

Article

“In God We Trust:” The U.S. National Motto and the Contested Concept of Civil Religion

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Abstract: In this essay, “In God We Trust”, the official motto of the United States, is discussed as an illustration of the contested character of American civil religion. Applying and evaluating assumptions from Robert N. Bellah and his critics, a conceptual history of the motto is presented, showing how from its first appearance to today it has inspired debates about the place of civil religion in American culture, law, and politics. Examining these debates, the changing character of the motto is explored: its creation as a religious response to the Civil War; its secularization as a symbol on the nation’s currency at the turn of the twentieth century; its state-sponsored institutionalization during the Cold War; its part in the litigation that challenged the constitutionality of civil religious symbolism in the era of the culture wars; and its continuing role in the increasingly partisan political battles of our own time. In this essay, I make the case that, while seemingly timeless, the meaning of the motto has been repeatedly reinterpreted, with culture, law, and politics interacting in sometimes surprising ways to form one of the nation’s most commonly accepted and frequently challenged symbols. In concluding, I speculate on the future of the motto, as well as on the changing place of civil religion in a nation that is increasingly pluralistic in its religion and polarized in its politics.

Keywords: civil religion; Robert N. Bellah; “In God We Trust”; national motto; religious nationalism; secularization; church and state

1. Introduction

Among the many manifestations of civil religion, the national motto of the United States may be the most ubiquitous. Engraved on all forms of the country’s currency, “In God We Trust” is written on every coin and bill that Americans carry in their pockets and purses and pass back and forth across counters every day ([U.S. Department of the Treasury 2011](#)). Enacted into law by Congress unanimously and without floor debate in 1956, the motto has been reaffirmed by congressional resolutions passed by overwhelming votes in 2002, 2006, and 2011 ([Farenthold 2011](#), p. A4). It is inscribed on pediments above the Speaker’s Chair in the House of Representatives and over the south entrance to the Senate Chamber in the United States Capitol ([Architect of the Capitol 2018](#)). Across the country it is displayed on public buildings and in public schools, on specialty license plates in a score of American states, and, over the past few years, on decals and bumper stickers placed on police cars and other public vehicles in growing numbers of cities and towns ([Shimron 2018](#)). Public opinion surveys have shown that a substantial majority of Americans are supportive of the motto. According to a 2003 USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll, for example, 90% of those surveyed said they approved of the inscription on the country’s coins ([Newport 2003](#)). Over the last two decades, it has taken a more prominent place in the rhetoric of American politicians, including President Donald Trump, who has cited it in recent State of the Union and National Prayer Breakfast addresses ([Mislin 2018](#)).

Yet, in spite of its ubiquity, the motto is a surprisingly opaque symbol, the product of a little-known history of continuing controversies that have raised fundamental issues about the character of civil

religion in the United States. In American iconography, “In God We Trust” is a relatively late addition, appearing for the first time during the Civil War and being named the official motto a hundred years later, almost two centuries after the nation’s founding. Since that time, it has been the subject of repeated challenges in federal courts, testing its constitutionality under the first amendment religion clause, and while never reaching the Supreme Court itself, it has been discussed *gratis dictum* in several of the Court’s most important cases involving religious freedom (Epstein 1996, p. 2154). Although the official motto was passed with minimal opposition in Congress, bills to establish and reaffirm it have been actively opposed by humanist and civil liberties groups, and recent efforts to post it in public schools and on public buildings and vehicles have sparked vocal opposition in many localities (Bomboy 2015; Brown 2015; Garrett 2018). Additionally, while public opinion polls have confirmed the motto’s popularity, its theistic wording has become increasingly problematic at a time when surveys show that growing numbers of Americans do not identify with conventional theistic faiths (Pew Research Center 2015). In short, writes Charles Haynes of the Freedom Forum Institute, “the whole ‘In God We Trust’ thing is much more layered than it first looks” (Jarvik 2007, p. E1).

In this essay, “In God We Trust” is discussed as an illustration of the contested character of American civil religion. Applying and evaluating assumptions from Robert N. Bellah and his critics, a conceptual history of the motto is constructed, showing how from its first appearance to today it has inspired debates about the place of civil religion in American culture, law, and politics. Examining these debates, the changing character of the motto is explored: its creation as a religious response to the Civil War; its secularization as a symbol on the nation’s currency at the turn of the twentieth century; its state-sponsored institutionalization during the Cold War; its part in the litigation that challenged the constitutionality of civil religious symbolism in the era of the culture wars; and its continuing role in the increasingly partisan political battles of our own time. In this essay, I make the case that, while seemingly timeless, the meaning of the motto has been repeatedly reinterpreted, with culture, law, and politics interacting in sometimes surprising ways to form one of the nation’s most commonly accepted and frequently challenged symbols. In concluding, I speculate on the future of the motto, as well as on the changing place of civil religion in a nation that is increasingly pluralistic in its religion and polarized in its politics.

2. Conceptualizing Civil Religion

In the modern world, civil religion has been a pervasive and problematic concept. From Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Spinoza who introduced the term, to Rousseau who first fully defined it, to Tocqueville, Durkheim, and contemporary theorists who have developed and revised it, thinkers have agreed that religion can often be appropriated for political purposes, and they have disagreed about when, where, how, and with what consequences this appropriation takes place (Beiner 2011). Among American scholars, the concept was popularized by sociologist Robert N. Bellah in his *Civil Religion in America*, which since its publication in 1967 has been celebrated, criticized, and debated in thousands of academic articles and books, as well as in countless other popular publications (Bellah 1967). As defined by Bellah, American civil religion is an “elaborate and well institutionalized” national faith, existing “alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches”, that provides “a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere” (Bellah 1967, pp. 1, 3–4). Although conveyed in public statements and speeches, and especially in presidential inaugural addresses, its roots run deep into the country’s character, capturing and expressing the essence of its most fundamental beliefs and values. Written at the height of the Vietnam War, at a time when many had lost faith in the nation, the essay hit a nerve, attracting immediate attention and acclaim. Yet, for those who examined Bellah’s argument closely, its ambiguous analysis and sweeping interpretations posed serious problems, inspiring a flood of commentary and criticism, along with what Raymond Haberski Jr. has called “an academic industry to expand, test, and revise the idea of American civil religion” (Haberski 2018, p. 2).

Beginning in the 1970s, Bellah’s article began to be debated. Among its earliest critics were scholars who cited the absence of a clear definition of the concept of civil religion. Donald G. Jones and Russell E.

Richey, for example, argued that Bellah's version of the concept was broad enough to encompass a wide variety of meanings, ranging from a kind of folk religion to a transcendent and universal national faith (Jones and Richey 1974, pp. 15–18). Martin Marty challenged Bellah's belief that all Americans shared a single civic creed, a common set of civil religious values, or a unified civil religious tradition, arguing instead that civil religion existed in multiple forms or modes, including "priestly" and "prophetic" ones (Marty 1974; Wuthnow 1988; see also Kao and Copulsky 2007). John F. Wilson, systematically deconstructing Bellah's analysis, rejected his claim that American civil religion could be considered a religion at all, because it contained no consistent set of beliefs, systematic pattern of behaviors, or fixed institutional structure (Wilson 1979, pp. 169–75). Others added to the criticism, so much so that by the mid-1980s sociologists N. J. Demerath III and Rhys H. Williams could declare that the concept itself had lost all meaning and that efforts to define it had become an empty exercise in categorization and definition, what they called "an enterprise in scholasticism" (Demerath and Williams 1985, pp. 165–66). Meanwhile, many readers insisted on misinterpreting the article's arguments, assuming that Bellah had been making the case for a state-sponsored form of patriotic nationalism. By the end of the decade, concerned that his concept had evoked so much controversy, and disturbed that so many had mistaken his view of American civil religion, Bellah himself had abandoned the term altogether, admitting that he had become "tired of arguing against those for whom civil religion means the idolatrous worship of the state" (Bellah 1989, p. 147; see also Mathisen 1989).

Yet, the concept of civil religion had taken on a life of its own. Bellah's dismissal of the term notwithstanding, scholars have repeatedly returned to it, albeit sometimes reluctantly, continuing to challenge his version while also offering alternative and revised understandings of it. Far from disappearing at the close of the 1980s, it has been revived regularly, especially in the post-9/11 period, as seen in studies of the civil religious rhetoric of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump (see Hammond 1994; Angrosino 2002; Kao and Copulsky 2007; Roof 2009; Williams 2013; Gorski 2017; Marcus and Balaji 2017). Although some continue to argue that the concept is counterproductive, a much larger cohort of scholars have embraced it, albeit in more empirical, contextual, and qualified ways, so that the study of civil religion has become, in the words of Catherine L. Albanese, "more chastened and circumspect, more complex and nuanced, more tentative than that of the past" (Albanese 2010; see also Chernus 2010; Sehat 2011, p. 284).

Thus, in contrast to Bellah, who saw civil religion as arising spontaneously out of popular understandings of the nation's highest and most transcendent values, scholars today argue that it can also be seen as a consciously created ideology, "an imposed phenomenon rather than a permanent spontaneous force" (Cristi 2001, p. 12). Far from a universal and unchanging construct, it is considered by most to be pluralistic and protean, with different groups and subcultures using different variations on civil religion "to frame, articulate, and legitimate their own particular political and moral visions" (Demerath and Williams 1985, p. 166; see also Murphy 2011; Remillard 2011). Although accepting that civil religious symbols and rituals can build consensus and encourage national unity, scholars have come to admit that they also can generate what Jonathan D. Sarna calls "highly charged conflicts" that "reflect deep-seated cultural differences that continue even today to set Americans at odds with one another" (Sarna 1994, p. 21; see also Williams 2013; Lienesch 2018). Above all, rather than stable or static, the concept of civil religion has come to be seen as elastic and resilient, capable of adapting to changing circumstances. Today it remains very much alive, as Wade Clark Roof has described it, as a "fluid, contested, and evolving symbolic construction" (Roof 2009, p. 300; see also Weinstein 2017, p. 252).

3. Creating the Motto

The study of civil religion begins with the problem of how it comes to be created. For early advocates of the concept, including Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau, civil religious beliefs were the product of the modern state, conceived and circulated by public officials seeking to control religious divisions and establish a new kind of civic order. When Bellah began his 1967 essay by quoting

Rousseau's *Social Contract*, he seemed to see the concept in these terms, as a state-sponsored doctrine, conveyed to citizens by public authorities in official statements such as presidential inaugural addresses. Yet, while appearing to adopt Rousseau's definition of civil religion, Bellah in fact had a different view of it altogether, one associated with sociologist Emile Durkheim, who saw it as a product of popular consciousness, a deeply rooted expression of the public's highest and most transcendent values. Since that time, argues sociologist Marcela Cristi in an influential study, students of American civil religion have too often followed in Bellah's footsteps, seeing civil religion as a cultural construct, a set of values that "springs spontaneously from the culture itself, and spontaneously binds people together." Instead, she writes, it should also be understood as an intentionally imposed ideology, "a conscious tool" in her words, "to further political purposes". Such arguments have proven persuasive, as over the last two decades scholars have come to accept a view of civil religion as the product of both state power and popular practice, being constructed by authorities and conveyed by elites, while also being adopted, resisted, and often transformed by the public as part of an ongoing political process. As Cristi puts it, for civil religion to be a useful term, it must be understood as "a phenomenon that is neither just civil, not just religious, but also essentially political" (Cristi 2001, pp. 12–13).

