

Meaning of Christmas Pending

THE Supreme Court of the United States may be on the verge of declaring Christmas to be a secular institution.

Before it is a case instigated by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1980 concerning use of a Nativity scene in Christmas decorations by the city of Pawtucket, R.I. The action is one of many lawsuits to have the First Amendment to the Constitution mean "freedom from religion" rather than "freedom of religion."

Attorneys asked the Supreme Court to make the right ruling in this case but for the wrong reason. They said, "This is not a promotion of religion, but really is an acknowledgment of the tradition" of celebrating Christmas. This would deny the day's religious origin and turn it into a national holiday officially without any spiritual meaning.

The same attitude was taken two years ago by the governor of South Dakota, who said a Nativity scene at the state Capitol was a seasonal decoration rather than a symbol of Christianity. "To some people, it's like Barbie dolls," said Gov. Bill Janklow.

The ACLU has filed suits to stop the Gideon Society from distributing free Bibles to Tulsa public school pupils, to have religious symbols removed from the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, and to prevent the singing of Christmas carols in public schools.

In a case involving the Sioux Falls, S.D., schools, the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals held in 1980 that Christmas carols could be sung providing they are not religious. Last month, a fed-

eral judge in Virginia ruled that the Bible could be taught in public schools if presented as secular literature, with no religious meaning.

These actions were taken under the guise of protecting religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution, even though such rulings patently interfere with the freedom of all those whose religious beliefs and practices are restricted thereby.

It is notable that framers of the Constitution wrote "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," but failed to include the Supreme Court. Probably they didn't anticipate that the court would legislate by its rulings, as so often it does today.

Belief in God generally was accepted in colonial times. The First Amendment was not intended to interfere with that but clearly was meant to prevent establishment of an official state religion, controlled by government, as had been the case in England.

The Declaration of Independence, and the constitutions of the United States and of each of the 50 states contain references to God. All presidents have used the name of God reverently in speeches, documents and in inaugural addresses.

Yet, if the Supreme Court continues along the path it has been following in response to lawsuits of the ACLU and atheist groups, the time may be near when all other religious beliefs could be declared either unconstitutional or unreligious.