



COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

A photo by Chris Highland titled "Trusting Nature."

In God we trust? A closer look at a national motto



CHRIS HIGHLAND
HIGHLAND VIEWS

Returning from a delightful day in highland forests, my wife and I stopped in a quaint historic town to have some lunch and explore.

Taking a walk down main street we noticed a large church on the corner with the words, "In God We Trust" prominently displayed over the entrance. Moving closer we were taken aback to find the "church" was actually the County Courthouse. Even my wife, as a person of faith, thought it was odd. In my secular skepticism, I wondered if this might be a "church of justice"?

In Bristol, Virginia, Joe Mink is running for sheriff. He says overcrowding at the jail and the city's budget are top priorities, but what's the very first act he would take as sheriff? "The first thing I would like to do, if I do win the office, is to have 'In God We Trust' put on every vehicle we have. We need more of that in this city."

I'm not sure what drives this passion, or why we even need a "national motto," but it's often revealing to take a glance back at history with these things.

"In God We Trust" has been the assumed national motto since 1956 (thanks to Billy Graham and Dwight Eisenhower and their alliance against "Godless Communism"). Though the new "motto" had been on some coins during the Civil War, the original motto preferred by the American Founders was E Pluribus Unum: "From many, one."

When a public building, built with public funds to be used for public business, erects a sign or symbol that expresses a religious point of view, we would do well to ask, What's going on here?

We don't hear Jews, Hindus, Muslims or even most Christians calling for the motto. No doubt a majority of Americans don't really care whether this appears on a dollar bill, a police car, a courthouse or Congress. For most people, perhaps, it's "just a motto" and has little to do with anything religious.

In fact, this is often the (strange) argument used when this motto is joined by the Ten Commandments, a cross or Bible verses displayed in or on publicly funded buildings like a state house or city hall, cemetery or elementary school. We hear, "Oh, it's just tradition, not religion." Isn't that an odd defense? (Yet if the display is challenged, it somehow becomes a "religious liberty" issue).

It might be helpful to ask: What does

this motto truly mean?

For those who passionately defend it, we can assume they really mean "Jesus" as the "God" proclaimed in the motto. So it might be more honest to re-phrase it as, "In Jesus We Trust," though no one would say that. This sectarian motto is certainly appropriate over a church door, on a pastor's car or a believer's hat, but probably not appropriate (or legal) on "the people's" property.

Appropriate or legal. Both important considerations. But so is simple thoughtfulness and courtesy. Say a town asks me to help everyone build a barn — a barn we can all use for our hay, horses and hoedowns. Then I decide to paint "Highland Barns are the Best" over the door, across the roof and maybe on every saddle. Maybe it's no big deal to people, and folks just get used to it, but ... it's not very neighborly, is it? Seems like I just wanted some free advertising.

What does "In God/Jesus We Trust" really tell us? Does it mean that citizens can be confident the officials at work in that building (or police or fire department) are more just, ethical and compassionate because of their trusting beliefs? Can we assume they are better at their jobs because of their faith? Does this mean that a person who doesn't put trust in the God of a particular faith can't be trusted to do the job fairly or competently?

I wonder sometimes if the motto actually puts more emphasis on WE rather than God. "See how faithful WE are." Not much humility there.

Some people of faith seem to pray for the day when everyone who works in a school, city hall, police department, state house or Congress trusts in one God and shares the same faith. On that day, every teacher, judge and representative will proudly post "In Jesus We Trust" in every public meeting place.

I trust that most folks can see the problem with that. If someone is in a position of authority, I would hope they treat all of us fairly, equally, kindly, regardless of beliefs. We want to trust we can participate in our institutions without feeling second-class, without feeling excluded before we even come in the door.

What if we learned to trust each other, and advertise that?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.