



The Freethought Society News

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Published by: The Freethought Society | <http://www.FtSociety.org>
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January/February 2016
Volume 8, Number 1

The Freethought Society News
ezine is published by
The Freethought Society (FS)
for the nontheist community.

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are available for
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Articles on topics of interest to
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Tax ID Number: 23-2738574

Chester County Commissioners Reject Nontheist Winter Holiday Symbol, Again!

by Margaret Downey

Every year since 2007, the Freethought Society (FS) has advocated the use of a *Tree of Knowledge* as a winter holiday symbol for the nontheist community on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Prior to 2010, the area was known as a “free speech zone,” but passage of a Chester County Commissioners’ resolution (Resolution Number 58-10) removed public accommodation rights. The Resolution gave Chester County Commissioners full and exclusive use of the lawn during the winter holiday season. They place displays of their choice on the grounds from Thanksgiving until shortly after New Year’s Day. The Commissioners contend that their chosen winter holiday-themed items follow permissible descriptions found in the 1984 United States Supreme Court case *Lynch v. Donnelly*. In 1984, the secular/nontheist community did not have a symbol of any type.

The Tree of Knowledge was created as a result of a ten-year search for a winter holiday symbol that could convey a message that would make nontheists proud. *The Tree of Knowledge* expresses the importance of education, and the necessary study of science, philosophy, history, ethics, critical thinking, lives led by nontheist heroes and much more. The use of laminated book cover ornaments conveys that literature about those subjects are available and recommended reading. *The Tree of Knowledge* is adorned with book covers including some that some religious leaders do not want people to know about, let alone read.

On November 10, 2015, I made another attempt to request that Resolution 58-10 be rescinded. I was joined by **Jason Torpy**, president of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF), and **Jason Heap** Executive Director of the United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR). During the public commentary at that Chester County Commissioners’ “Sunshine Meeting,” we took turns trying to convince Commissioners **Kathy Cozzone**, **Terence Farrell**, and **Michelle Kichline** that *The Tree of Knowledge* would be the ideal way to include the nontheist community. A week later, Farrell sent the following email:

At our Sunshine meeting last week (November 10th), you asked that the board reconsider/rescind Resolution 58-10 regarding holiday displays. At our Commissioners’ meeting on November 12th, I asked if anyone wanted to offer such a motion to reconsider/rescind Resolution 58-10. There was no such motion, and thus Resolution 58-10 remains in force. You can see video of our Commissioners’ meeting on the County’s website, Chesco.org.

*Terence Farrell
Chairman*

A video of the November 10, 2015 Sunshine Meeting that includes my testimony and those of Heap and Torpy can be seen at: <http://goo.gl/wXc1D2>

Needless to say, we were all disappointed that the Commissioners continue to refuse the inclusion of the nontheist winter holiday symbol, *The Tree of Knowledge*, but we will not be deterred. Legal consultations and further discussions are ongoing towards the goal of finding a way for nontheists to be treated as equal citizens in Chester County.

Please earmark a donation to this important winter holiday effort as soon as possible. *Tree of Knowledge* funding is needed in order for FS to pursue legal actions. □