In the United States, the creation of the national motto has been a complicated story. Although officially established in 1956, "In God We Trust" originated much earlier, having appeared on American currency for almost a century before that time. Moreover, even then it was not the first national motto, nor the only one. As early as 1776, when political leaders went to work to construct an official seal for the new nation to use in formalizing documents and treaties, Americans were creating mottos. Thus, when John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson—the committee of three appointed to the task by the Continental Congress—submitted a design for the seal that consisted of a diverse set of republican symbols, it included no fewer than three separate mottos—*E pluribus unum* ("out of many, one"), *Annuit coeptis* ("[God or Providence] favors our undertakings"), and *Novus ordo seclorum* ("new order of the ages") (Patterson and Dougall 1976, pp. 88–91). Among the three, *E pluribus unum* emerged as the most popular, appearing on numerous coins and seals during the early days of the country and being defined in editions of Webster's dictionaries from 1841 to 1959 as "the motto" of the United States (Patterson and Dougall 1976, pp. 512–14). "In God We Trust", by contrast, appeared for the first time not at the nation's founding, but during the American Civil War, when it began to be inscribed on the country's coins. Taking its place alongside *E pluribus unum*, it would slowly gain acceptance over the course of the next century. Yet, accepting the new motto did not come easily, as even at its creation it proved to be a contentious symbol, announcing the beginning of what one historian of religion has called a "complicated and contested history" (Kidd 2015).

"In God We Trust" began as a conscious political construction. Its origins lay in the early days of the American Civil War, at a time of anxiety concerning the fate of the nation following federal losses in some of the war's first battles. According to most accounts, in 1861, Mark Richard Watkinson, a Baptist minister from Pennsylvania, wrote to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, expressing concern about the absence of any reference to God on the country's currency (Fisher and Mourtada-Sabbah 2002, pp. 672–74). Worried that the nation might not survive intact, Watkinson insisted on the importance of placing some symbolic statement of its religious faith on its money. "You are probably a Christian", he wrote to Chase. "What if our Republic were now shattered beyond reconstruction? Would not the antiquaries of succeeding centuries rightly reason from our past that we were a heathen nation?" Proposing a design that included an "allseeing eye, crowned with a halo", along with an American flag carrying the words "God, liberty, law", he suggested that such a coin would be both beautiful and unobjectionable and that it would relieve the nation from what he called "the ignominy of heathenism". More importantly, Watkinson wrote, it would put the Christian God firmly on the side of the American state, because it would "place us openly under the Divine protection we have personally proclaimed" (Patterson and Dougall 1976, p. 515). Secretary Chase, a lifelong Episcopalian with a reputation for public shows of personal piety, was easily persuaded. Acknowledging the concerns of Watkinson and adding his own view that "no nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe in His

defense”, he at once directed James Pollock, Director of the United States Mint, to draw up a design for an American coin declaring “the trust of our people in God” (Patterson and Dougall 1976, p. 515).

At the start, the crafting of the motto was an exercise in Christian nationalism. The war had brought a surge of religiosity to the North as well as the South, including religious revivals in both armies, with partisans on both sides calling on God for guidance. When the Confederate States of America created their own constitution, with its preamble invoking “the favor and guidance of Almighty God”, many Northern Protestant ministers expressed the need for federal leaders to make some similar symbolic statement, placing God squarely on the Union side (Noll 2006; Fea 2011; Zauzmer 2018). It was in this context that Mint Director Pollock took up Chase’s directive for a new design for the country’s coins. A prominent Presbyterian layman, Pollock was an official in the American Sunday School Union who would later be active in the National Reform Association, a group that for decades would carry on campaigns to amend the Constitution to include both God and Jesus Christ. Committed to his Christian faith and eager to see it applied politically, Pollock went to work, announcing that the country’s coinage should “indicate the Christian character of our nation” (Director of the Mint 1862, p. 5). Thus, he proposed to Chase that newly minted coins carry the slogan “God, our Trust”, which he took from a line (“And this be our motto: In God is our trust”) from the fourth verse of the “Star-Spangled Banner”, which he called “our National Hymn” (Director of the Mint 1864, p. 10; see also Mislin 2018). Chase approved the suggestion but ordered that the wording be amended to “In God We Trust”, a phrase that may have come from one of several possible sources, including an abolitionist hymn, the slogan of a fraternal order, or the battle cry of a company of Union Army volunteers (Whitney 1845, p. 15; Louisville Daily Courier 1856, p. 1; Burrell 1997, p. 190). However phrased, the motto was intended to carry the clear meaning that the United States was a nation of believers. “We claim to be a Christian Nation”, Pollock explained, “why should we not vindicate our character by honoring the God of Nations in the exercise of our political Sovereignty as a Nation?” (Director of the Mint 1864, p. 10).

From its first appearance, the motto was controversial. The process of producing it—agreeing on a design, securing congressional support, creating new dies—took time, and the war was coming to a close before it began to appear on a small number of two-cent coins. With national survival secured, statements of political piety began to seem less urgent, and the appearance of a clearly religious message on the nation’s currency brought a variety of sometimes clashing views (Latterell 2011, pp. 596–600). Many church leaders celebrated the new motto. Typical was the Reverend Henry Smith, who in an 1865 sermon expressed his pleasure at the choice, telling his congregation at Buffalo’s North Presbyterian Church that “it is no violation, but rather an outgrowth, of the spirit of the American constitution that the coin of the United States is henceforth to bear the great legend, ‘In God we trust’” (Smith 1865, p. 14). Religious publications added their approval, albeit a few preferred an even stronger version. “Providence seems to be suggesting an amendment to it”, offered the Methodist *Zion’s Herald*. “Should it not read, ‘In God alone is our trust?’” (*Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal* 1865, p. 70). By contrast, others were not so admiring. The *New York Jewish Messenger* for one frankly admitted that it thought the new motto conveyed an “affectation of piety” (*Jewish Messenger* 1866, p. 4). The *Detroit Free Press* criticized its “conjuring of religious faith and filthy lucre” and condemned the “smack of cant in this worshipping God in Mammon” (*Detroit Free Press* 1866, p. 1). The editors of the *New York Times* also weighed in against it in no uncertain terms, calling the appearance of the motto on the nation’s currency a “new form of national worship”, describing “such tract-printing by the government” as “always improper” and asking Americans “to carry our religion—such as it is—in our hearts and not in our pockets” (*New York Times* 1865, p. 4).

The conflicting views were only the beginning of what would become decades of disagreement. In the years following the war, religious revivalism faded, and Protestant leaders began to feel their political influence slipping. In response, conservative clergy fought back, making use of the motto in causes ranging from Bible reading and prayer in public schools to Sunday closing laws (Mislin 2015, pp. 2–6). Thus, as early as 1870, Presbyterian preacher S. M. Campbell, writing in the *American Presbyterian Review*, cited the motto as proof that the United States was a Christian nation,

being a “most appropriate and beautiful recognition” of “the Great Being whom Christians worship, and who alone governs nations and men” (Campbell 1870, p. 238). Such statements were in turn sharply criticized by religious dissenters such as F. W. Evans, a Mount Pleasant, New York Shaker, who in 1879 told a Cincinnati audience that government had violated its first principles in putting “In God We Trust” on the nation’s coins. “Of course I think it is right to trust in God”, said Evans, “but this is a government of all the people, and we have no right to put theology on that coin” (*Louisville Courier-Journal* 1879, p. 2). Even more outspoken in their criticism were the freethinkers who banded together in organizations such as the National Liberal League and the American Secular Union, where speakers such as Robert G. Ingersoll, America’s most articulate agnostic, would rail against the motto as “contrary to the genius of the republic, contrary to the Declaration of Independence, and contrary really to the Constitution of the United States” (Ingersoll 1890, p. 124). By the late nineteenth century, the lines between Christian advocates and freethinking critics of the motto had been drawn, with advocates denouncing the “infidels” who would “erase from our national escutcheon our motto” and critics calling it “an insult to the intelligence of the excellent people who it is intended to please and conciliate” (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1897, p. 7; Mead 1891, p. 4).

In spite of the debates, the motto began to make its way into common use. As coins of additional denominations came into circulation, “In God We Trust” became more accepted and popular. *E pluribus unum* remained in use as well and after 1873 appeared on all coins. However, as early as the 1870s, some Americans had already started to refer to “In God We Trust” as “our nation’s motto” (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1870a, p. 3). Moreover, it quickly became associated not only with the country’s currency, but also with its civic and political culture. Thus, over the course of the century, it was adopted by a variety of groups to lend religious and political legitimacy to their causes. Fraternal organizations led by Odd Fellows and Masonic Orders appropriated it, decorating their meeting halls and temples with the slogan (*Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* 1867, p. 3; *San Francisco Chronicle* 1870a, p. 3). Prohibitionists embraced it so often that it became a kind of unofficial motto for their movement, while suffragists frequently marched under its banner (*Baltimore Sun* 1888, p. 1; *Louisville Courier-Journal* 1891, p. 4). Activists across the political spectrum from pacifists to nativists made use of the motto (Leeds 1894, p. 316; *San Francisco Chronicle* 1870b, p. 3). Political parties put it to work for partisan purposes. In the election of 1896, for example, with free silver roiling political debate, Bryan Democrats charged their Republican opponents with seeking to change “In God We Trust” to “In Gold We Trust” (Johnson 1896, p. 4), while McKinley Republicans reciprocated by warning that if Bryan won, “In God We Trust” would mean only that the coin holder could “trust in God for the balance due” (*Austin Daily Statesman* 1896, p. 12; see also *Chicago Daily Tribune* 1896, p. 8).

By the close of the nineteenth century, “In God We Trust” had taken on new religious and political meanings. With Protestantism’s hegemonic influence in decline, the motto’s Christian character had begun to be extended, with not only Protestant, but also Catholic and Jewish leaders appropriating its message. In 1883, the Reverend William Harris of Garrison Avenue Congregational Church in St. Louis told a multi-congregation Thanksgiving Day service how “In God we trust” was “stamped on the coins of our country” and how he “hoped to God the same motto was stamped upon the hearts of the American people” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1883, p. 3). In 1892, Louisville’s Father, William J. Dunn, used the occasion of Columbus Day to celebrate Catholic contributions to the nation’s past. “American people, allow me to bow before you”, he stated, addressing a high mass at the Cathedral of the Assumption. “You are *the people* of God. You have inscribed on your banner ‘In God we trust’” (*Louisville Courier-Journal* 1892, p. 6). A year later, Boston’s Congregation Ohabei Sholom marked its fiftieth anniversary with a celebration attended by the Mayor of Boston and the Governor of Massachusetts, featuring a sermon by Rabbi Joseph Silverman on America’s “liberty and good will” toward the Jewish people and the singing of a special hymn, titled “In God We Trust”, written for the occasion (*American Israelite* 1893, p. 6). At the same time, the motto had taken on a more expansively nationalistic character. In the years after Reconstruction, “In God We Trust” began to emerge as a sign of national reconciliation, coming into use in the South as well as in the North

(*Baltimore Sun* 1887, p. 1). With the Spanish-American War, it became a mark of America's growing international influence, scratched by U.S. sailors onto the first shell fired at the battle of Santiago Bay (*Nashville American* 1901, p. 4). In less than half a century after its creation, the motto had taken its place alongside the American flag as a central symbol of American civil religion, expressing popular faith in the increasingly prosperous and powerful nation's providential role in the world. "With 'In God We Trust' as their national motto", boasted one Californian of the time, the American people "will continue to face the future without fear or flinching" (*Los Angeles Times* 1906, p. I13).

