



Atheists make merry with Boston Common banner

In what has become an end-of-the-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 atheist 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 2017, as in 2016, the holiday greetings banner is sponsored by the Boston Atheists.

The banner, designed by Boston Atheists 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 group of BA members on Friday, December 22, 2017, at 3:30 PM, near Park Street station.

* * *

Why are the atheists placing their banner on Boston Common, and not in the State House, which this week has hosted a Jewish menorah and a Christian nativity scene? Boston Atheists co-organizer Dan Cusher explains:

"We usually say that the Constitution doesn't allow—and we don't want—sectarian symbols in public spaces. However, by 'public space', we don't mean 'publicly-accessible' or 'publicly-visible' spaces. That would include town greens, shopping malls, public sidewalks, maybe even churchyards or residential lawns. This is a common misunderstanding about our position. We're really focusing here on governmental spaces. We believe that churches and people's homes are completely appropriate places for religious displays, and we support their First Amendment rights to put up such displays. Boston Common, while government-owned, isn't a 'governmental' space."

Boston Atheists board member Zachary Bos reinforces this point. "We're glad to display our seasonal message in the public space of Boston Common. We absolutely do not believe that it is a good idea for anyone, whether government officials or private citizens, to seek to place sectarian symbols in the governmental space of the State House. Governmental buildings are where our laws are made and upheld. Accordingly, they should have stricter guidelines restricting the display of sectarian or religious symbols. No Muslim constituent, for example, should have to pause upon the grand staircase in the Great Hall of the Massachusetts State House, looking at a Christian nativity scene, and wondering: 'Do the legislators that display this sectarian imagery really consider me as much of a part of this community as the people who share their faith?'"

Bos, who also serves as Massachusetts State Director for American Atheists, continues. “The presence of theistic symbols in governmental spaces unavoidably permits the appearance of government endorsement of that religion, and a general endorsement of theism in general. An atheist constituent might reasonably wonder, upon seeing the State House nativity: ‘Does Rep. Lyons believe I can’t be a full member of our society unless I share his faith?’ And let there be no misunderstanding; Rep. Lyons himself is on the record explaining that he sees the State House nativity scene as a way to communicate the truth of his religious viewpoint: ‘The nativity scene is representative of a lot of Christians ... Jesus entered the world and love hope and joy was his message, and that’s what we want people to understand, that’s our message.’” (Source: <http://boston.cbslocal.com/2016/12/22/massachusetts-state-house-nativity-scene-rep-james-lyons>)

Bos concludes: “The claim that persons have to subscribe to a particular religious creed in order to fully participate in civil society is one which the atheist community will fight tooth and nail. We believe our government is not Christian; not sectarian; and not atheist. Instead, it is secular, and that means it belongs to all of us equally. Secularism is nothing to be threatened by, and we don’t feel that a celebration of secularism is at all at odds with the special sentiment of good will toward others which should prevail at this time of year. We have no warlike feelings toward Christmas; only a fervent desire that the month of December not become a battle ground where religious legislators seek to privilege their particular viewpoints in spaces that should be free from sectarian squabbling.”

In this, we agree with the recent Boston Herald op-ed: “Our fondest Christmas/Hanukkah/Kwanzaa/holiday wish is for people of good will and good intentions on both sides of issues simply to respect the same in others — and for those who serve in positions of influence not to mine our political and religious differences for their own gain.” (Source: http://www.bostonherald.com/opinion/editorials/2017/12/editorial_nonsense_over_nativity)

* * *

BACKGROUND: 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. 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.” Find photos of the vandalized banner at https://fb.com/pg/BostonAtheists/photos/?tab=album&album_id=10154628050170923.

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 an endorser of the Secular Coalition for Massachusetts.

Contact the Boston Atheists:
617-935-4951
bostonatheists@gmail.com
PO Box 15274, Boston MA 02215

twitter.com/bostonatheists
[meetup.com/bostonatheists](https://www.meetup.com/bostonatheists)
[facebook.com/bostonatheists](https://www.facebook.com/bostonatheists)
bostonatheists.org

