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December 7, 1993

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High court rejects challenge to Boy Scouts' religious oath

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The nation's top court refused Dec. 6 to hear a challenge to the Boy Scouts of America's requirement that members affirm a belief in God.

Without comment, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the appeal of an Illinois youth who argued that the requirement violates a federal anti-discrimination law.

Left standing is a federal appeals court's decision that a 1964 civil-rights law barring discrimination in public accommodations does not require the Boy Scouts to admit members who do not affirm a belief in God.

The law in question prohibits discrimination based on race, religion or national origin in public accommodations such as hotels, restaurants, retail establishments and places of entertainment.

Mark Welsh was prevented from joining a suburban Chicago Cub Scout pack three years ago after refusing as an agnostic to sign a pledge in which members "promise to love God."

Welsh, and his father, Elliott Welsh, who was denied membership as an adult participant in the Cub Scout pack, filed a lawsuit contending that their exclusion from the Scouts violated the civil rights law.

Lower courts, including the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the Welshes' arguments, holding that Scouts are not a public accommodation covered under the civil-rights law.

While the law has been applied to some membership organizations, such as the YMCA, that are "closely connected to a facility or structure," it has not been applied to "a membership organization like the Scouts whose purpose is not closely connected to a particular facility," the circuit court said.

Even if the Scouts were deemed a public accommodation or place of entertainment, Congress specifically exempted private clubs such as the Boy Scouts from the law.

Lawyers for both parties had asked the high court to accept the case. Richard Grossman, attorney for the Welshes, argued organizations such as

the Scouts who offer entertainment at various places, rather than a fixed site, should not be exempt from the civil-rights law.

Lawyers for the Boy Scouts, whose membership policies barring girls and homosexuals have also come under attack, asked the court to decide the First Amendment right of voluntary organizations to establish membership requirements reflecting their religious and moral values.

"The right of association of Boy Scouts and other groups to limit membership to those who accept the association's moral and religious values is of little practical consequence if members must defend themselves in full-dress constitutional litigation in jurisdiction after jurisdiction simply to practice their beliefs," the Boy Scouts' petition said.

Boy Scouts are defending nine legal challenges to its membership requirements, the brief states.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Smyth & Helwys marks
'unlikely' third birthday

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- For Smyth & Helwys, Dec. 10 marks a day many observers predicted the fledgling Baptist publisher would never see -- its third anniversary.

When the upstart moderate publishing house was born in 1990, a lot of Baptists thought the venture would be short-lived.

"Many wondered if it could really be done, including myself," recalled publisher Cecil Staton. "But we have done it. Smyth & Helwys is alive, growing and doing very well."

With 38 books in print and 1,300 churches using at least some Smyth & Helwys Sunday school materials, Staton claims: "Our future looks very good indeed."

Named for two early Baptist pioneers -- John Smyth and Thomas Helwys -- the publishing house was founded as a reaction to the conservative swing in the Southern Baptist Convention.

"It was clear that Broadman and Convention Press (the SBC's two traditional publishing labels) would be less available as channels for moderate Baptists who did not subscribe to the fundamentalist agenda," Staton said.

Started by an informal group of Baptist pastors, professors and laypersons -- many with close ties to Mercer and Furman universities -- Smyth & Helwys is one of several agencies formed in the 1990s as outgrowths of the SBC's loose-knit moderate movement.

"We felt it was vitally important that our movement have a channel for publishing where respect for biblical scholarship and open and honest inquiry are honored," Staton said.

"Our movement would be impoverished without a Smyth & Helwys," he added.

Though Baptist by tradition, Smyth & Helwys is not linked to any denomination. It carries the endorsement of the moderate umbrella group, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, but receives no Fellowship funding.

The Macon-based publisher has grown from one employee in 1991 to a full-time payroll of 23. It will operate on a budget of \$2.75 million in 1994.

Much of the publisher's growth has come from an unexpected source -- Sunday school curriculum. Conceived as a book publisher, Smyth & Helwys got

into curriculum publishing reluctantly.

"Almost as soon as there was a Smyth & Helwys, we were inundated with requests for resources for Sunday school," Staton said.

The publisher was leary of the undertaking at first, considering the amount of work and the financial risk involved in launching a curriculum line.

But the adult Bible study material -- its first offering -- made a surprisingly strong debut in the fall of 1991, with at least some Sunday school classes in 400 churches in 30 states buying the material for the first trimester.

A year later, Smyth & Helwys took another risk by unveiling Bible study curriculum for all ages. The make-or-break venture, representing a \$1 million investment, paid off. Usage jumped to 950 churches in 41 states.

In the past year, usage has climbed steadily to 1,300 churches in 46 states. Staton estimates 125,000 people now use Smyth & Helwys curriculum each Sunday.

