

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 7, 2015

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL
sheriff265@lacledecountymissouri.org

Sheriff Wayne Merritt
Laclede County Sheriff's Department
240 N. Adams Ave.
Lebanon, MO 65536

Re: Inappropriate and Unconstitutional Religious Endorsement

Dear Sheriff Merritt:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to remove "In God We Trust" from Laclede County Sheriff's Department vehicles. We were contacted by a concerned Laclede County resident. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 22,500 members across the country, including nearly 300 members in Missouri. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that the controversial national motto, "In God We Trust," is displayed on Laclede County Sheriff's Department vehicles. Please see the enclosed photo.

It is inappropriate for the Department to display "In God We Trust" on government property. Statements about a god have no place on government-owned cars. Public officials should not use their government position and government property to promote their religious views. The Department protects all residents of Laclede County, including those who do not believe in a monotheistic god or any gods.

As you are aware, citizens interact with and rely on law enforcement officers during some of the most urgent and vulnerable times of their lives. These citizens should not be made to feel offended, excluded, and like political outsiders because the local government they support with their taxes oversteps its power by prominently placing a religious statement on Department vehicles. Nor should the Department turn religious citizens into "insiders." We think you'll agree that law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others.

Citizens of Laclede County trust their elected officials to attend to their elected secular duties. Spending taxpayer time placing religious messages on patrol cars is beyond the scope of secular government. Further, in a time when citizens nationwide are increasingly distrustful of law enforcement officers' actions, it is frightening and politically dubious for the Department to announce to citizens that officers rely on the judgment of a deity rather than on the judgment of the law.

The history of the motto “In God We Trust” evidences no secular purpose; on the contrary, the motto was first adopted during the Cold War as a reaction to the purported “godlessness” of Communism. America’s original motto was purely secular—“*E Pluribus Unum*” (“out of many, one”)—and was selected by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin.

Overall, 23% Americans identify as nonreligious.¹⁷ That 8-point increase since 2007¹⁸ and 15-point jump since 1990 makes the “nones” the fastest growing identification in America.¹⁹ Nationally, about 35% of millennials are nonreligious.²⁰ It stands to reason at least some of your staff are nonreligious. “In God We Trust” is thus not even accurate. For it to be accurate, it would have to read, “In God Some of Us Trust.” Having a religious motto on patrol cars also implies a religious test for employment.

On behalf of Laclede County residents and taxpayers, we urge you remove “In God We Trust” from all Laclede County Sheriff’s Department vehicles. The Laclede County Sheriff’s Department should respect the rights of conscience of all citizens, including those who in good conscience reject belief in a god. Please inform us in writing of the actions you are taking on this matter. We look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President

ALG:mez

Enclosure

¹⁷ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

¹⁸ “Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Research Center, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (October 9, 2012) available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

¹⁹ Barry Kosmin, National Religious Identification Survey 1989-1990.

²⁰ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, *supra*.

