

ONE NATION UNDER GOD?

Deuteronomy 28: 1-6
Acts 17: 22-29

Faith Community
September 15, 2002

Introduction

On Wednesday, June 26th the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco ruled two to one that the pledge of allegiance was unconstitutional because it endorsed religion. What was under attack was the phrase, "One nation under God." The man who brought the case was an atheist, the father of a girl who was saying the pledge. The father didn't want her to have to say, "One nation under God."

The case is a little more complicated because the girl's mother has sole custody of her, and her mother wants her to say the pledge – as is.

Judge Alfred Goodwin who wrote the opinion for the majority later stayed his own opinion indefinitely. So no action is being taken on the decision. But this whole controversy raises the question are we "one nation under God?"

I

This is a nation that believes in God. It is a matter of fact. Various polls show that between 90 and 94% of Americans believe in God. Historically this has been true. The Gallop Organization has tracked this question since 1947. In 1947, 94% of Americans believe in God. In 1953 it was 98%, in 1967 – 98%, in 1975 - 94%. We are a nation that believes in God.

Everyone recognizes that the state of Israel is a Jewish state. But in fact, a higher percentage of Americans believe in God than there are Jews in Israel. Israel is made up of 82% Jews, the United States is made up of 94% people who believe in God.

If then we call Israel a Jewish nation we must say that the United States is a nation that believes in God. The American people are overwhelmingly a people who trust in God.

II

This is also how our nation got started. Historically we have believed in God. The founders of our nation not only believed in God, but many saw God behind the birth of our country. Several of the founders refer to God helping with the formation of this nation so that it could provide freedom, liberty, and justice for people.

Virtually every president since Washington has talked about God in public speeches, and often in their inaugural addresses. In April of 1789 George Washington said, "It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations.... that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes. No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the US."

On March 4, 1797 President John Adams said, “And may that Being who is supreme over all, the Patron of Order, the Fountain of Justice, and the Protector in all ages of the world of virtuous liberty, continue His blessing upon this nation and its Government and give it all possible success and duration consistent without the ends of His providence.”

On March 4, 1805 President Thomas Jefferson said, “I shall need too, the favor of that Being in whose hand we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from the native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with His providence and our riper years with His wisdom and power, and to whose goodness I ask you to join in supplications with me that He will so enlighten the minds of your servants, guide their councils, and prosper their measures that whatsoever they do shall result in your good, and shall secure to you the peace, friendship, and approbation of all nations.”

Along with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison was the one most involved in writing the constitution and the bill of rights, which, of course, contains the First Amendment. On March 4, 1809, Madison said, “In these (my fellow-citizens) my confidence will under every difficulty be best placed, next to that which we have all been encouraged to feel in the guardianship and guidance of that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations, whose blessings have been so conspicuously dispensed to this rising Republic, and to whom we are bound to address our devout gratitude for the past, as well as our fervent supplication and best hopes for the future.”

Fifty-six years later Abraham Lincoln said, “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue... so still it must be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’” and later he said, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

In 1917 Woodrow Wilson said, “I pray God I may be given the wisdom and the prudence to do my duty in the true spirit of this great people.”

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “In this dedication of a nation we humbly ask the blessing of God. May He protect each and every one of us. May He guide me in the days to come.”

In 1961 John F Kennedy said, “The world is very different now...And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe - the believe that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.”

I could go on citing these examples for hours, but the point is obvious: this land is founded on belief in God. Its history from the beginning has been a nation under God.

III

To now, in the 21st century, completely eliminate the name of God from our government is to be prejudiced against belief in God. Especially since the name of God is already found in so much of the foundational literature of our nation, to remove it at this point is clearly to act against those who believe in God, and to act for the tiny minority who don't.

To cut out all references to God now, is to act in favor of atheists and against those who hold trust in God. If we had a government that made no reference to God and people were campaigning to insert the name of God, that would be one thing. But to already have the name of God on everything from the Declaration of Independence to the National Anthem to the Pledge of Allegiance to the currency of our land, and then remove it, is a hostile act toward those who believe.

It is to act in a way that is prejudiced in favor of those who do not believe and against those who do believe. It is no longer a question of being neutral. To eliminate God is now a prejudicial action

IV

The God of our founders – and our God – teaches us to be open and respectful of other people's opinions. The God we trust in tells us to work for freedom. Because of our God we honor a person's right to be atheist, Hindu, Muslim, or whatever religion they choose — or to be no religion at all. No one has to force us to be tolerant of other people; we understand that is at the heart of freedom. And our God teaches us that freedom is of the greatest value.

Freedom is what the Exodus was all about. Because freedom is important, we have the right to choose God or reject God. God doesn't force anyone to believe. So if God doesn't force anyone to believe, why would we want to force our faith on others?

Because God offers the choice to trust in God or not, offering that same freedom is important to us. This is part of what we have always understood. We are "One nation under God" and that God requires us to respect each other – to hear and learn and be stronger because we share our different opinions.

Conclusion

Regardless of what judges may say or courts may enact, this will continue to be "One nation under God." No one and no group will be able to remove our trust in God from the national spirit.

Presidents will still call on God as they face the awesome responsibility of their office. Legislators will still ask for God's help as they begin each new Session. More importantly the people of this land will call on their God in the midst of their personal dilemmas. They will call on God as our nation faces challenges in the future.

September 11, 2001 was an indication of how much we rely on God. Within minutes of that crisis banners went up on buildings, and placards were placed on lawns. Across our country from New England to Southern California from South Florida to the state of Washington people paraded the same slogan. In the midst of this national emergency it became the phrase of the hour. The President spoke it, as did virtually every citizen in the land.

In our time of need the words we spoke were: "God, bless America."

Amen