



MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS & SECULAR MEDIA

SPECIAL REPORT

ALLEGIANCE TO WHOM DO WE PLEDGE?

By Albert James Dager



A federal appeals court in San Francisco, on June 26, 2002, declared the [Pledge of Allegiance](#) unconstitutional because of the words “under God” added by Congress in 1954. The ruling, if allowed to stand, means schoolchildren in the nine Western states covered by the court can no longer recite the Pledge. The 9th Circuit covers Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon and Washington state. No other states are immediately affected by the ruling.

In a 2-1 decision, the Court declared that the two-word phrase equates to government endorsement of religion, which violates the U.S. Constitution’s Establishment Clause requiring a separation of church and state.

Writing for the three-judge panel, Judge [Alfred T. Goodwin](#) stated, “A profession that we are a nation ‘under God’ is identical, for Establishment Clause purposes, to a profession that we are a nation ‘under Jesus,’ a nation ‘under Vishnu,’ a nation ‘under Zeus,’ or a nation ‘under no god,’ because none of these professions can be neutral with respect to religion.”

The appeals court said that an atheist or a holder of certain non-Judeo-Christian beliefs could see the Pledge of Allegiance as an endorsement of monotheism, since it mentions only a single god.

The court cited the U.S. Supreme Court, which has said that students

cannot hold religious invocations at graduations and cannot be compelled to recite the Pledge. When the Pledge is recited in a classroom, said the appeals court, a student who objects is confronted with an “unacceptable choice between participating and protesting.”

“Although students cannot be forced to participate in recitation of the Pledge, the school district is nonetheless conveying a message of state endorsement of a religious belief when it requires public school teachers to recite, and lead the recitation of, the current form of the Pledge,” the court said.

Critics of the ruling echoed views expressed by the lone dissenter on the panel, Senior Judge Ferdinand Fernandez, who was appointed by the first President Bush. Fernandez argued that there was only a “minuscule” risk that the use of the phrase “under God” would “bring about a theocracy or suppress someone’s beliefs.”

Under his two colleagues’ view, he wrote, “‘God Bless America’ and ‘America the Beautiful’ will be gone for sure, and ... currency beware!” His reference to currency alludes to the fact that coins and bills are emblazoned with the slogan “In God We Trust.”

Yet Goodwin’s opinion insisted that the 9th Circuit’s ruling merely was the logical extension of Supreme Court decisions that prohibit organized prayer in classrooms and at high-school graduations and football games.

Under these precedents, Goodwin wrote, the officially sponsored recitation of the phrase “under God,” amounted not only to state endorsement of religion, but also a subtle form of coercion over elementary-school students.

The suit was brought by [Michael A. Newdow](#), an atheist who objected to his second-grade daughter being required to recite the Pledge at the [Elk Grove, California, school district](#). A federal judge had earlier dismissed his lawsuit.

“I’m an American citizen. I don’t like my rights infringed upon by my government,” Newdow said in an interview. Newdow called the Pledge a “religious idea that certain people don’t agree with.”

Newdow, an emergency-room physician by training, says he has given up his profession to “fight the government.” He views himself as a free thinker who equates believing in God with believing in Santa Claus. The 49-year-old single father also has an undergraduate degree from Brown University, a medical degree from UCLA and a law degree from the University of Michigan.

He has fought repeatedly in court for a strict separation of church and state, and estimates that he spent 4,000 hours preparing his lawsuit to ban the Pledge of Allegiance. He claims that the phrase “one nation under God” is unconstitutional and marginalizes those who are not religious.

When he won in the federal court, Newdow didn't seem to think it was any big deal.

"I don't think it's a very interesting argument. I think it's an unquestionable argument," Newdow said. "Could we say we are 'One nation under Jesus?' Could we say we are 'One nation under David Koresh?' Or Mohammed? No. And we can't say we are 'One nation under God.'"

Within hours of the court's decision, the national media descended upon Newdow's home. He was forced to buy a second telephone line to his house—primarily to handle a steady influx of profane messages and death threats.

"You atheist [expletive]," one woman said on the answering machine. "If you don't like the way this country is, take yourself and your family and get the hell out," the woman continued. She signed off: "This is from America."

Another woman recited the Pledge of Allegiance on the machine, and a man left this message: "I hope you and your daughter go to hell. People are going to get even. I hope you suffer."

Newdow was stunned.

"I wasn't prepared," he said, shaking his head. "And I was stupid not to be prepared."

"The issue is this: Does government have the right to stick religion in the midst of a pledge, in the midst of society?" Newdow asked. "Or anywhere?"