4. Secularizing the Motto

Civil religion is often seen as a kind of bridge between the sacred and the secular. Existing midway between church and state, it provides sacred or transcendent authority to the secular realm, while also extending some degree of temporal legitimacy to certain spiritual beliefs and practices. In his 1967 essay, Bellah described the relationship as symbiotic, in that civil religion can draw from both conventional religion and civil government while remaining differentiated from each (Gehrig 1981, pp. 54–55). Critics have pointed out that in assuming this separation, Bellah failed to allow that civil religion can be heavily influenced by religious leaders and institutions and that it sometimes can serve to promote their religious beliefs or interests (Angrosino 2002, p. 248). They also have suggested that in not seeing a closer connection between civil religion and what he called the "political sphere", Bellah minimized the fact that sacred civil religious symbols and rituals can often be coopted for secular purposes by public officials or political activists (Demerath and Williams 1985, pp. 160–63). In addition, critics have argued that Bellah saw the creation and development of civil religion as part of a larger process of secularization that he described in evolutionary if not entirely linear or progressive terms. Thus, he assumed that as traditional religious symbols were appropriated for civil religious purposes, they could create tensions among more secular segments of the population, but that they would not lead to inescapable contradictions within the people as a whole (Fenn 1977; Goldstein 2009, pp. 161–62). What Bellah did not realize, as Richard Fenn has argued, is that in modern secularizing societies, civil religion can create "unity and wholeness", but it will also inevitably elicit "opposition and resistance". As such, Fenn concluded that civil religion must be understood not only as a source of tension, but also of what he called "chronic conflict" (Fenn 1977, pp. 514–15).

In the first decade of the twentieth century, conflict over the presence of "In God We Trust" on American currency exploded. By the turn of the century, sacred and secular had become increasingly distinct domains in the United States, as spheres of state, economy, and society became emancipated from traditional religious institutions and norms (Casanova 1994). The process did not take place smoothly. Instead, secularization was often a confused and contested matter, no more so than when it centered on the symbols associated with civil religion. In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt lit the fuse when he decided to remove "In God We Trust" from certain American coins. His decision would evoke heated debates across the country, setting preachers, politicians, and ordinary citizens at odds over the meaning of the motto and its status as a sacred and secular symbol. Although lasting only a matter of months, the debates would be intense, dramatically marking a milestone in the secularization of the United States (Gatewood 1966, pp. 43–44). In the process, Roosevelt would become what one scholar has called "the first and last major political leader to question the use of the motto" (Haynes 2006, p. 1C).

The debates of the time centered less on the motto than on whether it belonged on American money. After all, "In God We Trust" was clearly a statement of religious belief, and the country's currency had little if anything to do with religion. Indeed, for many Americans, money was a classic symbol of secularity, a sign of worldly rather than other-worldly concerns. Thus, Roosevelt apparently did not expect the reaction he got when he commissioned the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens to create new designs to replace what he considered the "artistically atrocious hideousness" of the country's currency (Gatewood 1966, p. 36). Attempting to emulate the elegant simplicity of classical coins, Saint-Gaudens suggested that extraneous inscriptions, including "In God We Trust", be kept to a minimum, and

Roosevelt agreed, authorizing the Director of the Mint to issue new ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces without the motto (Fisher and Mourtada-Sabbah 2002, p. 675). Plagued by problems that delayed production for almost two years, the first of the twenty-dollar coins were finally issued in 1907, only to be met by immediate criticism, with the loudest cries coming from church leaders (Gatewood 1966, pp. 39–47). Reacting quickly, Roosevelt released a letter to his religious critics in which he described “In God We Trust” as a sacred symbol, a “solemn” statement of faith that “should be treated and uttered only with that fine reverence which necessarily implies a certain exaltation of spirit.” As such, he argued that it was altogether appropriate to place the motto on the nation’s monuments and public buildings but not on anything as common as its currency, where, for decades during the free silver fight, it had been a “constant source of jest and ridicule”. To leave the motto on the coinage, Roosevelt went on, would be “to cheapen it, just as it would be to cheapen it by use on postage stamps, or in advertisements.” In fact, he concluded pointedly, to leave it on would be nothing less than an act of “irreverence, which comes dangerously close to sacrilege” (Washington Post 1907b, p. 4).

The controversy quickly expanded to address broader issues raised by combining the sacred and the secular. The topic was of special concern to church leaders, and it divided them sharply. Among the first to weigh in were those who were deeply opposed to the removal of “In God We Trust” from America’s coins. Meeting in New York City shortly after the first issue of the motto-less coins, Presbyterian leaders denounced the design, condemning the President’s actions and calling on “all Christian ministers” to join their “fight to the bitter end for the restoration of the old motto” (Washington Post 1907a, p. 4; see also Los Angeles Times 1907, p. 15). Clerics from other denominations soon joined the chorus. In Chicago, news reports stated that the Catholic clergy were “almost a unit in their stand against removing the motto” (Boston Daily Globe 1907a, p. 5). In Baltimore, one Congregational minister, preaching a sermon opposing the change, stirred his congregation “to such a pitch of enthusiasm that it agreed to petition Congress to restore the inscription” (Baltimore Sun 1907a, p. 9). In the South, Methodist conferences passed resolutions calling on the President to rescind his order and maintain the motto on the country’s coins (Brooks 1907, p. 2). In opposing the change, clerics made a variety of arguments. Most began by insisting that the motto was a religious statement, a clear expression of the fact that Americans believed in God. To remove it represented a loss of faith or “forgetting God”, as one New York minister put it, combined with a turn to more temporal concerns, with the country having become “so interested in other things as to wholly forget the Supreme Ruler” (Washington Post 1907a, p. 4). Many took the argument further, describing the act of removing the motto as an all-out attack on religion, “what seems to be, on the surface, a repudiation of God” (The Advance 1908, p. 6). However, critics agreed that the move was contributing to the increasingly secular spirit of the times. Whatever the President’s intentions, said Father Francis Gordon, rector of St. Stanislas Catholic Church in Chicago, the decision’s effect would amount to nothing more than “strengthening the cause of the unbeliever, the agnostic, and the atheist” (Boston Daily Globe 1907a, p. 5).

In demanding the motto’s return, clergy did not deny the incongruity between its sacred message and its secular setting on the country’s money. Instead, many argued that its purpose there was to provide a spiritual antidote to temporal corruption, by somehow cleansing or purifying the irreligious realm of commerce and trade. Thus, Congregationalist pastor Oliver Huckel of Baltimore called “In God We Trust” a “perpetual warning message” whose presence on currency stood as a constant reminder that God was “the only antidote to commercialism” (Baltimore Sun 1907a, p. 9). Boston’s Rabbi M. M. Eichler expanded on the point, insisting that the motto be seen as a way to overcome the growing gap between what he called “the domain of God and the domain of gold” by regularly reminding everyone “that all blessings come from God” (Boston Daily Globe 1907b, p. 16). Moreover, the motto’s message applied not only to economics but also politics. Thus, in calling for its return, ministers across the country explained to their congregations that religion was essential to political life, with the nation’s motto being a symbolic statement that the United States was a “Christian nation”, a “God-fearing nation”, or in the words of one Baltimore minister, “a God-fearing Anglo-Saxon nation” (Indianapolis Star 1907a, p. 1; Nashville Tennessean 1907c, p. 5; Baltimore Sun 1907b, p. 9). New York’s Ernest M. Stires,

rector of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in New York City, touched all the bases in describing how the motto encouraged not only religion, but also patriotism. “‘In God We Trust’”, he told a meeting of church leaders from across the city, “is good religion, good patriotism and it is good Anglo-Saxonism. You cannot wipe out that motto from the heart of the nation” (*Nashville Tennessean* 1907b, p. 1).

Yet, even as many church leaders criticized the removal of the sacred motto from America’s secular coins, others celebrated it. Indeed, Roosevelt’s statement describing the presence of “In God We Trust” on the country’s currency as sacrilegious seemed to strike a chord with a significant number of the country’s clerics. Within days of the release of the statement, many of them were coming to the President’s defense, echoing his claim that the motto had been corrupted by being placed on anything as materialistic as money. Rabbi Leon Harrison of Temple Israel in St. Louis was among the first to support the motto’s removal, saying that the President was “right in saying that such words should not be cheapened by the associations of petty trading” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1907, p. 10). Hartford’s Unitarian pastor J. T. Sunderland added his approval, claiming that the removal of such sacred words saved them from secular corruption, protecting them, in his words, “from common, vulgar surroundings” (*Hartford Courant* 1907, p. 6). Church leaders from across the country expressed similar sentiments. Some framed their arguments in prohibitionist terms. Father Mark Duffy of St. Michael’s Catholic Church in Jersey City, for one, explained that there was no place in which the name of God was “treated with less reverence than on the coin that was flung across the bar to purchase the liquid that robbed man of his reason and caused his tongue to form the words that blaspheme the Creator” (*New York Times* 1907b, p. 12). Others such as Unitarian pastor Alexander Kent of Washington’s People’s Church made the case for removing the motto on pacifist grounds, describing “motto piety” as “the cheapest sort of cant” in a nation that puts its “trust in battle ships, torpedo boats, and other agencies of destruction” (*Washington Post* 1907c, p. 3). Many contended that putting the motto on money was pointless, doing no discernable moral or religious good. Thus, according to W. C. Bitting of the St. Louis’s Second Baptist Church, there was “no moral or religious question involved in this controversy. Things are not made pious by stamping words on them” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1907, p. 10). A few described its presence as hypocritical. If Americans were honest with themselves, said Methodist minister S. A. Preston of New York City’s Metropolitan Temple, they would admit that the nation’s “true motto” was not “‘In God We Trust’” but “‘In Gold we trust’” (*Nashville Tennessean* 1907a, p. 1). Finally, there were those who believed that the American state was not living up to its motto. Pointing to the fact that Bible reading was not required in all of the nation’s public schools, Atlanta Presbyterian A. R. Holderby made the case that the motto “means nothing unless it is lived up to and put into practice. This the United States government does not do, and therefore the motto on its coin is a sham and a farce” (*Holderby* 1907, p. 3).

