

ACLU Says No On Christmas Stamp

Fifth Estate Collective

1966

The American Civil Liberties Union last week urged the U.S. Post Office Department to reverse its decision to issue a 1966 Christmas stamp representing a religious scene, calling such governmental support of religion a violation of the First Amendment's guarantee of separation of church and state.

In a letter to Postmaster General Lawrence O'Brien, ACLU executive director John de J. Pemberton Jr. sharply criticized the Post Office's plan to reproduce Hans Memling's "Madonna and Child with Angels" on a Christmas stamp. The ACLU spokesman declared that the government "has no mandate or authority to indoctrinate minorities in the religion of the majority, or to lend its instrumentalities and vast prestige to the celebration of the religious holidays of the majority."

The Union's letter was prompted by the Post Office's rejection of a protest against the issuance of the stamp from the American Jewish Congress. The Post Office's explanation to the AJC, which the ACLU noted offered no "supporting argument," was that the purchase of Christmas stamps is not mandatory and that the Memling reproduction is "a portion of a work of art." Attacking the Department's statement as "a cavalier way of dismissing a serious constitutional question," the civil liberties group asserted that "the fact that citizens are free to purchase other stamps does not offset the effect of the government's participation in a religious activity by issuing this stamp." The Union added that "the artistic nature of the Memling design does not alter the fact that the design clearly appears to have been selected just because it represents a world — recognized religious subject, and it will amount to government sponsorship of, or participation in, the celebration of a religious holiday."

The ACLU letter warned against an apparent official Post Office policy move "from an endorsement of the mild religiosity of recent years' designs to an uninhibited adoption of Christian themes in stamp designs for the Christmas season in 1966—and perhaps for the future."

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