

## What does Sanford believe about license plates?

By STEFAN LONCE - Guest Columnist

License plates are more than mere vehicle identifiers: They reflect our values and our political beliefs. South Carolinians will soon learn how controversial religious messages on license plates can be.

On May 22, the General Assembly unanimously passed a bill authorizing a Christian special license plate, which would have images of a cross and a church stained glass window and the slogan "I Believe." There would be no extra fee for the "I Believe" plate if Gov. Mark Sanford signs the bill into law.

The American Jewish Congress, which strongly advocates separation of religion and state, has urged Gov. Sanford to veto the bill.

Like death and taxes, it's a certainty that South Carolina would be sued if it issues the "I Believe" plate. The plate would apparently be the first U.S. license plate with explicitly religious images (other than university logos that incorporate religious symbols). South Carolina is the only state that lost a lawsuit over the "Choose Life" special license plates, which have an explicitly pro-life, anti-abortion message.

Special license plates honor universities, sports teams, regions, professions, the military and causes. Although motorists would have to request the "I Believe" plate, a court could find that it implies that the state is endorsing a particular religion, and violates the First Amendment.

Vanity plates with religious messages are frequently controversial. Vermont prohibits all religious messages on vanity plates; a motorist sued when the Vermont DMV refused to issue him a vanity plate that says "JN36NT" — a reference to a New Testament passage. The motorist is appealing a federal judge's dismissal of his lawsuit.

I think that there's a distinction between a vanity plate with a religious message — which is clearly the motorist's message — and a religious special license plate. I respect the strongly held beliefs of the sponsors of the "I Believe" plate, but to some people, the plate could imply that the state is endorsing a particular religion.

To be constitutional, South Carolina would have to allow other religions to apply for special license plates, and then state legislators would have to decide which religion would get which plate. What if different branches of the same religion apply for its special plate? South Carolina already issues a special plate honoring secular humanism — but is secular humanism a "religion"? Would atheists be entitled to a special plate that says "I Don't Believe"?

To close the state's budget deficit, the General Assembly cut spending, including for the Department of Corrections, which is running a \$4.3 million deficit this year. Legislators did not consider the potential costs of defending litigation over the "I Believe" plate, although members of the House Education and Public Works Committee were assured that it is constitutional. Still, the House amended the bill to strengthen the state's legal position in court.

Florida legislators, recognizing the "I Believe" plate's potential legal problems, did not pass it.

Gov. Sanford is famously frugal with taxpayer dollars, and should consider that the "I Believe" plate would raise no revenue, but would cost the state to defend in court. License plates reflect our values, and our politics.

Mr. Lonce is author of the forthcoming book *LCNS2ROM — License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the GR8 Stories They Tell* ([www.LCNS2ROM.com](http://www.LCNS2ROM.com)) and editor of the *Montauk Sun* in New York.