The August 5, 2002, *Seattle Times* reported:

The mother of Newdow's daughter, Sandra Banning, filed a court motion seeking to intervene in the case. If the court will not allow that, she asks that references to her daughter be taken off the lawsuit.

Banning, who has sole custody of the girl, said that she and her daughter are Christians and that neither believes there is anything wrong with reciting the pledge. She said her daughter would be harmed by a "lifetime of public scorn" if she becomes known as the "little atheist girl that attacked the pledge," according to the motion.¹

The reaction to the court's decision has been largely met with disdain by government officials from both the legislative and executive branches.

President Bush declared the ruling "out of step" with America, saying the United States needs "commonsense judges who understand that our rights were derived from God." He

pledged that he would appoint such judges. Talking to reporters before a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Bush said that America "values our relationship with an Almighty."

"The declaration of God in the Pledge of Allegiance doesn't violate rights. As a matter of fact, it's a confirmation of the fact that we received our rights from God, as proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence. That's why the ruling of the courts was out of step with the traditions and history of America," Bush said.

Congress and the Justice Department asked the court to reconsider its decision.

Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that the Justice Department was requesting a rehearing by the full 9th Circuit as part of its effort to "defend the ability of our nation's children to pledge allegiance to the American flag."

"This absurd decision was made by a court run amok," said House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas. "This Congress is not going to let anyone strip our nation of our proud heritage—not now, not ever."

The day after the ruling lawmakers filled both houses to recite the oath, right hands over hearts. Some shouted as they reached the phrase "one nation under God." Later, the House voted 416-3 to express its outrage at the appeals court's decision.

"The ruling treats any religious reference as inherently evil," the House resolution declared.

The Senate, which approved its own resolution within hours of the court ruling, voted unanimously for legislation that would reaffirm both the wording of the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" as the nation's motto.

Said Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., "We are one nation under God. We affirmed that today as Americans, not as Republicans or Democrats, and we did so proudly."

Due to the large display of concern from both individual citizens and government leaders, the court decided to shelve its decision for the time being. This has done little to stem the tide of outrage. But it does call into question the integrity of the court. If it really believes its decision is constitutional then why does it not just stand by it and allow it to be challenged in further appeals?

CHRISTIANS RESPOND

The response to the court's decision has been largely one of condemnation within the Christian community, particularly among the so-called "Christian right." Notable voices such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy, Donald Wildmon and James Dobson have been outspoken in their defense of the Pledge of Allegiance as it stands.

D. James Kennedy's Center for Reclaiming America, housed at his Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church under the auspices of Coral Ridge Ministries, called the ruling "outrageous."

The Center has launched a "nation-wide campaign to rally 1,000,000 citizens as soon as possible for a mass show of support of the Pledge in our schools. These petitions will be presented to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, as well as the U.S. Supreme Court, leaders in Congress and President Bush." As of the date of this writing, over 115,000 petitions have been delivered to the court. The petition reads:

To: 9th Circuit, U.S. Supreme Court, Leaders in Congress, and President Bush
From: 1,000,000 concerned citizens. I am outraged that the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals has banned the Pledge of Allegiance from public schools because of the phrase "under God." The Pledge is an important reminder of our nation's heritage. Our government must take immediate action to encourage the reciting of the Pledge in every school in America. Please know that I am taking a personal stand by joining this "I Support The Pledge" campaign.

More than 475 radio stations nationwide broadcast Kennedy's half-hour program, *Truths That Transform* daily.

Jerry Falwell has also devised a petition to send to the court, lambasting the court in the process. "This is probably the most dangerous ruling of any Federal Court in American history because it is a declaration that America is no longer "one nation under God," said Falwell. "This court is saying that America does not need or want God. This ruling must be reversed immediately!"

Dr. James Dobson called the court's decision "a shameless insult against America and all of her citizens."

Said Dobson: "This abominable ruling by an imperious court is a slap in the face to all Americans and people of faith. At a moment when national

unity should be of the utmost importance, two individuals chose to speak for an entire nation and, in the process, divide this country. There is no place for myopic edicts, especially during this time of national and international uncertainty. Clearly neither the events of [September 11](#), nor America's war on terrorism, was weighing on the judges' minds."

[Pat Robertson](#) has echoed these sentiments, calling the court's decision "outrageous." He points to the historical inclusion of references to God in many of the nation's official documents.

"Every constitution of the fifty states which make up our union contains a reference to God. Oaths sworn in court use the phrase '...so help me God,'" said Robertson. "The Supreme Court convenes with a prayer, 'God save this honorable court.' We are, and have continued to be, a religious people since our founding.

