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June 21, 2008: The "I Believe" License Plates

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Title: The "I Believe" License Plates

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6/21/2008--I am sorry that South Carolina made itself such an easy target in creating its new "I Believe" automobile license plates. The plates carry the words "I Believe" plus a cross superimposed on a stained glass window. Because of the cross, the plates might as well say "I am a Christian". Given current constitutional caselaw, a strong majority on the Supreme Court, maybe unanimously, will not allow South Carolina to give official preference to Christianity. So, the only way the license plate can be defended is by treating it as private speech allowed but not favored by government. Unfortunately for South Carolina, apparently the procedures for private-group plates were not followed. Anyway, according to newspaper accounts, Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed a lawsuit last week on behalf of two Christian pastors, a humanist pastor and a rabbi in South Carolina, along with the Hindu American Foundation. They will probably win the case and they should. I am sorry that South Carolina did not create a simple "I Believe" license plate, without the cross. Such a plate would have said I am a believer. It would not have specified any religion, or even religion itself. It would have stood as a symbolic expression against materialism, relativism, nihilism, and nationalism, at least in theory. That license plate could have been argued as permissible speech by government itself (although no doubt government could not and should not impose such a plate on everyone.) The point, as Hallowed Secularism makes clear, is that we are facing a new question today. Not the competition of individual religions, but what if anything does our culture believe in?