

Wilkins Township/"In God We Trust" Position Essay  
Michael Boyd

I must dissent in the strongest possible manner with regard to the display of the motto "In God We Trust" in the Wilkins Township Municipal Building. I strongly believe in the equality of all citizens of this township regardless of race, gender, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, or religious belief. As a result, regardless of religious faith or non-faith, all Wilkins Township residents should be regarded equally, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Wiccan, atheist, agnostic, and so forth. In practice I see the way our township government can realize this ideal is through the true separation of church and state. I believe Wilkins should not weigh in to issues of religion and thus should not post slogans or mottos that resonate with and favor only a single faith or range of faiths.

Approximately 77% of respondents to a 2008 Census-related survey on religious identification self-identified as Christian or Jewish (approximately 76% Christian and 1% Jewish). Roughly 3% of respondents self-identified as members of other religions, and 15% of respondents indicated having no religion. Based on this data, posting the motto "In God We Trust" would resonate with the vast majority of our citizens, but would not with a significant minority. I believe that privileging the majority in this manner is extremely problematic. For example, considering the 2010 Census data, our country is 72% white and Wilkins Township is 84% white. Despite the fact that most citizens in the township are Caucasian, we would not refer to Wilkins as "Warm, Wonderful, White Wilkins." The reason that we would not do that is because it would unnecessarily hierarchicalize our community, specifically in a way that alienates one or more minority

groups. If I posed the question “Are black residents less important than white residents in Wilkins?” I hope we would all answer with a resounding “no.” I do not see a substantial difference, however, if I posed the question “Are atheist or Hindu or Buddhist residents less important than Christian or Jewish residents?”. The resolution under consideration asserts that they are.

The posting of a Judeo-Christian motto in our township building would codify the hierarchicalization of our township by religious faith and essentially discriminate against residents with differing spiritual beliefs and views. To be as clear as possible, I believe that the resolution under consideration is a form of discrimination. Upon entering our building and seeing the posted motto our residents would be immediately aware of this faith-based social hierarchy.

I see the campaign to coerce municipalities nationwide to post religious affirmations in their legislative spaces as a socially conservative attempt to create the illusion of a unified national culture. As a “melting pot” nation, the United States has never had and very likely never will have a singular national culture. Instead our contemporary reality, and the often unspoken reality of our history, is one of diversity and plurality. Accepting and respecting diversity does not threaten majority groups and it allows all citizens to exist and coexist with dignity. The motto under consideration was adopted as the national motto in 1956 – a time when racial segregation, misogyny, and homophobia were realities. Thus it is not surprising that faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism and non-faiths such as atheism and agnosticism were marginalized.

Particularly for those who are entirely or mostly part of historically-favored majorities (white, heterosexual, Christian, male), it is difficult to empathize on issues of

demographic-based marginalization having never held the position of “other.” The fact that our society tends to view these majority categories as neutral and minority categories as notably different and other makes it more difficult to comprehend the perspectives of individuals that are part of these minority groups. Imagine if Wilkins posted “In Ganesh We Trust” or “In Reason We Trust” in this room – that is how a significant minority of our residents might feel if the resolution under consideration is adopted.

It is also useful to consider demographic trends, both nationally and locally. Both the United States and Wilkins Township are diversifying. In 2000 Wilkins was 93% white; in 2010 that number dropped to 84%. Looking at the aforementioned Census-related religious identification survey the respondents identifying Judeo-Christian faiths dropped from 88% in 1990 to 77% in 2008. Similarly members of other faiths have grown from 1.5% in 1990 to 2.6% in 2008, and respondents indicating no religion grew from 8% in 1990 to 15% in 2008.

Community hierarchicalization through the highlighting of difference and preference for majority groups around social factors such as race, sexual identity, or religion is, I feel, unhealthy. I believe we should accept and respect difference and not overtly or covertly privilege one group over another. I do see the value for Judeo-Christian residents in posting the motto under consideration, but I feel that it is much more important to create a maximally inclusive atmosphere that is welcoming and comfortable for all residents and future residents.