

▼ *Melanie Springer Mock is an associate professor of writing and literature at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, and a Mennonite. Mennonites are a Christian denomination with sixteenth-century roots in what is today the Netherlands. The denomination began as part of what became known as the Protestant Reformation. George Fox University is named for the founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and is affiliated with the evangelical branch of Friends in the United States. Together with the Church of the Brethren, the Mennonites and the Quakers are the denominations historically known as peace churches, which advocate a pacifism that is derived from their understanding that Jesus practiced and preached nonviolence. In this opinion piece, which appeared in December 2008 in The Oregonian newspaper, published in Portland, Oregon, Mock takes an unusual stance on a controversy that has flared over the past decade or so. As you read, pay attention to the ways in which Mock uses emotional and ethical appeals to make her claims.*

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## Separation of Church and State: A War on Christmas and Other Misguided Notions

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**MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK**

Other than the hot, hot days of summer, Christmas is my favorite time of year. I love Christmas lights and decorating a tree and shopping for presents. I love celebrating Advent<sup>o</sup> in a greenery-draped church and singing

carols as the Christmas lights glow bright around us. And most definitely, I love Christmas Eve services, when we gather around a Nativity<sup>o</sup> to celebrate Jesus' birth.

Yet, even though I love Christmas and all its decorating splendor, I'm convinced Christmas displays should

not appear in government-owned spaces. Nativities and other Christian symbols of Christmas don't belong in state capitols, in courthouses, in city parks. More accurately, it is because I am a Christian that I am convinced the government should not be celebrating Jesus' birth.

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**Advent:** the birth or coming of Christ or, here, the part of the church calendar leading up to Christmas, a period of expectation and anticipation.

**Nativity:** the birth of Jesus or a representation of this event. A Nativity, also called a crèche or manger scene, recalls the account of Jesus's birth found primarily in the Gospel of Luke in the Christian New Testament. It often

includes representations of the newborn Jesus lying in a manger (the trough that held hay for the animals); Mary, his mother; Joseph, her husband; shepherds; angels; and animals such as cattle, sheep, and donkeys. Representations of

the Magi (also called the "Wise Men" or "Three Kings"), who brought gifts to Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew, are also often part of this display.



To kick off a campaign to promote the display of Nativity scenes on public and private property across the country, Christian activists exhibit one during a news conference in front of the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington in November 2008.

Somewhere in the country every year, though, conflicts flame about the presence of Christian-specific decorations in government spaces. Washington state is among the latest

to enter the fray, with atheist and Christian groups duking it out over decorating the Capitol building. Some claim that government organizations should be free to include Nativities in their Christmas displays, while others argue that doing so violates the Constitution's First Amendment. The battles have in places become so fierce that some on the right—such as the Liberty Counsel and Fox television commentator Bill O'Reilly—have declared that there's a "War on Christmas," claiming that secularists are trying to destroy "the reason for the season."

Not only do I believe the Prince of Peace<sup>5</sup> would reject any militaristic language about "war" over his birth, I'm also convinced that Christians should not engage in crusades about Christmas decorations in the public square. For while O'Reilly and gang blame the Christmas war on secularists, it's important to remember that many Christians are also strong proponents of the separation of church and state, and believe that the government has no business endorsing Christianity, either explicitly or im-

plicitly. Yet by placing Nativities in capitol buildings and city parks, the government is advocating for Christianity to the exclusion of other faiths embraced by its citizens.

The reasons for my own beliefs are complicated, wrapped as they are in my church denomination's history of persecution by church-states, where refusing to worship as a Catholic or Lutheran sometimes meant punishment and death. The martyrdom<sup>6</sup> of Anabaptists<sup>7</sup> in Europe led them to believe wholly in the need for separation between church and state entities, and they carried this conviction with them as they fled the persecution of one church-state, and then others.

I grew up hearing this history of martyrdom, and learned—almost by osmosis, it seemed—that the U.S. Constitution ensured that which the Mennonites held dear: that the church and the state would remain separate.

