

Why I decided to get 'In God We Trust' Tenn. license plate



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The time for me to renew my Tennessee license plate finally came around Thanksgiving. The new blue license plate comes with the option of having “In God We Trust” engraved in it.

Six months ago, in a column about faith pervading Tennessee life and society, I told readers I was not sure what box I was going to check on the “In God We Trust” question.

“I am a preacher’s son who led our company’s interfaith employee group, but I am also wary of sending a government-sponsored message about religion that would marginalize people because of their faith tradition or lack thereof,” I wrote.

Since the column ran on June 10, however, the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision on abortion was overturned, top state and federal elected leaders held a rally to decry what they call “genital mutilation,” the Maury County library director was run out of his job for having an LGBTQ book display, and legislation has been filed to allow the state to intervene in transgender people’s medical decisions and regulate drag shows.

Moreover, as documented by *The Tennessean*, the rise of Christian nationalism has permeated state politics, turning terms such as “Tennessee values” into cudgels against people who hold different viewpoints.

Melding of politics and religion has been divisive

When I chose “In God We Trust,” it was an emotional decision made out of self-preservation and personal safety.

As someone who also identifies as LGBTQ and travels across the state regularly where expressions of secularism are not always as common as in urban areas, I made my decision based on fear.

And that choice does not sit well with me.

I am a person of faith who has faced both rejection and embrace in my religious tradition. My travels have allowed me to encounter many wonderful and sincere people across the entire state.

At the same time, I cannot be numb to political rhetoric that calls LGBTQ people and their allies “groomers” or laws that have passed to erase citizens’ stories or history because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Tennessee’s U.S. senators refused to vote for a federal bill protecting same-sex marriages on the ground of religious freedom even though the measure expressly protects religious liberty and conscience.

Years of violence against LGBTQ people, including the recent shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, left me shaken.

I have a First Amendment right to express my point of view, but I am concerned that the melding of politics and a particular religious viewpoint has made it unsafe for many citizens.

The license plate creates forced sorting of citizens

The rights of LGBTQ people are being expanded or restricted at state legislatures, Congress and the Supreme Court, which just heard a case involving a Colorado website developer who is suing for the right to refuse to serve same-sex couples who are getting married.

The plaintiff does not want government forcing her to betray her beliefs.

In Tennessee, the State Constitution expressly prohibits the state from denying or forcing citizens to practice any religion.

However, the “In God We Trust” license plate creates a situation that invites religious discrimination.

It’s not just that there’s a logo. The license plates are expressly different. Those with “In God We Trust” start with numbers and those without start with letters.

In June, a kind reader wrote me after I published my previous column: “I think you have little to fear from the option to have ‘In God we trust’ on TN license plates. The text size is so small that no one can read it a car length away.”

But it’s easy to see the difference. The letters and numbers create a forced sorting of citizens. This further stokes the polarization that has afflicted our society and makes it difficult to come together to resolve issues respectfully.

Clarity and reflection helped overcome fear

However, I believe my colleagues’ and my work of showing up in different communities to practice journalism and convene conversations and forums over several years has come out of intentional purpose, not fear.

So, as I began to pray about my unease, I experienced an epiphany challenging me to overcome that fear.

I can potentially see this as an extension of civic engagement work and start necessary and difficult conversations that matter. This license plate could be an olive branch.

Admittedly, naivete and some mental gymnastics go into this justification. But I am haunted that my decision was based on angst even though it was informed by experience. Then again, it’s just a license plate, right?

So, my goal now is to turn that fear into something better, something productive and brave. The first advice I would give fellow citizens is to choose whatever license plate reflects your values knowing that others might disagree with you.

That’s the benefit of living in a democratic republic. It should be, at least.

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