a valid permit. The banner was restored, and then a day later, on December 23, it was slashed by unknown persons wielding a razor knife. The torn banner was repaired by BA and SCMA members who were determined not to be driven out of the public space. The repaired banner, proclaiming a tongue-in-cheek message of “Reason’s Greetings”, remained on Boston Common into the second week of the New Year. At the time, BA president Gabriel McDonald released a public statement: “It’s unfortunate that some people are so insecure in their own beliefs that when confronted by a friendly greeting, they lash out with vandalism.”



Pictured: Members of the Boston Atheists help to install a holiday banner on Boston Common in December 2015, supporting the Secular Coalition for Massachusetts. To see more photos of this 2015 banner, and photos of the banner after it was vandalized, visit https://www.fb.com/pg/BostonAtheists/photos/?tab=album&album_id=10154628050170923.

BACKGROUND: The Boston Atheists group is the largest atheist membership organization in New England, and one of the most active secular organizations in the Boston area. We provide opportunities for friendship, education, and community for hundreds of local atheists and, as a local affiliate of American Atheists, advocate for the advancement of reality-based worldviews. The Boston Atheists group is a member of the Boston Coalition of Reason and of the Secular Coalition for Massachusetts.



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