"Now, a tiny minority is using the federal court system to attempt to dismantle our entire public affirmation of faith in God. After the shocking events of September 11th, I was asked on television interviews, 'Where was God in all of this?' The court should realize that if something much more terrible than September 11th befalls our beloved nation, the answer to the question 'Where was God in all of this (?)' may well be 'He was excluded by the 9th Circuit.'"

The hue and cry is being heard not only on the broadcasts and Web sites of these and other prominent Christian organizations. Pulpits all over the country are sounding boards for pastors outraged at the court's ruling. Christians of every persuasion are being urged to write to their congressmen, senators, and the court itself.

These are what may legitimately be called "Christian responses" to the world's secular attitude. Unfortunately, the Christian response is not always the biblical response—how God Himself views things. Let us not forget what God says to us in Isaiah 55:8-9:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God and religion—even Christian religion—are often at odds.

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL RESPONSE?

God's view of the world is certainly apparent in the words Jesus spoke to His unbelieving relatives:

The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil. (John 7:7)

To those who do believe in Him He has said:

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.

If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19)

Conversely, He has commanded us not to love the world:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.

And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

Jesus distanced Himself from the world system on many occasions, not the least of which was when He stood before Pontius Pilate who asked Him if He were the King of the Jews.

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." (John 18:36)

Jesus not only distanced Himself from the world, He distanced Himself from rebellious Israel. He and the Father are not tied to any aspect of man's world. The purpose of redemption was to tie individual men to God's Kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. Any religious expression apart from that truth has no bearing with God.

It is a fact that the world hates Jesus Christ. The Gospel is a rock of offense and a stumbling block to those who are perishing (1 Peter 2:8). Those who are perishing are not only atheists like Michael Newdow. Every religious person who does not receive Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior—the only way to the Father—is perishing as well. And they hate Jesus and His disciples as much as does any atheist or agnostic.

Let us keep these truths in mind as we assess the real nature of this issue.

Before I go any further I would like to express my gratitude to the Father for allowing me to be born into the greatest nation in the history of the world—a nation that has historically permitted me to worship the true God without hindrance; a nation that has afforded me many material advantages; a nation whose citizens have proven themselves above all others in civility, compassion for the hurting, tolerance of those different, and in many noble pursuits. This nation, though not founded specifically as a theocracy, nevertheless inherited a biblical ethic from many of the men who first colonized its shores.

I love this nation, and I have served in its armed forces. In public forums when the national anthem is sung I am vexed by those who do not stand still in respect. I resent the national anthem being stylized by performers who treat it as a means to display their talents (or lack thereof) for the sake of entertainment rather than as a solemn tribute to those who fought to birth this nation, even if they were in rebellion. I even fly the flag for special occasions, recognizing that it symbolizes not the government or even the land, but the people who make up the nation, especially those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice so that we could enjoy all this nation has to offer. I do all these things even though I recognize that my allegiance is first and foremost to the Kingdom of Heaven and to its King.

While I love this nation and its people, I must confess that I love my brethren in other countries more than I love unbelieving Americans. I place all believers—American and foreign—in the same category: brethren who deserve my allegiance more than this country deserves it.

Is that heresy? One would think so to hear prominent Christian leaders extol the virtues of this country as if it alone were the Kingdom of God on earth, especially in the wake of 9-11.

That said, let us take the biblical approach to the court's ruling on the Pledge of Allegiance.

Although not all the framers of the Constitution were Christians, they wrote that document for a biblically-oriented people. The biblical ethic is no longer the guiding force for American society. For many Americans today the Constitution is only a piece of paper with no real meaning.

When Christian children—or Christians of any age—pledge their allegiance to the flag and to the nation for which it stands, they are joining with other people who are for the most part enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are enemies of God’s Kingdom of which we are citizens first and foremost. Perhaps they are not conscious enemies, but having refused to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, they are in Satan’s camp. It doesn’t matter whom they call “God”; they do not know God.

The point is that when Christians say “one nation under God,” in the same context as others who do not know God, they are acquiescing to the idea that a generic god is as good as the true God. Why? Because it is the true believer’s responsibility, in the face of any reference to God, to inform others that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ. To stand silently by while everyone in the room is pledging allegiance to a flag and a nation that does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as the only way to God is to give tacit approval to the idea that God accepts references to any god for Himself.

