

Christmas and Religious Freedom
(Rev. Dr. John Bartol)

“Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people”
(Luke 2: 10).

Last December I read about an incident that took place in the town of Vienna, Virginia where citizens were not permitted to sing Christmas carols or place a Nativity scene in the town square. Even though secular symbols such as Santa were included, the American Civil Liberties Union was successful in having all Christmas carols and symbols removed.

But, as Michael Horner points out, “This position is clearly discriminatory since it is censoring only the traditional, religious version of Christmas while the secular view is allowed full access. Christians are not asking for special favours; they simply want guidelines to be fair and consistent.”

I do not know of any similar incident here in our Annapolis Valley. In fact, in recent years I’ve seen more evidence of people of faith showing respect toward others and working together to meet the needs of hurting people.

After some research I am convinced that in both US and Canada, most of these problems over discrimination stem from a misinterpretation of the principle of “Separation of Church and State.” This principle was first established in the New World at Rhode Island in 1639 and was designed to protect the free exercise of religious beliefs and prohibit the establishment of a state church.

In the beginning this was a good principle because it insured religious freedom and expression for all beliefs, even for atheists. However, now we find this same precept is being misused and misinterpreted to remove from public life all references to religion, especially the Judea – Christian ethic. Freedom of religion is being treated as freedom from religious influence altogether.

This is a profound distortion of a noble ideal intended to promote social peace, religious freedom and a moral community. I believe that if we recovered this concept of separation in its true sense, it would help to remove several forms of unfairness and foster goodwill for all.

Recent surveys show that refugees and people of other faiths are not offended by Christmas carols or Christian symbols. In fact they are glad because it gives assurance that they will have the same freedom to express their own faith, and rightly so.

On a positive note, someone envisaged receiving the following letter from Jesus. “It has come to my attention that many of you are upset because some folk are removing my name from Christmas celebrations. I do appreciate being

remembered at anytime but let me suggest: If it bothers you that the town in which you live does not allow a scene depicting my birth, put up a small Nativity scene on your own front yard. If all my followers did that there would be no need for such a scene in the town square.

In the future, if you want to celebrate my birth, start with the two great commandments, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength; and love your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:27).