Its Bible study material, more than anything else, has brought Smyth & Helwys into tension with the Sunday School Board, which previously had a virtual lock on Sunday school curriculum among Southern Baptists.

Sunday School Board officials argue convincingly that Smyth & Helwys poses no threat to the SBC's official publishing house, which competes with a number of Bible study publishers and still reports \$80 million in annual sales. However, those officials faced an 8 percent drop in curriculum sales in 1992.

To reverse the downward trend, Sunday School Board personnel undertook an aggressive marketing campaign, personally contacting churches that have switched to Smyth & Helwys and other publishers. Some churches complained the board's high-pressure sales tactics bordered on manipulation, but an investigation by Associated Baptist Press turned up no evidence of an organized campaign to discredit Smyth & Helwys.

At a Sunday School Board meeting in August, trustees and staff discussed the increased competition from Smyth & Helwys. But Gene Mims, vice president of the Sunday School Board's church-growth group, downplayed the impact of Smyth & Helwys in a Dec. 7 statement to ABP.

"Competition in the general market of church literature is greater than ever before," he said. "While we certainly are concerned about the pressures represented by our competition, we also believe this represents an opportunity to work hard and become better than we have ever been at providing products and services that meet the needs of churches and individuals."

Mims said the Sunday School Board, which still claims a "93 percent customer base among Southern Baptist churches," has made changes in curriculum to increase its appeal to churches.

For Smyth & Helwys, book publishing continues to be a mainstay. Its three most popular offerings are What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention?, by former Sunday School Board president Grady Cothen; The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms, by Mercer historian Walter Shurden; and Don't Cry Past Tuesday, by Charles Poole.

To commemorate the third anniversary, Smyth & Helwys will hold a banquet Jan. 13 on the Mercer campus.

Selling of Christmas worries Christians

By Mark Wingfield

(ABP) The average American family will spend \$689 this year on Christmas presents, according to the American Research Group. Although that estimate is down slightly from the \$740 per family spent last year, it's still enough to cause concern among Christian ethicists.

"This is an enormous expenditure for families who could be using their funds for other things," said Al Fritsch, a Jesuit priest and ethicist who studies poverty issues in Appalachia.

While the selling of Christmas has bothered Christians for a long time, by most accounts such commercialization has intensified in recent years. There is a growing concern that consumerism is devouring the Christmas message.

"What drives the commercialization of Christmas is the straight-forward profit motive of businesses," said David Gushee, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"My fear," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, "is that church people often don't recognize how heavily saturated the Christmas season is with commercials, which define this high and holy season as a time of high and unholy consumption."

"Commercialism basically distorts the message of the Christmas season," Parham said. "The last time I checked the Christmas story, it was about goodwill, the birth of the Peace Child, God's promise that the impossible is possible, that God loves the world enough to give his own Son."

That gospel message conflicts with the preaching of corporate America, "that human worth is wrapped up in human consumption," Parham said.

"We're getting away from the whole notion of the gift at Christmas," said Fritsch, who directs Appalachia Science in the Public Interest near London, Ky. "It's gone only into material things."

While Christians have been celebrating Christmas in a variety of ways for at least 1600 years, the commercialization of the season is a relatively new development -- beginning about 100 years ago.

In 1941, to aid U.S. businesses, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving Day one week earlier to expand the Christmas shopping season.

The buying-and-selling frenzy has accelerated ever since, Parham said, until now stores start promoting Christmas even before Halloween.

"Christians need to have a stance in which they are resistant to allowing the buying and selling emphasis of the Christmas season to take over their entire celebration," Southern Seminary's Gushee added.

Gushee, Parham and Fritsch offered additional reasons why Christians should be concerned about excessive spending at Christmas:

-- Families feel enormous societal pressure to join the buying frenzy. "Many Americans spend themselves into debt based upon the guilt they have over their inability to have a luxurious, materialistic season," Parham said.

-- The emphasis on buying fosters greed. "Where it goes off track is in the running with the Joneses and the desire to be bigger and better in terms of what we buy at Christmas," Gushee said. "It's the acquisitiveness, the idea that 'I've got to get all these great gifts or I won't be happy.'"

-- The poor are impacted more adversely. "People who already are in miserable economic circumstances have their noses rubbed in it," Gushee said, "because the parents aren't able to provide for their children all the toys

they see advertised on television or perhaps their friends at school are getting."

-- Some merchants exploit Christian faith for the purpose of profit. "When do malls invite church choirs to perform?" Parham asked. "Do you ever know of a mall that invited a church choir to come sing at Easter? When do malls and other stores play Christian music over their intercoms? Only at Christmastime."

But there is another side to the issue, noted David Profitt, a bivocational pastor and manager of Martin's department store in Salyersville, Ky.

Christmas may be too commercial, he agreed, but the gifts Americans buy put turkeys on the tables of thousands of retail and manufacturing workers.