Throughout the winter of 1907, controversy continued. Debates divided many of the country’s churches, as clergy and lay leaders fought among themselves over the fate of the motto on the country’s coins. In New York, one Episcopal diocesan convention erupted in “red-hot debate” over the issue, with speakers being shouted down and motions being met with “a chorus of ‘noes’ that was deafening” (*New York Times* 1907a, p. 1). In Indiana, a newspaper survey of fifty clergy found them to be closely divided, with twenty-five favoring retention of the motto on coins, eighteen favoring elimination, and seven seeing the question as “immaterial” (*Indianapolis Star* 1907a, p. 1). News reports from other parts of the country mentioned that many church leaders were trying to avoid the issue altogether, with some of them describing the protests as “misapplied energy” and “a waste of time” (*New-York Tribune* 1907, p. 4; see also *Hartford Courant* 1907, p. 6). Commenting on the debates, Congregationalist patriarch Lyman Abbott, writing in *The Outlook*, lamented that if religious assemblies were “stirred as mightily over the evils of child labor” as “some have been over the omission of an inscription on a single series of gold coins”, the church’s “power in moral issues would be vastly increased” (*The Outlook* 1907, p. 708).

As the debates continued, the motto began to gain support. Among the clergy, its supporters seemed more emboldened as congregants began to express strong opposition to the President’s move. Faith-based organizations such as the National Reform Association and the Gideons mobilized in

defense of the motto and were soon joined by a small army of civic, patriotic, and veterans groups that included chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Military Order of the Loyal Legion (*Cincinnati Enquirer* 1907, p. 7; *Indianapolis Star* 1907b, p. 9; *Indianapolis Star* 1908, p. 9; *Nashville Tennessean* 1908, p. 5). Observers sensed that public opinion was turning against the President. After all, explained the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “In God We Trust” was able to tap “the religious devotion which permeated the best elements of society”, while also being “accepted even by sinners as a conventional expression quite appropriate for a national coin” (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1907, p. 28). With petitions to save the motto pouring into its offices, Congress took up the proposal to reestablish it on the coinage. For his part, seeing the tide shifting, Roosevelt staged a strategic retreat, confiding to allies that he considered any bill to reestablish the motto on American coins to be “pure rot”, but allowing that “if Congress wants to pass a bill re-establishing the motto, I shall not veto it” (*Gatewood* 1966, pp. 48–49).

From there, maintaining the motto was a foregone conclusion. A House committee unanimously reported out a bill recommending that it be restored to the country’s coins. In floor debate, Charles C. Carlin (D-VA) described the restoration of the motto as “a lesson to the country and the world to the effect that this is a Christian nation” (*Congressional Record* 1908, p. 3384). Emphasizing that the issue was “no sectarian question”, Charles G. Edwards (D-GA) told how “the Methodist, the Baptist, the Presbyterian, the Catholic, the Hebrews, the Episcopal, in fact all churches, all creeds, who have a belief in God, are as one in the opinion that it was a great mistake to ever have removed this motto from our coins” (*Congressional Record* 1908, p. 3387). Washington Gardner (R-MI) stressed the motto’s importance for national reconciliation. “We of the North join hands with you of the South”, he observed, “and say, your God is our God, as your people are our people” (*Congressional Record* 1908, p. 3390). Among the few voices of dissent, George W. Gordon (D-TN) reminded his colleagues that the debate was not so much about the motto as about its presence on the country’s coinage, which was “a medium of secular, and not sacred transactions” (*Congressional Record* 1908, p. 3390). Even so, the legislation passed with only five votes opposed in the House and without debate in the Senate, from that time making “In God We Trust” mandatory on all coins on which it had previously been stamped. The question of whether a sacred statement such as the motto belonged on the secular medium of the currency had been answered decisively by Congress, and most Americans apparently approved of its decision. However, in requiring the presence of the motto on the country’s coins, its supporters had contributed to its secularization, blurring the lines between church and state and leaving some Americans deeply disapproving of civil religious symbolism that so blithely brought religion into the affairs of government. “Congress has responded to the clamor of the less thoughtful”, wrote the disappointed editor of the *Episcopal Churchman*, “who welcomed so easy a way to seem to range themselves on the side of God” (*The Churchman* 1908, p. 695).

5. Institutionalizing the Motto

According to Bellah, civil religion frequently takes institutional forms. That is to say, civil religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals are commonly formalized in rules and procedures and incorporated in state sponsored structures and practices. In his 1967 article, Bellah famously described American civil religion in these terms, as an “elaborate and well institutionalized” phenomenon, as seen in public holidays, memorials, and events such as presidential inaugurations (*Bellah* 1967, p. 1). Somewhat surprisingly, scholars have said relatively little about this institutional character of civil religion, in part because they have looked more often at civil religious beliefs than at symbols and rituals and more often at discourse than at practices (see *Gorski* 2017, pp. 3–7). In recent years, however, scholars have begun to pay more attention to these symbols (the flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, the national anthem) and rituals (patriotic parades, ceremonies at battlefields and memorials, anniversaries marking public mourning), examining their role in the formation of national identity (*Billig* 1995; *Ellis* 2005; *Johnston* 2007; *Gardella* 2014; *Ferris* 2014; *Stow* 2017). In the process, they have begun to more seriously consider their political implications. Specifically, some have argued that with institutionalization, civil religion can take on a more inclusive character, becoming the authorized civic faith of a united people,

and it can also become more exclusive, casting those who are not included as part of it, or those who fail to subscribe to it, as outsiders (Williams 2013, p. 254). As Benjamin Marcus and Murali Balaji put it, civil religious institutions can inspire “inclusive idealism and hospitality”, binding together even a “radically diverse nation”. They can also, they write, “be used to scapegoat the nonconformist and expel the other” (Marcus and Balaji 2017).

In the 1950s, “In God We Trust” became an institutionalized part of American politics. Following the debates of the early century, controversy over the motto had declined dramatically, as it quietly took its place as a ubiquitous if unremarkable feature of the country’s coinage. With the Cold War, however, it reemerged as a political issue, becoming one of a series of symbols and rituals that were officially inserted into American law. Thus, it was at this time that the phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance; that the National Day of Prayer was signed into law and the National Prayer Breakfast established; and that “In God We Trust” began to appear not only on coins but also on stamps and paper money, while also being officially recognized as the nation’s official motto. With communist expansionism abroad and economic dissent and racial division at home, the Cold War raised existential fears about the fate of the nation, and Americans once again turned to civil religious symbols and rituals to provide a sense of national identity and unity (Herzog 2011, pp. 39–71). Along the way, these symbols and rituals became political weapons as well—condoning religious conformity, fueling anticommunist campaigns, and building unquestioning support for corporate capitalism (Herzog 2011, pp. 75–108; Haberski 2012, pp. 11–54; Kruse 2015, pp. 95–125). Above all, as they came to be institutionalized, symbols such as “In God We Trust” took on the character of timeless truths, having achieved, in the words of Kevin Kruse, “a seemingly permanent place in the national imagination” (Kruse 2015, p. 124).

The institutionalization of the motto began by recasting it as a nonsectarian slogan. While its Christian roots remained intact, advocates framed it as part of a civic faith that could be eagerly embraced by mainstream Protestants, Catholics, and Jews and accepted or at least tolerated by religious dissenters and sectarian groups. Admittedly, Christian nationalists were among those who worked to elevate the slogan, with politically connected Protestant preachers such as James Fifield calling on Americans to reestablish the foundations of their “Christian country” by putting the motto not only “on our money but in our lives” (*Los Angeles Sentinel* 1951, p. B2). However, in 1952, when the American Legion announced its “Back to God” movement, designed to encourage spiritual revitalization in American society, it took as its inspiration the deaths of four chaplains—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish—who gave up their life jackets to four enlisted men during the sinking of a U.S. transport ship in World War II (see Wall 2008, pp. 146–47; Schultz 2011, pp. 57–67). As part of the “Back to God” movement, state and local Legion chapters launched campaigns to install the inscription “In God We Trust” in public schools, explaining that there was nothing about the motto, in the words of one Maryland Legion official, “that could cause offense to any denomination of religious belief that has for its phraseology the acknowledgment of the Maker of Man” (*Baltimore Sun* 1952, p. 9). With politicians led by President Dwight D. Eisenhower actively endorsing the drive, the motto took on new prominence, with plans initiated to install it not only in public schools but also on public buildings, postage stamps, and paper currency. In an address on the anniversary of the deaths of the four chaplains, Eisenhower described its centrality to America’s nonsectarian civic faith. “Whatever our individual church, whatever our personal creed”, he told the American people, “our common faith in God is a common bond among us. In our fundamental faith, we are all one By the millions, we speak prayers, we sing hymns—and no matter what their words may be, their spirit is the same—in God is our trust” (Young 1954, p. 7).

The campaign to institutionalize the motto began with the post office. In the early twentieth century, “In God We Trust” had appeared on a special series of postage stamps commemorating the American Revolution. However, beginning in 1951, advocates led by New York’s Cardinal Francis Spellman began lobbying to add the motto to standard issue stamps and postmarks. Pointing to “communist postal stamp propaganda”, the fiercely anticommunist Spellman, who was also an ardent

stamp collector, made the case that stamps offered a way for Americans to counter “atheist communism” with a strong symbolic statement that “America still believes and trusts in God”. Although Spellman personally preferred special stamps depicting aspects of the country’s faith, he allowed that such designs might spark “attacks by anti-religious groups in the United States”. Thus, he suggested instead that “all stamps” be inscribed with “In God We Trust”, describing the phrase as “a national motto” and insisting that “no American could object to its use on United States stamps” (Kehr 1951, p. B6). Although Spellman’s words carried weight, his suggestion met resistance from postal officials in the outgoing Truman administration, who insisted that the standard size of stamps would not permit the additional wording. By the spring of 1953, however, encouraged by “Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish individuals and groups” and by civic organizations led by the Fraternal Order of Eagles, an extensive campaign to add the motto to American stamps had been mounted, with more than 10,000 letters reported to have been received by the Post Office Department (Kehr 1953, p. C5; *Austin Statesman* 1953, p. A14). With Congress bringing pressure, the new Republican Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield, acted, and the following year, two stamps bearing the motto were released, one of them a three-cent stamp for domestic mail and the other an eight-cent stamp to be used primarily for international letters. In what was described as the biggest ceremony of its kind in the history of the Post Office, President Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Summerfield were joined by Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders in dedicating the new eight-cent stamp, with Spellman proudly describing how it would carry “a God-saving message and inspire enshackled peoples everywhere to follow the one road to freedom—trust in God” (*New York Times* 1954, p. 13).