Of course, Americans as a whole would never accept the idea that the Pledge should include the phrase “one nation under YHWH,” or “one nation under Jesus Christ and the Father.” And therein lies the dilemma. To which god is it acknowledged that the nation is under? Christians would say “Jesus Christ,” or “the God of the Bible.” But most of those with whom they stand to pledge allegiance would say otherwise. Can the true believer in Jesus stand silent in the face of religious expression—in fact, joining in with the religious expression—and not cry out, “Jesus Christ alone is the way to God”? Can the true believer in Christ say in all honesty to himself, “it doesn’t matter what they believe; I know who God is”?

Should Christians even stand with the unbelieving and declare with them the same allegiance to a nation that does not recognize the true God as sovereign over it? Even President Bush alluded to “an” Almighty when protesting the court’s action. He didn’t even use the definite article, “the” Almighty.

But, then, could we expect him to? The United States is not a theocracy. It never was, nor can it ever be. The only theocracy ordained by God was the nation of Israel and then only for a specific time for a specific purpose.

Certainly Christians must be salt and light in this world, but we are not to be a part of the world. Nor are we to give our allegiance to any part of the world, no matter how that part may be superior to all other parts in the realm of religious tolerance.

This nation prides itself on its religious pluralism. God has no use for religious pluralism. That’s not to say we are to fight against other religions. We are to love all men and allow them to live as they wish. But we are not to have spiritual fellowship with them.

I realize I’m treading on dangerous ground here. Christians think it is better that any reference of God be included than no reference at all. But a generic god is not the God to whom we owe our allegiance. And even if Christians think of the true God while reciting the Pledge, the problem remains that Christians so love the world—especially the American world—that they have lost sight of the truth that God is a jealous God and He will not share His glory with anyone. Do they honestly think God is honored to hear a generic phrase uttered by unbelievers while those who claim to be His followers join with them?

Taking an Oath

Pledging allegiance to anyone or anything is the same as taking an oath. It is saying that one’s heart, mind, soul and body are given over to the thing being pledged. There are no disclaimers in the oath that allow one to remove oneself from it should the thing being pledged act contrary to the Kingdom of God. Jesus said:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’

But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne;

Nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

But let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No.” For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

James reiterated this with urgency:

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes,” be “Yes,” and your “No,”

“No,” lest you fall into judgment. (James 5:12)

“Above all.” Believers in Jesus are not to take oaths or to swear allegiance to anything or anyone besides Jesus and our heavenly Father. Yet prominent Christian voices are clamoring for the government to keep an ambiguous phrase in a pledge to which they should have no attachment.

Is the Nation Really “Under God”?

Christians joined with non-Christians may claim that the United States is under God’s rule, but is that true? We are a nation of diverse religions. We are also a nation that suffers under a burden of sin so great that it begs God’s judgment.

In the emotions of 9-11 and all the paeans to the indomitable “human spirit” heard not only in the secular world but in many pulpits, we have forgotten God’s Word that should disaster befall a city He is the cause (Amos 3:6).

While we sorrow over 9-11 let us not lose sight of God’s eternal purpose, especially as it relates to believers in Christ.

Ignoring that purpose, even Christianity in America has largely abandoned the biblical ethic. Scandals plague Christianity as in every aspect of American life: religion, politics, commerce, the media, athletics. And the public in general are not only unconcerned, they idolize the people who scandalize them. Should that characterize a nation “under God”?

It may be an affront to God for an atheist to challenge the status quo and win his case against calling this “one nation under God.” But is it not more of an affront to make the claim of being “under God” and yet act as if He has no real purpose in the lives of the nation’s citizens? Truly, God’s Word is an indictment against the United States no less than it was against Israel:

These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. (Matthew 15:8)

Which, then, is the greater affront? For an unbeliever to challenge God, or for a professed believer to live in disobedience to God? There is more hope for the former than there is for the latter.

But the religious of this nation—Christians especially—lift their voices in protest of the agnostics and atheists, vilifying them with hate-filled language. They do not see their own sin-

fulness before God exhibited not by their “holy” living, but by their compromise with other religions. Joining hands with God’s enemies who choose other gods before Him, they remain silent lest they offend them.

Far be it for them to realize or even consider the possibility that God may be using atheists like Michael Newdow to expose the hypocrisy of religion—especially the Christian religions. The greatest danger to the Faith is not atheism. It is tolerance of religious beliefs contrary to God’s Word. It is uniting with religious unbelievers for common causes.

It may be argued that, regardless of the people, the nation itself is under God because the founding fathers were Christians.

Although some professing Christians were instrumental in colonizing the continent early on, the U.S. government was never formed to establish a Christian nation. In truth, many of the framers of the Constitution were at best Freemasons who were also church people, and at worst deists who denied the Lord Jesus Christ and even the very nature of our personal God.

