

“In God We Trust”?

U.S. currency and coins bear the inscription, “In God we trust.” I have qualms about the appropriateness of such a theological affirmation in our religiously pluralistic and democratic society, but my biggest quarrel with this inscription is that it is patently false. Would that we did trust in God! Yes, we claim to be a God-believing people. But belief is hardly the same as trust.

Suppose Congress passed a law demanding monetary truth in advertising. Imagine what our currency and coins would read: “In money we trust”? “In oil we trust”? “In violence we trust”? Perhaps simply, “In the American way we trust”? We are the world’s wealthiest nation, the greatest consumer of oil and other energy resources, the greatest employer of violence, and in many respects the most prideful of all the nations. Examine the size of our jail and prison populations, and you’ll see that we are also the most incarcerating society. Whether it’s our own citizen offenders, or those hapless detainees in Guantanamo and God knows where else who, in most cases, are victims of circumstance, we trust in punishment in a big way.

Where does trusting God come in? If actions speak louder than words, the message is clear: We don’t think God is up to the task of looking after us. God apparently has little to offer in the way of security or help with life’s temporal demands. And God hardly needs to be taken seriously regarding such matters as justice, forgiveness, and redemption. It’s up to us to take matters into our own hands: punish the evildoers, protect our interests, and generally ride roughshod over all who try to stand in the way.

Please don’t get me wrong. I love my country. I just wish its heritage of freedom, equality, justice, and goodwill were not being squandered in the name of national self-interest and national security. People who hold great power, and powerful nations, tend to have grossly distorted views of reality. They tend to think it is mainly by their own wits and efforts that they have gained such power. By all rights and means they must preserve, protect, and defend what is theirs. Whatever pinch of truth lies in that view, in the long run it is a delusion. Coercive self-indulging power ultimately destroys what it most highly covets. What is happening in Iraq is only the latest and most tragic exhibit.

Copyright 2007 by Byron C. Bangert