The addition of “In God We Trust” to postage stamps did not meet with universal approval. The stamps were exceptionally popular, so much so that within weeks, some twenty-five million of the eight-cent issue had been distributed to meet public demand. Yet, almost at once, the wording on them was challenged by a number of religious and secular groups. In its annual meeting in Boston, the American Unitarian Association passed a resolution opposing the use of any stamps or coins for “religious propaganda” (*Boston Daily Globe* 1954, p. 3). The organization Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State (POAU), a coalition of religious and secular leaders known for its ardent anti-Catholicism and strong commitment to church–state separation, warned in its *Church and State* magazine that the decision to place the motto on the stamp might “set the precedent for others embodying religious belief, and for other acts of government in aid of religion” (*New Postage Stamp to Set Precedent?* 1954, p. 1). The American Humanist Association, in a letter of protest to the Postmaster General, expressed its concern that the presence of the motto on government postage would convey the message that anyone “who does not believe in the officially defined creed—cannot be a first class citizen” (*New Postage Stamp to Set Precedent?* 1954, p. 6). In New York, the National Liberal League and the American Society for the Advancement of Atheism, describing the new stamps as a violation of the Constitution’s separation of church and state, announced that they would team up to challenge them in court. The stamps, said Charles Smith of the Liberal League, were “converting the post office into a propaganda office for religion” (*New York Herald Tribune* 1954, p. 4). Seeking a test case, leaders of the organizations mailed letters marked with a statement written on the envelope that its motto-bearing stamp was unconstitutional, only to have the post office refuse to deliver the letters on the grounds that they had violated a law prohibiting the mailing of information considered to be libelous to the government. Expressing frustration, critics of the motto allowed that the question of whether it was unconstitutional would “have to wait for another type of court test” (Blanshard 1955, p. 279).

Even so, with the motto now appearing on stamps as well as coins, it became not only authorized but increasingly conventional. For a large majority of citizens, such civil religious symbols appeared to be either unassailable or unquestioned, while for the small minority that opposed them, they began to seem inevitable. Thus, in the summer of 1954, when meetings of both the American Numismatic Association and the American Legion passed resolutions to add “In God We Trust” to all paper currency, which in contrast to coins had never carried the motto, it was framed by most

supporters as a matter of correcting an error of omission. Although introduced in Congress by Christian lawmakers led by Representative Charles E. Bennett (D-FL), a leader of the International Council for Christian Leadership (ICCL), and supported by members of the House prayer breakfast group, the proposal made its way through House committee hearings with relatively little reference to religion (Kruse 2015, pp. 116–19). Passed unanimously in the House and sent to the Senate three weeks later, the Senate Banking Committee was so supportive that it did not even bother to hold hearings, issuing instead a statement calling the bill “an excellent opportunity to correct an oversight” (*New York Times* 1955, p. 52). The legislation passed through Congress without a single statement opposing it from the floor of either chamber and was signed by the President privately, the White House deeming it not important enough to merit a splashy signing ceremony (Fisher and Mourtada-Sabbah 2002, pp. 681–82; Kruse 2015, p. 120). In contrast to the open opposition of religious liberals, freethinkers, and civil libertarians when the motto was added to postage a year earlier, such voices were almost entirely silent when it came to adding it to the nation’s paper money. The addition of the motto had happened so quickly, one opponent explained, that before they “[could] voice their protest, the ubiquitous clericalists ha[d] achieved another *fait accompli*” (Wilson 1955, p. 180).

Nevertheless, institutionalization was not complete. What remained was to make the motto official, writing it into law as an authoritative statement of shared civic faith. Thus, only days after “In God We Trust” was added to all currency, advocates announced plans to make it the official national motto. Once again, while Bennett and other sponsors made no secret of their Christian faith, they framed the measure less in religious terms than in broadly “spiritual and moral” ones, while also citing the precedents of the motto on coins and currency, pointing to its supposed origins as a line in the national anthem and describing it as a means to encourage patriotism in the country’s people (Bennett 1956, p. 3). In addition, while recognizing that the phrase *E pluribus unum* continued to be used widely, they argued that it would be of “great spiritual and psychological value”, in the words of the House Judiciary Committee report, to have “a clearly designated national motto” that was written “in plain, popularly accepted English” (U.S. House of Representatives 1956, p. 2). Passed by both the House and the Senate without floor debate, the resolution was quickly signed into law, apparently to the approval of a large majority of Americans. By 1956, the motto had been in common usage for almost a century and had already begun to seem to some as if it were a permanent part of American politics, what one writer described as “chosen at our national birth” (Jenkins 1955, p. E4; see Herzog 2011, p. 108). Others went further, telling how it had stirred Americans throughout their history, being somehow present “in 1620, 1776, and 1812”. Indeed, as an Indiana journalist assured his readers, “the motto of the United States originated when man first realized that there was some power greater than his own” (Williamson 1956, p. 57).

Yet, not all Americans approved of the motto’s official adoption. As it made its way through Congress, the bill had generated comments from at least a few critics. Admittedly, observed George Axtelle, chair of the American Humanist Association’s Committee on Church and State, its official adoption was “a comparatively minor matter”. Nevertheless, as Axtelle told the Senate Judiciary Committee when it held hearings on the measure, it was indicative of a disturbing trend, in which “the principle of church-state separation is being endangered by a series of tiny but significant erosions”. Moreover, he went on to warn that “if the present drift continues, the unorthodox citizen will be made to feel like a second-class citizen” (Blanshard 1956, p. 186). While most religious liberals remained silent, a few spoke up to express their disapproval, with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs director, Emanuel Carlson, wondering about the status of those who did not believe in God. “If there should be some”, he asked pointedly, “who admittedly do not trust in God or pray to Him, are they now slightly ‘un-American?’” (*Washington Post* 1956, p. 30). Institutionalization of the motto may have encouraged inclusion, but it also allowed for the exclusion of those who did not accept it as an article of America’s civil religious faith. So, when former California Governor Culbert Olson, speaking as head of the United Secularists of America, announced that he was opposed to officially adopting the motto because he believed that church and state should remain separate, he was publicly derided for

his views, which one critic described as serving “to equate our country with the regimes of Hitler or Stalin” (Shand 1957, p. B4).

6. Litigating the Motto

Civil religion inevitably raises questions concerning the role of religion in the making of public policy. In the United States, these questions are often legal ones, bringing into play first amendment religious freedoms. Challenging and complicating constitutional requirements concerning religious establishment and religious free exercise, civil religious symbols and rituals have been at the heart of important freedom of religion cases from the mid-twentieth century to today. Beginning with cases concerning state-mandated prayer in public schools and continuing with litigation involving religious symbols such as crèches, Christian crosses, and the posting of the Ten Commandments in courthouses and schools, these symbols and rituals have roused continuing legal debates concerning the relationship between church and state. They have also been present in some of the most controversial of American legal decisions, as well as some of the most criticized ones. Among these decisions are those that involve civil religious symbols that contain the word God without reference to more specific religious traditions or that refer to the deity in otherwise secular settings. And one of the most contested of these symbols is the national motto, which legal scholar Richard H. Jones has called “the paradigm of this phenomenon” (Jones 1989, p. 381).

In the late twentieth century, “In God We Trust” arrived in the nation’s courts. It was during this time that the motto began to be seriously challenged on first amendment grounds, and that courts issued some of their most important opinions on its constitutional status. Although challenges to the motto did not reach the U.S. Supreme Court, they were litigated in important federal and state court cases of the time. Moreover, while the Supreme Court never issued a ruling on the motto, it was discussed as dicta in a number of its decisions, establishing precedents that have been influential in defining the legal status not only of the motto itself, but also of other forms of civil religion. In the last decades of the twentieth century, in particular, amid the clashes of the culture wars, challenges to the motto became a familiar presence in the courts, while also sparking controversy in the court of public opinion. While the outcome of these cases became predictable, with judges repeatedly finding “In God We Trust” to be constitutional, court opinions became increasingly convoluted in the legal reasoning they used to determine the motto’s constitutionality. By the end of the twentieth century, legal analysts were expressing dismay at the way courts were interpreting the first amendment’s establishment clause. As for the motto, wrote law professor Stephen Epstein, the logic of its constitutionality had already become a “slippery slope” (Epstein 1996, p. 2089, and see pp. 2153–54).

In 1962, “In God We Trust” began to appear in American court decisions. It came in what would become a characteristic manner, not with a case directly concerning the motto, but one that concerned another aspect of American civil religion. With *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), the Supreme Court struck down New York’s state-mandated Regent’s Prayer and set off legal and political reverberations that would continue for decades. In the 6–1 decision, Justice William O. Douglas wrote a concurring opinion that appeared to cast doubt not only on the constitutional status of school prayer, but also on other civil religious symbols and rituals, including the national motto (*Engel v. Vitale* 1962, p. 441). The decision, coming as a surprise to court observers, aroused widespread outrage, and critics set to work finding ways around it (Lain 2015, pp. 507–31). In Congress, resolutions for a constitutional amendment making prayer and Bible reading lawful in public schools were introduced in both the House and Senate. However, with the fate of other religious political symbols and rituals now in question, advocates turned their attention to defending them as well, beginning with the motto. On Capitol Hill, Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-NC) wondered aloud how much longer “we will be permitted to use the words ‘In God we trust’” (Hearst 1962, p. 1). American Bar Association president John C. Salterfield announced that if the Court found school prayer unconstitutional, “then the words on this coin (In God We Trust) are also unconstitutional” (Clayton 1962, p. A9). Amid rumors that “In God We Trust” would have to be removed from the currency, the Director of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing rushed a

new printing process into use, with plates for every denomination redesigned to incorporate the motto (Burrell 1997, p. 192). In Congress, a House resolution, described by one of its sponsors as “our answer to the recent decision of the U.S. Supreme Court”, ordered “In God We Trust” to be placed in gold letters above the Speaker’s Chair (Fisher and Mourtada-Sabbah 2002, p. 684). In New York, legislators reacted to the loss of the Regent’s Prayer by introducing a bill to install plaques bearing the national motto in every classroom in the state (Hinden 1963, p. 5). Meanwhile, evangelist Billy Graham was telling audiences across the country that the nation was “on the brink of a moral catastrophe” that could only be averted “by a return to the philosophy of ‘In God We Trust’” (Philbrick 1962, p. B7).

Attempts to save the motto did not stop there. Over the next several months, anger over *Engel v. Vitale* began to subside. However, by the following June it reemerged when the Court announced its decision in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), in which it declared school-sponsored Bible reading and recitation of the Lord’s Prayer to be unconstitutional. Once again, the fate of the motto was a subtext in the Court’s decision, as Justice William J. Brennan went out of his way in his concurring opinion to state that the outcome of this case had no bearing on symbols such as the motto, which he described as “interwoven . . . so deeply into the fabric of our civil polity” (*School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* 1963, p. 303). Although public reaction to the decision was not as intense as after *Engel*, it was still mostly negative, with religious leaders divided and their congregations strongly opposed (Lain 2015, pp. 531–38). Elected representatives again rushed to defend the motto, with Congressional lawmakers led by Representative Robert T. Ashmore (D-SC) introducing a bill to install “In God We Trust” above the bench of the U.S. Supreme Court. To Ashmore’s dismay, his proposed bill was quickly blocked by Chief Justice Earl Warren, who intervened to advise against the installation, calling it a violation of the Court chamber’s “beauty and symmetry” (*New York Times* 1963, p. A9). What followed, according to the *Detroit Free Press*, was “an avalanche of indignation, with lawmakers calling on Congress to “rise up in its wrath”, in the words of Representative Howard Smith (D-VA), and “put this inscription in the court chambers” (*Detroit Free Press* 1963, p. 16; *Warden* 1963, p. 1). Over the next few months, even as public business slowed following the assassination of President Kennedy, no fewer than 147 bills were introduced to legalize prayer and Bible reading in public schools, along with others to add the motto to both the inside and outside of the Supreme Court building. Testifying on the proposed legislation before the House Judiciary Committee in 1964, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen managed to address both issues simultaneously, telling the committee that the prayer that should be said in the schools was the one “that every member of Congress is carrying in his pocket: ‘In God we trust.’” After all, said Sheen, the motto was “the perfect prayer” (*Chicago Tribune* 1964, p. B17).

