

Church/State Separation Battles

by Norm R. Allen Jr.

Conservative theists love to merge religion and state. Even in a predominantly Christian nation such as the U.S., many conservative Jews and Muslims advocate promoting government-sponsored expressions of love for the Deity from non-sectarian points of view.

Recently, *The New York Times* ran a story about police agencies throughout the U.S. displaying “In God We Trust” decals on official motorized vehicles. (“Police Agencies defy critics and show ‘In God We Trust,’” reprinted in *The Buffalo News*, October 4, 2015, p. A10.)

Sheriff Johnny Moats of Polk County, Georgia said: “If it’s on my money and it’s on the flag, I can put it on a patrol car.” One could just as well have argued if slavery was right in Atlanta and throughout Georgia, it should have also been right in Alabama. Since when does an action become morally right just because it has been practiced elsewhere?

Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Madison, Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) was understandably miffed to say the least. “This motto has nothing to do with the problem of police forces’ shooting people, but it’s a great way to divert attention away from that and wrap yourself in a mantle of piety so that you’re above criticism,” she said.

Adrian Garcia, the police chief of Childress, Texas, in a letter posted on his department’s Facebook page, suggested that Gaylor “and the Freedom From Religion Foundation go fly a kite.”

Moats said:

I don't know why an atheist is so upset about us putting up "In God We Trust." I'm not saying that they trust God. I'm saying that we, as the guys in the department who put this on our cars, we trust in God. And why is that a bad thing? Even if you don't believe, you know God's all about good.

This raises other questions. For example, are only "guys" welcome to be police officers in Polk County, Georgia? Must God be a male? Even if women are welcome, would Wiccans or goddess worshippers be welcome? How about Satanists and other non-Christians? Do these cops only trust in the Christian God? If so, would they be likely to abuse Arabs, Muslims and atheists? Would one that does not believe in God, or the right God, be less likely to be promoted in the police department?

Complicating matters even farther, inmates in the Polk County Public Safety Complex painted a mural featuring the Ten Commandments. While it is true that there are very few atheists in jails and prisons, there are still some. Why should they have to be exposed to this kind of religious indoctrination? After all, atheist prisoners have often complained about the religious brainwashing that often goes on in correctional facilities. (Incidentally, the Ten Commandments monument at the Oklahoma State Capitol was recently taken down owing to the fact that it blatantly crossed the increasingly vanishing line separating church and state.)

Sheriff Moats claims that "you know that God's all about good." I certainly do not know that. I do know that the God of the Bible condemns homosexuality. Though same-sex marriage is now legal, that certainly did not stop reactionary religionists like Kim Davis from trying to use governmental authority to discriminate against LGBTQI people hoping to get married. Who is to say that some religious cop encouraged by the government to trust in God would be able to rein in

his personal prejudices when dealing with LGBTQI people and others deemed sinful?

This is not to argue that religious conservatives cannot be fair cops. However, when law enforcement officers, who are already prone to aggressiveness, and entire police departments, are told by the *government* that they have God on their side, the potential for police abuse would seem to grow immensely.

There are other questions that arise. Are Christian civilians to get favorable treatment from cops that tell the public they trust in God? How about other theists or non-theists? That is to say, would cops that are essentially encouraged by the government to trust in God be more suspicious of civilians that trust in another God, or that do not trust in God at all?

I had a very pleasant run-in with the police some years ago. Another person and I had a table at the Juneteenth celebration in Buffalo as a local representative of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. One young woman was furious with us, believing that only Satan-worshippers could be opposed to the merging of church and state. She brought two cops to our table, insisting that they arrest us! The cops just asked us for our permits, which we showed them. They then angrily ran the woman off, and even offered to help us load up our van as we were leaving.

However, I cannot help wondering what might have happened if they had been encouraged by their department and the city government to trust in God and to display "In God We Trust" decals on their cars. Would they have still been so accommodating? I honestly do not know. And I am glad that I did not have to find out.

We must all fight to keep religion and state separate. As someone long ago observed, church/state separation is a threat to no one except theocrats and religious bigots. The last thing we need is an American version of the Taliban or Isis to darken our days.