Without Christmas sales, the retail industry's goose would be cooked, Profitt said. "If you don't make it between October and Jan. 1, you won't make it."

Christmas buying accounts for anywhere from 40 percent to 60 percent of annual sales for most American retailers, according to industry insiders and economists.

The commercialization of Christmas "is only one facet of a world that's run by self," added Profitt, pastor of Licking River Baptist Church in Salyersville, Ky. "If the church and religious leaders want to do something about the commercialization of Christmas, let them preach sermons against self."

The real problem is not with the products in store shelves but with what's found in the hearts of individuals, he said.

"You can buy gifts and give them with a spirit of love, the spirit of Christ, and have nothing wrong at all. On the other hand, you can do all the crass things that are associated with commercialization and make Christmas a sham."

In the final analysis, "our response to Christmas, and to what degree we allow commercialization to rob us of the basic gifts of Christmas, are always very personal," Profitt said.

Parham, Fritsch and 23 other religious leaders who recently issued a statement against the commercialization of Christmas don't want to be labeled Scrooges, they insist.

"What we object to is using the celebration of the Peace Child as a means to obtain personal gain and corporate gain."

Those who signed the statement are not opposed to Americans spending money, said Karen Brown, research director at the Center for the Study of Commercialism, which spearheaded the effort. But, she said, people ought to be more thoughtful about how and when they spend their money.

"What we're looking for is a better distribution of the wealth into more useful social purposes instead of just gadgety consumer items," she said.

The bottom line for Christians, Gushee said, is to keep the celebration in Christmas.

"It's important to see the gift-buying, the gift-giving and gift-receiving as only a small part of what Christmas is about," he said. "If we can make gift-giving an opportunity to show our appreciation for those we love and care about ... with modest, thoughtful gifts ... that can be a very special thing."

Tips for avoiding commercialized Christmas

(ABP) -- Are you determined to avoid the excessive commercialization of Christmas? Here are 10 practical tips to get started, offered by members of a religious coalition to "take commercialism out of Christmas":

-- "Recognize that the Christian symbols related to the birth of the Peace Child are being inappropriately used and aggressively used to sell products," said Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics. "We always have to begin with recognition of the problem."

-- Use the church as a place to teach the true meaning of Christmas, not only in December but throughout the year.

-- Teach within churches and families the ideals of self-sacrifice and proper determination of self-worth modeled by Jesus Christ.

-- Make gifts at home rather than buying them.

-- Reduce the number of gifts given, perhaps to one gift per person.

-- Give gifts of service rather than tangible items. For example, parents could give their children the gift of time, noted Karen Brown of the Center for the Study of Commercialism. "One of the ironies of Christmastime is people are hustling around to shop and give up really quality family time."

-- Create a festive atmosphere in the home based on the celebration of Christ's birth rather than on giving and getting gifts.

-- Observe the Advent season at church and at home to make Christmas more than just a one-day holiday. Many churches now produce Advent devotional guides written by their own members.

-- Give gifts to worthwhile causes, such as missions, homeless shelters and the like, on behalf of people you normally would give a purchased item.

-- Purchase gifts that benefit worthy social causes. For example, Koinonia Farms in Americus, Ga., sells gift items to support its ministry. Another Georgia organization called "Alternatives" offers a catalog of gifts produced in Third World countries that help build developing economies.

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Why do we give gifts at Christmas?

(ABP) -- Ever wonder who started this business of gift-giving at Christmastime?

Unraveling the answer isn't an easy task. That's because the modern holiday celebrated as Christmas is the combined product of several streams of tradition.

The word "Christmas" is Old English for "cristes maesse," or "Christ's mass."

Although the early church celebrated the birth of Christ, it took several hundred years for a uniform holiday to develop. The oldest record of the Feast of Christ's Nativity dates to the year 336 in Rome, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica.

However, it wasn't until the year 400 that a Christian calendar was developed to replace a previously pagan calendar.

"Constantine was the first Christian emperor, but at the end of the fourth century it was Theodosius who arranged the Christian calendar,"

explained Marvin Anderson, professor of Christian history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Christmas Day was placed on Dec. 25 to replace a pagan Roman festival that featured merrymaking and gift-giving, Anderson continued. "What Christians did was to take over those aspects."

Giving gifts is a natural extension because gift-giving long has been associated with both pagan and Christian holidays of all types, Anderson said.

On another level, the gift-giving is thought to be a tradition tied to the Epiphany, the celebration of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus by the magi.

How Christmas gifts came to be exchanged on Dec. 25 is another story. Theodosius, the man who first arranged the Christian calendar, and his contemporaries chose this date.

"Christian demographers of the third century believed that the creation of the world took place at the spring equinox, then reckoned as March 25," according to the Encyclopedia Britanica. "Hence, the new creation in the incarnation and death of Christ must therefore have occurred on the same day, with his birth following nine months later at the winter solstice."

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