

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 27, 2015

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL
citycouncil@venicegov.com

The Honorable John Holic
Mayor
Venice City Council
401 West Venice Ave.
Venice, FL 34285

Re: Proposed “In God We Trust” display

Dear Mayor Holic and Council members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the proposal before the Venice City Council to place a display reading “In God We Trust” in the Council’s chambers. We were contacted by a concerned local resident. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 22,000 members across the country, including 1,100 in Florida. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and represent the views of nonreligious Americans.

We understand the Council will vote on this proposal tomorrow at its April 28 meeting. The proposed resolution approving the display claims that the motto is “inspiring” and “a profound source of strength and guidance to many generations of Americans.”

Posting “In God We Trust” at the seat of city government sends an unfortunate message of exclusion to the fast-growing segment of the population who are nonreligious and do not find the notion of trusting God “a profound source of strength and guidance.” The message alienates not only significant numbers of atheists and agnostics, but those with beliefs in many gods.

The Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits, among other things, government “sponsorship” of religion. *See Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 612 (1971). That prohibition applies to government actions that favor one religion over another or that favor religion in general over nonreligion. *See McCreary County, Ky. v. ACLU of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005). In addition to being an unconstitutional endorsement of religion, the motto is inaccurate. To be accurate it would have to read, “In God *Some Of Us* Trust,” and wouldn’t that be silly? It is improper for the government to take sides on a matter that must be left to individual conscience.

This proposed display, just as it was intended, is a statement on a personal matter of religious belief. Posting "In God We Trust" interferes with citizens' rights of conscience and is a misuse of city property for the benefit of a system of religion.

The phrase "In God We Trust" was chosen belatedly as a national motto by an Act of Congress only in 1956 as a response to fear of "godless" communism. It first appeared on paper currency in 1957. This symbolic unity of "God" with government has created a lack of respect for the previously revered constitutional principle of the separation of state and church. It would be advantageous to all if the motto "E pluribus unum" (From Many, come one) could resume its former stature. After all, it was the motto chosen by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin.

While the constitutionality of "In God We Trust" in similar modern postings has not been fully established by courts, our judiciary does scrutinize more closely symbolic violations with which individuals are forced to come into personal contact. This is exactly what Venice will do if it posts "In God We Trust" in its council chambers. Anyone with any civic and secular business before the city will infer they must conform to a system of government-endorsed orthodoxy in matters of religion. Consider the uproar were the councilors to propose posting the message "There is only one true God, and Allah is his prophet." The current proposal is equally inappropriate.

Please do not approve the posting of a divisive religious message in the Venice City Council chambers. Many other phrases, such as "United We Stand," or the original motto, "E Pluribus Unum," are also "a profound source of strength and guidance to many generations of Americans" and would "solemnize public occasions and express confidence in our society" without endorsing religion and excluding many good Venice citizens.

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President

ALG:mez