Opinion
Guest Voices

Texas Senate Bill 797 requires public schools in Texas to display — in a conspicuous place — a poster reading "In God We Trust" if such a poster is donated to the school. (Pixabay/Silke)

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The new school year has begun, and I am knee-deep in packing lunches, signing paperwork and helping my 6-year-old with projects (right now, we have to fit five items that represent him best in a brown paper lunch sack). But recent news in Texas related to the required display of "In God We Trust" posters in public school has me adding new tasks to my to-do lists. Step one: Talk with my community about what religious liberty means, what Christian nationalism is, and what Catholics owe our non-Christian brothers and sisters.

When I hear the term "religious liberty," the first thing that comes to mind is *freedom to and freedom from*. As a practicing Catholic and a hospital chaplain, I have incorporated much of my Catholic identity into my daily life: in how I offer up prayers to St. Anthony when something is missing, in how my family prays before meals, in how I share tenets of Ignatian spirituality with people who meet with me seeking advice.

These are comforting practices to me, but I recognize that they are not for everyone. I am grateful for the choices I have in how I live out my identity as a person of faith. And I'm also grateful that I am not required to participate in practices that are not comfortable for me.

In summer 2018, I attended a training offered by the Baptist Joint Committee, or BJC. This training offers young professionals the opportunity to deepen their historical, theological and legal understanding of religious liberty in the United States. I was the only Catholic in the cohort that year, but the group welcomed me warmly. They taught me how to advocate for religious liberty for all *because* of my Catholic Christian identity, not in spite of it.

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While BJC also first introduced me to the term "Christian nationalism," it was harder for me to come up with examples of what that actually looked like in my daily life. Lately, though, unsettling examples seem to pop up in the news every few days, especially in my home state of Texas.

Take Texas Senate Bill 797, for example. Authored by state Sen. Bryan Hughes, this law requires Texas schools to display a poster reading "In God We Trust" if such a poster is donated to the school. Specifically, the poster must be displayed in a "conspicuous place," and Hughes is praising organizations that donate these posters (groups like The Yellow Rose of Texas Republican Women and Moms for Liberty). While this phrase is our national motto, it is important to note that it has been so only since the mid-1950s. Before that, our motto was *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one).

These posters make me uneasy. Perhaps it is because one will very likely hang in the lobby of my son's elementary school. His school, made up of a diverse group of about 400 kids, is a Title 1 school. This means that a certain percentage of students come from low-income families. These kids walk in each morning, wide-eyed and curious, speaking multiple languages as their Disney-themed backpacks bounce against their backs.

A large portion of these children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Each letter the school sends home comes in three languages in the hopes that most parents will be able to understand what is going on at school each week. In the main hallway of the school, giant posters of individual students cover the walls with information about who the student is, where their family came from, and why they like our school. They are all *so different*.

So who is this sign for?

I am a Christian. I try very hard to trust in God. And I also value separation of church and state. Our public school system already allows for students to express their religious identity in school, and BJC has compiled resources on this topic on their website. Students can pray in school so long as they do not force prayer on others. Students can wear religious clothing and accessories. Religious groups can meet on school grounds to pray or study sacred texts so long as class is not in session and school personnel do not encourage or discourage these activities.

As a public high school student, I made many signs of the cross before exams, participated in Fellowship of Christian Athletes' morning Bible studies before classes started, and wore silver cross earrings. My actions, permitted in a public school setting, were revelatory of my identity as a person of faith. And while my faith was and is a big part of my identity, it was not the only part. My language, my culture, my special interests: all were welcomed and nurtured in my public school. As were the diverse languages and cultures and interests of my friends.

"In God We Trust."

Picture it with me, this poster with large letters in a "conspicuous place;" required to be displayed if gifted to the school. But whose God? And who is "we?" This phrase does not typically imply a nod to any non-Christian god; to suggest so would be a stretch. This sign, all 8.5 x11 inches of it, is a marker of Christian nationalism. This sign implies there is one god, the Judeo-Christian God, and that all of us trust in this god. It implies we are all on the same page.

As Catholics, we should be uncomfortable with this suggestion in public schools.

In his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes, "We Christians ask that, in those countries where we are a minority, we be guaranteed freedom, even as we ourselves promote that freedom for non-Christians in places where they are a minority. One fundamental human right must not be forgotten in the journey towards fraternity and peace. It is religious freedom for believers of all religions."

For decades, public schools have worked to protect religious liberty for all. Not for a few, not for the majority: for all. Frankly, the old motto of *e pluribus unum* seems like a more inclusive and appropriate fit for this setting.

My son may include his crucifix necklace in his brown paper bag. It is a gift from his *abuelita,* and he likes it. He is allowed to bring it as one of his five items because of policies that protect religious liberty in public school. But he cannot insist that other people hold it or pray with it.

At the end of the day, my son is 6: He is more likely to bring his swim goggles and his karate belt. And he will be curious to learn about the different things his friends bring, too. I hope that his non-Christian friends feel as welcome to bring their own

religious (or non-religious!) items as he does.