Beginning in the 1970s, the motto itself began to make its way through the courts. In a series of federal court cases, judges were asked to determine whether “In God We Trust” was a violation of the first amendment’s prohibition of any law respecting an establishment of religion. In each case, courts went out of their way to declare the motto constitutional on the grounds that its purpose could not be defined as religious. In *Aronow v. United States* (1970), a California case challenging the motto’s appearance on coins, paper money, and some official documents, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit found it “quite obvious” that the motto had “nothing whatsoever to do with the establishment of religion.” In making its case, the court turned back to Theodore Roosevelt, recalling how Congress had rejected his view that the use of the motto on the country’s coins was “sacrilegious and irreverent”. It also cited the 1955 House Judiciary report that called for its establishment as the nation’s official motto, in which it was described as having “spiritual and psychological value” and “inspirational quality” rather than any “theological or ritualistic impact”. Although admitting that the terms “patriotic” and “ceremonial” were not “particularly apt words” to describe the phrase “In God We Trust”, the court nonetheless concluded that the motto had a “patriotic or ceremonial character” that carried “no true resemblance to a government sponsorship of religion” (*Aronow v. United States* 1970, pp. 242–43). In *Wooley v. Maynard* (1977), a New Hampshire case brought by Jehovah’s Witnesses challenging that state’s requirement that all automobile license plates carry the state’s motto, federal courts declared the requirement unconstitutional on first amendment grounds. On appeal, the decision was upheld by the

U.S. Supreme Court. In writing for the Court, however, Chief Justice Warren Burger went out of his way to state that nothing in the decision could be read “as sanctioning the obliteration of the national motto ‘In God We Trust’ from United States coins and currency”, while Justice William Rehnquist, writing in dissent, joined in by insisting that he could “not imagine” that carrying and using currency could in any way “impinge upon the First Amendment rights of an atheist” (*Wooley v. Maynard* 1977, pp. 717, 722). The following year, in *O’Hair v. Blumenthal* (1978), a Texas case in which an atheist plaintiff challenged the motto on coins and paper currency, a federal district court echoed both *Aronow* and *Wooley* in finding that it served a secular ceremonial purpose rather than a religious one, and that it was “ludicrous to argue that the use of the national motto fosters any excessive government entanglement with religion” (*O’Hair v. Blumenthal* 1978, p. 20).

In fact, many advocates of the motto supported it precisely because they considered it to be an endorsement of religious beliefs, as well as a repudiation of irreligious ones. From 1976 to 1994, Gallup surveys found that between 94% and 96% of Americans stated that they believed in God or a universal spirit (*Newport* 2016). Thus, throughout the late twentieth century, court cases involving the motto were commonly depicted as struggles pitting the overwhelming majority of believers against a tiny minority of atheists. *O’Hair v. Blumenthal* was a case in point. In the early 1960s, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, a Baltimore activist who advocated atheism and the strict separation of church and state, began filing lawsuits challenging compulsory prayer in local public schools, claiming that her son’s refusal to pray had led to bullying by classmates. In 1963, when her case was consolidated with *Abington v. Schempp*, she became something of a national celebrity, recognized both for her outspoken atheism and her successful opposition to school prayer. Flamboyant and highly polarizing, O’Hair welcomed controversy, and over the following years she and her Texas-based American Atheist Center proceeded to file multiple lawsuits in which she claimed constitutional violations of church–state separation, including her 1978 challenge to the use of “In God We Trust” on coins and paper money. Hence when the suit was announced, news outlets focused immediately on O’Hair, describing her as “the nation’s best known atheist” who was “leading a crusade to banish ‘In God We Trust’ from the currency and ‘under God’ from the Pledge of Allegiance” (*Cincinnati Enquirer* 1977, p. 4). While mainline church leaders largely avoided comment, religious conservatives seized on the case, with Floyd Robertson, public affairs director of the National Association of Evangelicals, describing it as a “catalyst to provoke the people into action” against what he called the Supreme Court’s “secularistic trend” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1978, p. 43). Letters poured into newspaper offices voicing opposition to the lawsuit and describing O’Hair as “ungodly” and “un-American” (*Austin American Statesman* 1977b, p. A6). In 1978, responding to the suit, Florida preacher and gospel promoter J. G. Whitfield announced formation of a religious freedom crusade to fight O’Hair’s efforts to “destroy our right for public display of our faith in this country”. Whitfield stated that “Now is the time for us to stop her and others like her” (*Speed* 1978, p. 8B).

O’Hair v. Blumenthal was only the beginning. Over the next two decades, O’Hair and other atheist plaintiffs would file multiple legal challenges to the motto, the Pledge of Allegiance, and other civil religious symbols. Although consistently unsuccessful in the courts, their efforts enraged and mobilized critics outside them, while adding fuel to the fire in what would come to be called the culture wars. For her part, O’Hair actively encouraged confrontation with her critics. In the late 1970s, she had attracted media attention by debating New Orleans evangelist Bob Harrington, “the Chaplain of Bourbon Street”, in dozens of venues across the country (*Austin American Statesman* 1977a, p. A2). Throughout the 1980s, her continuing lawsuits and outspoken attacks on Christianity made her a favorite target of conservative culture warriors of the time. Thus, in 1988, Robert K. Skolrood, executive director of the National Legal Foundation of Virginia Beach, Virginia, an organization founded by televangelist Pat Robertson to be a counterpart to the American Civil Liberties Union, placed a full-page advertisement in *USA Today* publicizing O’Hair’s efforts to remove the motto from the country’s currency and warning readers that she was determined to “force her own caustic atheism on an entire nation”. Included in the advertisement was a “ballot” in which readers were asked to vote either “yes”

to preserve the national motto on currency or “no, I don’t care about America’s traditional values” (Pugh 1988, p. 2E). Even after 1995, when O’Hair and two members of her family disappeared from public view, later being found to have been abducted and murdered, culture warriors continued to warn against the danger she and other atheists posed. Thus in 1996, when the Supreme Court rejected without comment a suit to remove “In God We Trust” from American money brought by the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), a group that had separated from O’Hair’s American Atheists, critics cast the case as a battle between believers and nonbelievers. According to the evangelical advocacy group Focus on the Family, the atheists and freethinkers of the FFRF were part of the “vanguard of the secular left” (Welsh 1996, p. 6A).

Yet, even as believers and nonbelievers contested the motto, courts continued to rule that it had no religious meaning. Indeed, as early as the 1980s, “In God We Trust” had begun to be defined in legal terms as an entirely secular symbol. In *Lynch v. Donnelly* (1984), a Rhode Island case in which the Supreme Court found a city sponsored holiday display that contained a Christian crèche to be constitutional, Justice Brennan took time out from his dissent to clearly define the legal status of the motto. Borrowing a term from legal scholar Eugene Rostow, Brennan argued that certain public mentions of the deity, as “In God We Trust” and “One nation under God”, could best be understood as examples of “ceremonial deism”, protected under the establishment clause chiefly “because they have lost through rote repetition any significant religious content” (*Lynch v. Donnelly* 1984, p. 717). Since that time, the term has been repeatedly applied in legal arguments and court opinions concerning the motto and a host of other civil religious symbols (Epstein 1996, pp. 2137–54). In 1992, for example, when a federal appeals court ruled that the city seal of Zion, Illinois, was unconstitutional, citing its display of a Christian cross and the slogan “God Reigns”, the city removed the cross and substituted the motto “In God We Trust”. Ruling on the change the following year, a federal district judge found the revised seal to be constitutional, even while allowing that the city took the action primarily to invoke the “same spirit and message” as the previous one, because legal precedent had declared “In God We Trust” to be “drained of religious significance” (O’Connor 1993, p. A1). In *Gaylor v. United States* (1996), which again challenged the constitutionality of “In God We Trust” on currency, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals relied on Brennan’s dissent to deem the motto a clear example of ceremonial deism that “through historical usage and ubiquity cannot be reasonably understood to convey government approval of religious belief” (*Gaylor v. United States* 1996, p. 216).

By the end of the twentieth century, American courts had declared “In God We Trust” to be a statement of civil rather than religious significance. As legal doctrine, the concept of ceremonial deism had become well accepted. In 1993, following the court ruling in the Zion case, Robert Sherman of American Atheists, Inc., the activist who bought the original suit, announced that his group saw no route ahead in mounting challenges to the motto’s affirmation of belief in God. Sherman said, “our legal challenge is hopeless. We’re going to have to change strategies” (Parsons and Hill 1993, p. 2C1). However, ceremonial deism had also begun to present problems for advocates of the motto, who were now asked to argue that clear statements of America’s civil religious faith contained no religious content whatsoever. According to attorney Richard D. Grossman, who represented Sherman in the Zion case, the decision to allow “In God We Trust” on the city shield was a defeat for the atheists who sought its removal. However, it was also, said Grossman, “insulting to the great mass of the public who believe in God and are dismayed to hear that the word ‘God’ doesn’t mean anything” (O’Connor 1993, p. A1). By the end of the century, the issue was back again when a three-member panel of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals declared the state motto of Ohio (“With God All Things Are Possible”) to be unconstitutional, raising questions about why the state motto did not constitute ceremonial deism, while the national motto so clearly did (Steinfels 2000, p. B7). For motto opponents, the decision was an invitation to head back to court. “One thing is certain”, wrote one journalist at the time, “this contentious issue probably won’t be laid to rest anytime soon” (Baxtrom 2000).

7. Mobilizing the Motto

For Robert Bellah, civil religion was a shared public creed that served the purpose of binding a nation together, building unity while rising above divisions based on ideology or party. Although allowing that this unity could at times be fractured and while seeing internal tensions within it, Bellah never fully admitted that civil religion can also be divisive, let alone used for partisan purposes. By contrast, scholars since Bellah have made a point of stressing how civil religious symbols and rituals can be employed as political tools by activists and public officials. In fact, multiple studies have shown that such symbols and rituals have provided potent resources that have been used to mobilize support for a wide variety of political purposes, including electoral campaigns, protest movements, and policy debates (Chapp 2012; Manis 2002; McDougall 2016). In polarized political systems in particular, civil religion can be used as a wedge to advance particularized interests and as a weapon to achieve partisan results. In this regard, as Rhys Williams has argued, it can act not only to unify people, but also to divide them, with partisans using it to heighten boundaries between themselves and others, while also “digging in behind them” (Williams 2013, p. 254). As Williams explains, “civil religion was born with ‘uncivil’ impulses alongside its ennobling ones, and the struggle of contradictions is far from resolved” (Williams 2013, pp. 254–55; see Maloyed 2018).