Of course, there are many who believe the First Amendment has been misconstrued, and that government displays of religious symbols don't violate the church/state separation. And the U.S. Supreme Court decided

*Prince of Peace*: a name for Jesus in the Christian tradition. The name derives from the child mentioned in Isaiah 9:5 in the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the "Old Testament." This name is an example of *antonomasia*, a trope. (See

Chapter 13 for a discussion of this and other tropes.)

*martyrdom*: the persecution suffered by Mennonites and other Anabaptists during the sixteenth century. A book dating from 1660, *Martyrs Mirror*, which documents the history of many who

died for their faith, especially Anabaptists, remains a book second in importance only to the Bible as religious reading for many Mennonites.

*Anabaptists*: several sixteenth century European Protestant movements (including the Amish, the

Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and German Baptists, among others) that opposed infant baptism (practiced by other Protestants and by Roman Catholics) and insisted instead on believer's baptism, which occurs after a person's profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

in the 1980s that government bodies could place Christian symbols alongside other secular holiday exhibits, so that Frosty the Snowman can stand beside a Nativity, or Rudolph beside a menorah.<sup>o</sup>

But I wonder why such government displays are even necessary. Putting aside arguments about the First Amendment and church/state separation, do Christians really need baby Jesus on the courthouse steps to remind them of his birth? If the answer is yes, then perhaps that says more about their faith (or faithlessness) than it does about Christmas decorations or the Constitution.

And if people want Nativities in government spaces to remind non-Christians about “the reason for the season,” that seems like evangelism, an act in which the government should play no role. After all, if Christians were a minority faith—as my Mennonite ancestors were in Europe several centuries ago—I imagine they would not wish to be evangelized by those in the majority, be they Muslims or Jews or Hare Krishnas.<sup>o</sup> Purposefully, our Constitution means we’ll never have to face that threat.

Mostly, though, I long to keep the 10 sacred just that: sacred. The focus of every Christian should be on the real

manger, rather than on whether Nativities should appear in the public square, pressed up next to Santa and the elves. To believe and act otherwise—that we need to fight some presumed war on Christmas by putting Christian displays in government spaces—cheapens what should be the central focus of a Christian’s adoration: the birth of a savior.

*menorah*: a candelabrum that is associated with Judaism. Here, it is the eight-branched candelabrum lit nightly during the Festival of Lights (Hanukkah). The holiday continues for eight nights in December in memory of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem following the successful Maccabean

Revolt during the second century BCE. (The candelabrum holds eight candles as well as a “helper” candle used to light the others.)

*Hare Krishnas*: a popular label for those affiliated with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, a branch of

Vaishnava Hinduism founded in New York City in 1966 but whose origins date to the sixteenth century or earlier. Hare Krishnas wear orange-yellow robes and chant in public places.



Mock repeatedly appeals to her Christian beliefs as a Mennonite to build her ethos in this argument that criticizes some of her fellow Christians. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of how to establish an authoritative ethos.

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**RESPOND •**

1. What stance does Mock, as a Christian, take on the issue of “the war on Christmas”? What makes her stance unusual among some Christians? How does she use that fact strategically in organizing her argument?
2. What is Mock’s understanding of the notion of the separation of church and state? How well does she explain it? How well does she justify it?
3. Note the ethical appeals that Mock uses to support her position. How does she create an ethos as a Christian? As a Mennonite? As an American? (For a discussion of ethical appeals and arguments, see Chapter 3.)
4. What sorts of emotional and logical arguments does Mock use? How effective are they? (For a discussion of emotional and logical arguments, see Chapters 2 and 4, respectively.)
5. In what senses is Mock’s argument a proposal? A proposal addressed specifically to Christians? To all Americans? (For a discussion of proposal arguments, see Chapter 12.)
6. Investigate debates about the so-called war on Christmas or related public debates about the display of religious symbols in public spaces. If there have been such controversies in your area, you may wish to focus on them. **Write a rhetorical analysis** of a single text—an editorial, a letter to the editor, a blog posting, a cartoon, a transcript of a media program, or a court opinion—in a specific debate about religious symbols in public contexts. You’ll need to provide background information to contextualize the specific debate, and you’ll want to include a copy of the text you analyze with your analysis. (For a discussion of rhetorical analyses, see Chapter 5.)