

‘In God We Trust,’ Even at Our Most Divided

HOUSES OF WORSHIP By Jonathan Den Hartog

On April 22, 1864, Congress approved a significant revision to the nation’s coinage: the addition of “In God We Trust” on several U.S. coins. This was more than a small change for small change: Governmental officials believed it would help America through a time of crisis. As the country continues to slog through an era of deep division, it’s worth studying the ideals that informed this refinement of American currency.

April 1864 was not necessarily an auspicious time for the U.S. The Civil War was raging. Bloody battles took place at Sabine Crossroads and Pleasant Hill, and free African-American soldiers were massacred when they were overrun at Fort Pillow in Tennessee. Southern secession left the nation physically and spiritually fractured.

With political life frayed and the war effort faltering, adding a new motto to American coinage might have looked like desperation or propaganda. It was neither. Abraham Lincoln and Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase had known about the idea for years. In an 1861 letter, the Rev. M.R. Watkinson of Pennsylvania asked Chase to consider recognizing “the Almighty God in some form on our coins.”

Chase, an abolitionist Ohio Republican, had liked the idea for years. “No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in His defense,” he wrote to the director of the U.S. Mint in 1861. “The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins.” Some three years later the motto was approved by Congress and stamped on coinage in Philadelphia.

The change fit the mood of the time. Facing the dissolution of the Union, many Americans looked for divine aid to help heal the national divisions. They recognized that faith could sustain liberty and self-government. This echoed the acts of earlier generations of Americans, who during the Revolutionary War had flown battle flags bearing the motto “An Appeal to Heaven.”

Does using the language of faith on currency constitute another example of “civil religion” perverting traditional religion for secular ends? As historian John D. Wilsey argued in “American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion,” such public religious appeals aren’t necessarily destined to become unhealthy derivatives of serious religious ideals. They can create an open ideal that broadens the circle of citizenship and invites participation—which the “In God We Trust” stamp did.

President Lincoln channeled these religious concerns during his Second Inaugural

Address in 1865. His reflections were brief but profound, drawing heavily on biblical language. The president rejected the South’s claims, but he did so with humility. “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged,” he asserted, building off Matthew 7:1-2.

The story behind the Civil War-era motto that still appears on America’s coins.

Rather than assume a morally superior position, Lincoln used the moment to call for self-reflection. The North had also been entangled in slavery and the violence of the Civil War, and it was in no position to claim perfect conduct. “The Almighty has His own purposes,” Lincoln said. And, no matter what, “so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,’ ” evoking Psalm 19:9.

If both North and South stood under divine judgment, then a new attitude was demanded, one of humbly working for the common good. In his peroration, Lincoln called his hearers to steady service: “With malice toward none,

with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.”

The most important of these tasks was “to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.” Lincoln was calling to mind the good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke, who, finding an injured man, “bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine.” Similarly, his injunction to help the widow and the orphan echoed the Book of James, which taught that “pure religion” consisted at least partly of visiting “the fatherless and widows in their affliction.”

Lincoln concluded that this vision could be a global one, as they would “do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” The 16th president thus demonstrated that the best religious reflection in public life could lead to humility, self-criticism, care for fellow citizens, and renewal of civic ties. And that seems like a beneficial reminder from the random coins jangling in our pockets.

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