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, “In God We Trust” seemed to be firmly established in American law and politics, so much so that advocates of the motto could go on the offensive, initiating new campaigns to expand its presence in American life. For decades, activists had carried out grassroots campaigns in communities across the country to install the motto in public buildings and local schools. However, beginning in 2000, these efforts expanded dramatically, with grassroots groups being supplanted by more centralized organizations, and sporadic campaigns giving way to more sustained ones. At about the same time, following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the campaigns also became more sectarian, with many activists interpreting the motto in ways that emphasized America’s Christian character to the exclusion of Muslims and those of other minority religions. After 2008 and the election of President Obama, the motto took on an increasingly ideological cast, being used especially by conservative activists and politicians to advocate for traditional cultural values and express opposition to the decisions of liberal administrators and courts. By 2015, it had emerged as an important issue in conservative movement politics, acting as a kind of opening wedge in what has come to be called the “religious freedom movement”. All told, in the politically charged atmosphere of the new century, advocates committed to making the motto more prominent had become more active than ever, having opened what Charles Haynes has described as a “new frontier” in the motto wars (Jarvik 2007, p. E1).

Christian conservatives proved particularly adept at mobilizing the motto. With American courts repeatedly declaring “In God We Trust” to be immune from first amendment challenges, activists associated with the new Christian right looked to the motto as a constitutionally safe means to advance their agendas. Thus, in March of 2000, Mississippi minister Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association (AFA), a conservative religious advocacy organization, announced a drive to bring it into America’s public schools. Although beginning in Mississippi, the group promised to take the campaign nationwide, lobbying states to encourage the posting of the national motto in school cafeterias and classrooms, and offering to sell eleven-by-fourteen inch posters featuring it to interested school systems (Boston 2001, p. 9). By the early summer, spurred by the mass shootings at Columbine High School, the Colorado State Board of Education had endorsed the motto campaign by passing a resolution encouraging all public schools in that state to display its posters (Janofsky 2000, p. A9). A year later, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and with wars raging in Iraq and Afghanistan, interest in it intensified, with the AFA asking its 200,000 members in all fifty states to contact lawmakers to add amendments supporting the motto’s posting to new bills strengthening homeland security measures (Farrington 2002, p. A3). In 2002, when the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals issued its opinion that the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance violated the first amendment establishment clause, the campaign to post the motto surged. Although the court decision concerning the pledge was

immediately put on indefinite hold so that it could be reviewed, and while it would be overturned by the Supreme Court two years later, AFA activists redoubled their efforts, so that by 2005 the motto would be encouraged or required in schools and public buildings in eighteen states. “We have hundreds of thousands of posters in 18 states and not a single lawsuit filed”, stated Randy Sharp of the American Family Association. “I think that speaks for itself” (Richey 2005, p. 2).

The American Family Association was not alone in advocating for the motto. As religious conservatives across the country picked up the idea of posting the motto in public schools, they often found that school administrators and board members were willing to support the project but unable to fund it due to limited budgets. Thus, other groups began initiating motto funding campaigns of their own. As early as 2001, Christian women’s groups in Florida were providing posters with the motto to public schools (Mariano 2001, p. 127). In 2002, activists working through churches in Indiana to “put God back into the classroom” were donating posters and frames (Mabry 2002, p. 58). In Ohio, a conservative women’s group called “Moms for Ohio” launched a successful drive to bring the motto into public schools (Cincinnati Enquirer 2006, p. 20). Nor were schools the only target. In Bakersfield, California, city council member Jacquie Sullivan, having heard about protests over placing the words “In God We Trust” on a public building, resolved to push back, successfully promoting a resolution to display the motto in the city council chambers of Bakersfield City Hall. By 2004, Sullivan and other supporters had incorporated the nonprofit organization In God We Trust—America, Inc., which has subsequently claimed responsibility for encouraging hundreds of cities and towns to post the motto as part of a campaign to see it “in every City, County Chamber, and State Capitol in America” (In God We Trust America 2017). In 2002, North Carolina activist Rick Lanier, responding to the 9/11 terror attacks and to what he called legal efforts to “completely secularize our society”, called on his local county commissioners to install “In God We Trust” in eighteen-inch letters on the side of the Davidson County Government Center. When the proposal stalled amid concerns about possible litigation, Lanier and his supporters organized an ad hoc group called the U.S. Motto Action Committee, which proceeded to gather some 18,000 signatures on a petition favoring the proposal, while also raising \$10,000 from local churches and donors to cover any legal expenses (Richey 2005, pp. 1–2). Since that time, working with supporters and donors, the organization has successfully convinced local officials in sixty-seven North Carolina counties and municipalities to display the motto, with plans to have it installed within or outside government buildings in all one hundred counties of the state (Kays 2016; Cavanaugh 2015). The success of the movement, says admirer M. H. Cavanaugh of the Christian Action League of North Carolina, has been “phenomenal” (Cavanaugh 2015).

However, mobilizing the motto also brought growing opposition. As campaigns to publicize the motto proliferated, many of them described their efforts in expressly religious terms. Yet, public opinion surveys from the time showed not only growing numbers of Americans who did not identify with conventional religion, but also even more rapidly growing numbers who did not identify with any religion whatsoever. By 2012, one-fifth of the U.S. public was religiously unaffiliated, including the nearly 6% of the public who considered themselves atheist or agnostic (Pew Research Center 2012). Thus, as early as 2000, when the Colorado Board of Education encouraged schools to display the motto, opponents argued that “In God We Trust” had the potential to alienate schoolchildren who were Hindus, Muslims, or Buddhists, along with those whose families identified as atheists or agnostics. “In this pluralistic society”, said Gully Stanford, the only member of the seven-member state board who opposed the resolution, “we must question the proclamation of one belief to the exclusion of another” (Vogt 2000, p. A1). Since that time, motto postings have regularly brought legal challenges on behalf of members of minority faiths and nonbelievers. In several states, for example, organizations led by the Anti-Defamation League and the American Civil Liberties Union have sent letters to every school district warning that such postings would have exclusionary effects on such students (Toland 2005, p. A1). In a few instances, movements advocating the motto have stirred counter movements. Hence, in Virginia, where lawmakers required every public school to display a motto poster, a Loudoun County citizens group calling itself Mainstream Loudoun organized a drive to place

posters with *E pluribus unum* in every school in the county. This “original motto”, said advocates, with its inclusive message, makes it clear “that students of all faiths or no faith are equally welcome” (Helderman 2002, p. J1).

At the same time, the motto was being mobilized by elected officials. Critics aside, “In God We Trust” remained popular among a large majority of the public. After 9/11 in particular, it took on additional weight as a symbolic rallying cry, with opposition to the motto being seen as unpatriotic. Under the circumstances, said Haynes, no politician “who cares about getting re-elected would dare oppose posting the national motto” (Haynes 2006, p. 1C). Thus, in 2002, when the Ninth Circuit Court issued its opinion on the Pledge of Allegiance, members of the United States Congress responded not only by marching *en masse* to the Capitol steps to recite the pledge and sing “God Bless America”, but also by passing resolutions protesting the ruling and reaffirming both “under God” in the pledge and “In God We Trust” as the national motto (Cass 2002, p. A2). Four years later, when Congress passed a concurrent resolution commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of “In God We Trust” as the official motto, the vote came only days after a California federal judge had dismissed a lawsuit challenging its constitutionality (Jalsevac 2006). Again in 2009, a concurrent resolution sponsored by members of the Congressional Prayer Caucus ordered that “In God We Trust” be engraved in the main hall of the new Capitol Visitors’ Center (Boston 2009, p. 5). In 2011, the House of Representatives voted on still another resolution reaffirming “In God We Trust” as the national motto. The vote came as a response to a 2010 speech made by President Obama to students in Jakarta, Indonesia, in which he stated that “in the United States, our motto is *E pluribus unum*—out of many, one” (Somanader 2010). Although the vote was overwhelmingly in favor, a small number of representatives dissented, finding partisan purpose in the resolution. In debate on the House floor, Representative Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) explained his opposition: “The national motto is not in danger. No one here is suggesting we get rid of it. It appears on our money, it appears in this chamber above your head, it appears in the Capitol Visitors’ Center, all over the place” (Steinhauer 2011, p. A19).

More recently, the motto has become central to broader cultural politics as well. In 2015, following protests over reported cases of police brutality and shootings of unarmed citizens, law enforcement agencies in the South and Midwest began to add “In God We Trust” bumper stickers to their patrol cars. Apparently beginning with Sheriff Jim Arnott of Green County, Missouri, the practice has spread rapidly throughout the rural Midwest and South, conveyed by social media and news reports (Gitau 2015). In Georgia, Sheriff Johnny Moats of Polk County, who saw the idea on a Facebook posting, took it upon himself to send a mass email to other sheriffs in the state, many of whom proved eager to participate (Blinder and Pérez-Peña 2015, p. 18). From there, the word has continued to spread, mostly among small town police chiefs and rural county sheriffs. Among those participating, some describe the motto as a way to counter negative portrayals of police officers. “Right now it seems like in our country law enforcement has been painted with a brush that we’re bad guys”, Bay County Florida Sheriff Frank McKeithen told the *Washington Post*. “So I was trying to think of something that might set a fire to our guys. We want to be proud and we want people to be proud of us, and we know we’re better than how people portray us” (Izadi 2015; see also Warren 2015). Others, however, admit that the motto reflects their own religious views, as well as those of their employees and most of the citizens of their communities. “I want people to know I’m a Christian man”, said Sheriff Moats. “Christian values are good . . . I don’t understand how Christians have gotten such a bad name” (Joyner 2015, p. B1).

The practice of placing mottos on police vehicles has continued to gain attention, in part, because in many places it has attracted vocal opposition. In particular, the issue has become more public as a result of letters sent from the Freedom from Religion Foundation, asking more than sixty police departments across the country to desist from the practice on constitutional grounds. The letters have evoked indignant responses from some officials. “Go fly a kite”, replied Childress, Texas police chief Adrian Garcia in pointedly refusing to comply with the FFRF request (Muska 2015). In many communities, citizens have rallied around their police departments, describing critics as outsiders seeking to start a fight. “The people that were negative, I’ve never even heard of them”, said one Childress resident. “We

live in the Bible Belt. I think that we have a very strong Christian community, and I don't personally foresee anyone in our community reacting in a negative fashion" (Stein 2015). Even so, confrontations have occurred in some places, such as in Holmes County, Florida, where a small group protesting "In God We Trust" on public vehicles was met by three hundred supporters of the bumper stickers (Izadi 2015). Meanwhile, in one Arkansas jurisdiction, police acted to avoid conflict by placing "We the People" decals on their cruisers. While "'In God We Trust" can be controversial, commented Austin, Arkansas Chief James Kulesa, "there is no question with this, and it covers everybody . . . and it means the officers are part of the people" (Mehta 2016).

