

Specialty plates empower groups to express themselves, and political or religious specialty plates are often divisive.

Seventeen states issue the **CHOOSE LIFE** specialty plate, which promotes a pro-life, anti-abortion message. Choose Life, Inc., which sponsors the plate, claims to have raised \$8.6 million from plate fees.



In June 2008, South Carolina passed the first-ever religious specialty license plate, which has an image of a cross in front of a stained glass window, and the slogan, "**I BELIEVE**"; the plate is being challenged in court on constitutional grounds.

The debate over the role of religion in American public life has morphed to a new platform: license plates. In an op-ed article posted on the web site of *The State* (South Carolina's preeminent newspaper), I wrote, "[T]here'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."

Controversial vanity and specialty plates will continue to generate news. Courts will continue to refine the application of the constitutional right to freedom of speech to license plates.

License plates are more than mere vehicle identifiers; they allow us to express ourselves, and they reflect our values. Vanity license plates are fascinating and fun... vanitize, everyone!

~ Stefan Lonce
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