

TRUSTING GOD IN SCHOOL

By William Nicoson

Our children returning this fall to school will find a placard conspicuously displayed which announces: “‘In God We Trust,’ the National Motto, enacted by Congress in 1956”.

The posting of this statement was required under legislation enacted by the Virginia General Assembly at its last session. It took effect July 1.

The motto, “In God We Trust”, also appears on U.S. currency. Given our experience recently with vanishing value in stock investments, we might do well to trust God rather than ourselves to preserve our financial health.

We ought to wonder, however, whether this message is useful in inspiring learning by students in public schools. Children who study hard, trusting in themselves, will learn and achieve recognition. Those who only trust intervention on their behalf by the Almighty will certainly be at greater risk.

There is also bound to be confusion about the identity of the God in which students are encouraged to trust. For many children in Reston schools, God is not the Christian God of the New Testament or the Jewish God of the Torah. God may be the God of the Koran, or of the sayings of Buddha, or of the Hindu Vedanta or of the canons of Confucius.

Still greater confusion will be felt by students who doubt the existence of God or our ability to understand God.

The intentions of the Virginia General Assembly are unclear as to the God children are encouraged to trust. Did legislators refer to the various Gods of the various children, to the ineffable God of the agnostics or to the God of the legislators voting yea?

The General Assembly made it clear that no funds were appropriated to pay for preparation and installation of the required placards, though individual contributions for this purpose might be accepted by schools. But legislators did authorize staff of the Attorney General to “intervene on behalf of local school boards and...provide legal defense of the provisions” enacted.

What litigation did the legislators anticipate? They obviously expected one or more feckless lawyers to claim that erecting in public schools a placard reciting trust in God might contravene the First Amendment of our Constitution prohibiting any “law respecting an establishment of religion”. The Virginia legislation was enacted following a widely publicized opinion of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals striking down a requirement that the pledge of allegiance (“...one nation...under God...”) be recited in the schools.

The legislative response of the Virginia General Assembly is nothing less than court baiting. Yah, yah, judge, throw God out of the schoolroom if you can! And some lawyers and parents will certainly urge judges to do just that. Their cases will be defended with our taxes.

This mischievous bill was passed overwhelmingly: 28-11 in the Senate and 87-9 in the House of Delegates. Governor Mark R. Warner (D) recommended that display of the motto be made permissive rather than mandatory. His proposed change would surely have avoided court challenges. The House of Delegates rejected it by a vote of 68-29.

Both of Reston's legislators, Senator Janet Howell (D) and Delegate Ken Plum (D), voted against the bill and supported the Governor's recommended palliative. They deserve congratulations for being defiantly contrarian.

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