Yet there is one sense in which this nation is under God:

This decision is by the decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men. (Daniel 4:17)

So, yes, the United States is, in a sense, “under God.” But so is every nation on earth. No doubt this offends those who believe the United States has a “manifest destiny” to rule the world.

A HISTORY OF THE PLEDGE

How is it that the Pledge of Allegiance has become such a hot issue for Christians? There was no Pledge of Allegiance until just over one hundred years ago, and there was no mention of any god in it. The truth is that the Pledge of Allegiance was authored by socialist editor and Baptist clergyman [Francis Bellamy](#). It first was published in 1892 in *The Youth’s Companion*, a children’s magazine where he worked.

The pledge was based on the ideals of Bellamy’s cousin, [Edward Bellamy](#), author of the social utopian novels, *Looking Backward* and *Equality*.²

Bellamy crafted the Pledge to foster the idea that the middle class of this

nation could fashion a planned political and social economy, equitable for all. John W. Baer states:

The Pledge was published in the September 8th issue of [The Youth’s Companion](#), the leading family magazine and the *Reader’s Digest* of its day. Its owner and editor, Daniel Ford, had hired Francis in 1891 as his assistant when Francis was pressured into leaving his Baptist church in Boston because of his socialist sermons. As a member of his congregation, Ford had enjoyed Francis’s sermons. Ford later founded the liberal and often controversial Ford Hall Forum, located in downtown Boston.

In 1892 [Francis Bellamy](#) was also a chairman of a committee of state superintendents of education in the [National Education Association](#). As its chairman, he prepared the program for the public schools’ quadricentennial celebration for Columbus Day in 1892. He structured this public school program around a flag raising ceremony and a flag salute—his “Pledge of Allegiance.”

His original Pledge read as follows: “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” He considered placing the word, “equality,” in his Pledge, but knew that the state superintendents of education on his committee were against equality for women and African Americans.

In 1923 and 1924 the National Flag Conference, under the “leadership of the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, changed the Pledge’s words, “my Flag,” to “the Flag of the United States of America.” Bellamy disliked this change, but his protest was ignored.

In 1954, Congress after a campaign by the [Roman Catholic] [Knights of Columbus](#), added the words, “under God,” to the Pledge. The Pledge was now both a patriotic oath and a public prayer.³

Writing as a guest columnist for *The Seattle Times*, Rosemary J. Zook states:

Granted, they are important words, and already the disclaimers are flying about just what it is that “God” means. It’s being dubbed “generic,” “spiritual,” “not a Christian God,” “belongs in there,” “not prayer,” etc.—all in defense of the God of the Pledge of Allegiance, which is apparently whatever you want it to mean.⁴

So the Pledge of Allegiance is a “patriotic oath” authored by a socialist who was also a Baptist pastor.

CONCLUSION

To some, the Pledge of Allegiance is more than just an oath of loyalty to the American flag; it is also a “public prayer.” That seems to be stretching it a bit, but the truth remains that the concept of “god” to which the varied beliefs of those who recite it may apply leaves believers in Jesus torn between genuine love of their country and the realization that any appeal to a generic “god” has no standing before the true God. We realize that the oath is not to a piece of fabric, but to the nation that the flag represents, even though the words “the the flag” remain.

Allegiance to any nation is honorable so long as that allegiance does not supercede allegiance to Christ Jesus. Our brethren in other countries do not take an oath of allegiance to the United States, but they must also weigh whatever allegiance their country demands of them against their allegiance to our Lord.

We cannot equate love for America with faith in God. It is fine to love America, but as the nation turns more and more against Christ, where will we stand?

The noble intent of its author aside, the Pledge of Allegiance is still an oath. Yet Christians are being herded by their pastors and other media personalities to insist that the Pledge of Allegiance is a sacred ode, and that it remain as is, ignoring two aspects of God’s Word: 1) the prohibition against oaths; 2) fellowship with unbelievers.

Most Christians will protest what I have said here. They will continue their love affair with the world under the mistaken notion that it is somehow more virtuous to be patriotic than to be true to God’s Word. Yet the best patriotism is faithfulness to the only true God. He alone determines which nations stand and which fall. ❖

NOTES

1. “Mom wants girl out of California Pledge of Allegiance case,” *The Seattle Times*, Nation Digest, August 6, 2002.
2. John W. Baer, Ph.D., “The Pledge of Allegiance, A Short *Thancestory*, 1892 - 1992 (Annapolis, MD: John W. Baer, 1992).
3. *Ibid*.

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PO Box 290
Redmond, WA 98073-0290
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