Over the last several years, advocates of the motto have become more strategic, as well as better organized in their efforts. Following the Supreme Court decision in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014), a number of Christian conservative advocacy groups began to come together around a shared strategy of using first amendment claims of religious freedom to resist or carve out exemptions to a wide range of public regulations and protections, including anti-discrimination laws. In 2015, several of these groups, led by the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, the National Legal Foundation, and conservative evangelical activist David Barton's WallBuilders, announced the creation of "Project Blitz", an initiative designed to provide model legislation to state lawmakers seeking to protect religious liberty (Shimron 2018). Following the example of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Project Blitz created a package of twenty model bills, many of which were designed to exempt business owners and professionals from requirements that they provide reproductive health benefits for employees or provide services to same-sex couples. The model bills also included resolutions and proclamations recognizing the role of religious liberty in America, beginning with a "National Motto Display Act" requiring the display of "In God We Trust" on public buildings and license plates (Clarkson 2018a). As explained in the Project's 116-page manual, sympathetic lawmakers are encouraged to start with symbolic legislation such as the Motto Display Act, moving on from there to more controversial measures while building public support. "Despite arguments that this type of legislation is not needed", says the manual, "measures such as the 'In God We Trust' bill can have enormous impact. Even if it does not become law, it can still provide the basis to shore up later support for other governmental entities to support religious displays" (Shimron 2018). In a teleconference call to launch the project, Barton described the strategy in simpler terms, as "kinda like whack-a-mole for the other side. It'll drive them crazy that they will have to divide their resources out in opposing this" (Clarkson 2018a).

To all appearances, the strategy has been successful. According to one accounting, in 2018 alone, bills advocating legislation similar to the Motto Display Act were introduced in twenty-three states. Of these, five were passed and signed into law, with Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, and Tennessee allowing or requiring display of the motto in public schools (Clarkson 2018b). In other states, legislation has been introduced requiring posting of the motto in public buildings and schools, as well as on state license plates (Garrett 2018). By 2018, some twenty states were offering "In God we Trust" specialty plates, available to motorists at an additional fee, while in Mississippi a bill was signed into law in that year that puts an image of the state seal, redesigned to include the national motto, on the standard issue plate (Parke 2019). Recently, Project Blitz released its 2019 legislative manual, which lists its top priority as a "National Motto License Plate Act", which would allow citizens in states across the country to opt for "In God We Trust" specialty plates to create what it calls "moving billboards" (Clarkson 2018c). In addition, the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation has sponsored "In God We Trust" bus tours, public service announcements, and other events, along with a "Million Window Campaign", which claims to have distributed more than three million "In God We Trust" window decals to its supporters at \$5 apiece (fifty decals for \$100), along with other "'In God We Trust' gear—t-shirts, hats, mouse pads, and more" (Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation 2019).

Along with success, however, Project Blitz has met with growing opposition. Much of the resistance has come from nonbelievers, who have taken the lead in challenging model laws on constitutional grounds. In recent surveys, the numbers of Americans considering themselves nonreligious has

continued to grow rapidly. In 2014, a Pew Research Center survey found that almost 23% of the population was religiously unaffiliated and that over 7% of respondents identified as atheist or agnostic, with the youngest generation of adults being the most likely to identify as religious “nones” (Pew Research Center 2015; Lipka 2015). Thus, in 2015, when the Freedom from Religion Foundation requested that one Texas police department cease from placing the motto on its vehicles, FFRF co-president Annie Laurie Gaylor described herself as speaking for “many of us, 24 percent of the population today” who “identif[y] as nonreligious” (Silver 2015). Yet, religious voices have begun to speak out against Project Blitz as well. In North Carolina, where an “In God We Trust” bill passed the House but stalled in the Senate, the executive director of the North Carolina Council of Churches spoke out strongly against it. “For those who have no religious tradition, whose beliefs also are protected by the First Amendment, the motto is an affront”, said the Council’s Jennifer Copeland. “For those who DO believe the tenets of Trinitarian Christianity, we don’t need a sign at school telling us who we trust” (Copeland 2018). In Minnesota, where a similar bill allowing posting of the motto in schools passed the state senate, state senator John Marty (D-FL-Roseville) opposed it on religious grounds. “Speaking as a Lutheran, I don’t want my religious beliefs watered-down by simplistic, generic, politically motivated, government-sanctioned mottos or practices”, Marty insisted. “I spoke out for many who have a deep Christian faith and who don’t want our government to use our religion as a divisive club to beat up others for political reasons. And, we don’t want to force our beliefs on others” (Clarkson 2018b). When bill sponsor Dan Hall (R-FL-Roseville) told “Fox & Friends” host Pete Hegseth that critics of the legislation were part of an “anti-faith movement” that seeks to “suppress” religion and “wipe it out of government”, Marty replied in a Senate speech that the “government sanctioned motto does not strengthen our religion, but it demeans, devalues and cheapens our religion” (Clarkson 2018b). Finally, as Project Blitz has gained prominence as part of what has come to be called the “religious freedom movement”, critics have begun to make a common cause against it. Thus, in early 2019, a coalition of religious and secular organizations, including the National Council of Churches, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the Union for Reform Judaism, and the Hindu American Foundation, along with groups committed to civil, reproductive, and sexual rights, issued a joint statement opposing Project Blitz and similar legislative efforts. The purpose of the coalition, said Rachel Laser, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, was to “expose the truth behind Project Blitz—Christian nationalism and the weaponization of religion as the basis of discrimination” (Leading Religious, Civil Rights & Secular Groups Unite Against National Effort to Enshrine Christian Nationalism in State Laws 2019).

Thus, for Project Blitz, success has brought controversy. By associating the motto with a broader political agenda, advocates have attracted millions of supporters but have also generated a growing network of opponents. In the process, “In God We Trust” has become an even more contested symbol. In Arizona, for example, where it was found that a portion of the proceeds from the sale of specialty license plates bearing the motto was going to the Alliance Defending Freedom, a Christian conservative legal advocacy group, bills have been introduced revoking the option to purchase the plates and requiring the state Department of Transportation to be more transparent about which groups are being supported by their sale (Anapol 2019). In Alabama, the motto came under fire in a debate over “In God We Trust” legislation when a sponsor claimed its wording had originated in Francis Scott Key’s national anthem, only to have members of the Alabama Black Caucus point out that Key was a Maryland slave owner who, as an attorney, prosecuted abolitionists in the 1830s (Lyman 2018). In many other places, from state legislatures to city councils, the motto has ignited conflict between officials and citizens. For the sponsors of Project Blitz, such controversies over civil religious symbols are part of the plan. “They’re going to be things that people yell at”, as David Barton explained the project strategy, “but they will help move the ball down the court” (Stewart 2018, p. SR6). Advocates believe the strategy is working. “We have this window of opportunity now; I think we’re all feeling it”, said Lea Carawan, co-founder and executive director of the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation. “We believe this is just the beginning” (Hayes 2018, p. 10).

8. Conclusions

For more than half a century, scholars have been predicting the collapse of American civil religion. The predictions began with Bellah himself, who declared the country's common civic faith to be hopelessly fractured, its vision of unity having degenerated into "an empty and broken shell" (Bellah 1975, p. 142). They continued throughout the late twentieth century, as the culture was shattered civil religious consensus, replacing it with what Robert Wuthnow called a "confusion of tongues" offering "different visions of what America can and should be" (Wuthnow 1988, p. 396). In our own century, the predictions persist, with claims that religious diversity and political polarization have made it increasingly impossible for nations to generate collective identity, leading to exclusionary expressions of what has been called "tribalist versions of civil religion" (Williams and Fuist 2014, p. 932). Today, the election of President Trump has brought additional warnings of civil religious collapse, with critics describing his divisive and narrowly nationalistic rhetoric as doing "the initial demolition work of our shared civic faith" (Carlson 2017).

On its face, the continuing debate over the national motto seems to validate these concerns. With increasing religious pluralism and political polarization, controversies over the state-sanctioned display of "In God We Trust" have become endemic. Although court cases seeking to remove the motto from coins and paper currency have had no success to date, plaintiffs led by California attorney Michael Newdow continue their challenges, carrying on a strategy of challenging the motto's place on the country's currency in each of the nine circuits of the U.S. Appeals Courts. "All he needs", explains one admirer, "is one to agree with him" (Mehta 2018). Cases involving the posting of "In God We Trust" in schools, on public buildings, and on police and emergency vehicles are only beginning to make their way through the courts, with opponents expressing hope that one of them will be "the one that gets the Court to address the constitutionality of the government's endorsement of monotheism" (Thorne 2003). Meanwhile, some legal scholars have argued that the reliance of courts on the concept of ceremonial deism is unsustainable and that other tests of the constitutionality of civil religious symbols must be introduced in cases involving establishment and free exercise claims (Epstein 1996; Gedicks 2009; Hill 2010; Corbin 2010). The adoption of the motto by conservative religious activists complicates the issue. "There's a strange dance conservatives do when they litigate these things," says law professor Frederick Gedicks, describing how lawyers defend the motto in court by arguing that it is a secular rather than a religious sentiment, while outside of court "they infuse it with pretty thick religious meaning" (Jarvik 2007, p. E1). As legal challenges continue, motto advocates remain ready to fight them. Thus, the American Center for Law and Justice, to name only one group, has established a committee to defend "In God We Trust", which currently claims over 400,000 supporters, vowing that suits against the motto will "continue to meet with failure" (Hernandez 2018).

Yet, the history of the motto suggests another reading of the future of civil religion. For over 150 years, "In God We Trust" has been a controversial concept. At the time of its Civil War creation, it inspired both advocates and critics, setting Christian nationalist supporters against religious and secular opponents. Throughout the twentieth century it provoked continuing debates about the mixing of sacred and secular, the role of religion in government and politics, and the legal meaning of separation of church and state. In our own time, it has been celebrated and criticized, championed as a source of patriotism and condemned as a weapon used to isolate and silence religious minorities and political dissenters. Today, advocates and opponents seem to be locked in continuing conflict over its fate. Activists call for the motto to be displayed in schools and on public buildings. Lawmakers work to pass motto display legislation, adding to a growing list of states with similar laws. Public safety officers proudly paste it on their patrol cars and emergency vehicles. For their part, critics of these efforts speak out at city council meetings; teachers and school superintendents question the point of motto posters; lawmakers cast unpopular votes. In recent years, some have begun to make the case that "In God We Trust" should no longer be the national motto at all and that *E pluribus unum* is a more appropriate motto for a pluralistic nation (Lounsbury 2018). The debates go on, providing a measure of proof that American civil religion, far from collapsing, continues to be an essential part of

our politics. Indeed, as Andrew R. Murphy has put it, civil religion captures “the multiplicity and contestation at the heart of Americans’ ongoing efforts to understand the meaning and significance of their political undertaking” (Murphy 2011, p. 226). As we look to the future, the example of the motto conveys the clear message that civil religion will continue to be a deeply compelling concept, as well as a highly contested one.

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