

One Nation without God

7 July 2002

On roughly the same day recently, we heard on the news that an appeals court panel in California had decided the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag were unconstitutional, and that the officers of another large corporation had stolen billions of dollars by cooking their books. The two events are no doubt unconnected, except in the imagination of the observer who is inclined to bewail the spiritual state of America these days. The crimes of Worldcom’s bosses led to losses by investors and even more by ordinary workers (who always suffer far worse punishments than the actual criminals). But crimes by the rich are nothing new, and while the court decision cost no one his livelihood or life savings, it appeared to many more of a trend than a repetition.

The general reaction to the decision, from the President to the editorial cartoonists (who rarely agree with him) was that it was ridiculous, and legal pundits opined that it would soon be overturned. At least that was the initial reaction. After a few days on the circuit, both the proponents and opponents of the decision had begun to take it more seriously. Atheists asserted their right to conscience as if their eternal salvation depended on it, while believers asserted the desirability of recognition of Deity without asserting that any particular Deity was being recognized. What a few days before almost everyone had been inclined to accept without much reflection suddenly became controversial. And it is in the nature of such things that it will so remain, whatever the fate of this particular judicial pronouncement.

As a former atheist, I can understand the logic of the plaintiff in the case. When I was eleven or twelve years old, I believed passionately that the recognition of God in the Pledge of Allegiance and in the national motto were grave threats to liberty. As a Christian, I now believe that faith in God is the only guarantee of liberty, and resent the movement to eliminate all religion from public discourse. As a historian, I can also see this argument in the context of the history of Western thought and particularly of American civil religion. In that context, everyone is right, and everyone is wrong.

Both historically and logically, it is absurd to argue that “one nation under God indivisible” is not in itself a religious statement. If a reference to God is not religious, then it is blasphemy, and the believers who defend “under God” should be the first to condemn it. The question is what religion it asserts, and whether that assertion is a violation of anyone’s rights. Furthermore, the implications of putting this question into controversy merit examination.

Under the surface of the debates on this issue, as on similar ones, is the question as to whether the United States is in origin a “Christian nation.” Those in favor point to the undoubted religious motivation of many of the early colonists, the evident faith of many of the nation’s founders, and the references to God in the Declaration of Independence and other early documents. Those opposed appeal to a long tradition of tolerance in many places, to the skepticism of many of the Founding Fathers, and the clear determination of the framers of

the Constitution and the Bill of Rights to prevent the establishment of a national church. Moreover, they assert, regardless of the situation at the end of the eighteenth century, the country is now so pluralistic that any public recognition of religion is an imposition. The defenders of the “Christian nation” contend that to abandon all recognition of the country’s religious heritage will destroy any moral bonds that have united American society.

I would argue on the evidence that the United States is not a Christian nation, but it was in its founding, and to a large degree still is, a nation of Christians. It is certainly a nation of monotheists, of believers in one God. The majority of Americans consider themselves to be to some degree believers in the tradition of ethical monotheism that has its origin in Judaism and is today represented by Christianity and Islam as well. At the time of the American Revolution, this belief was almost universal. In several of the thirteen colonies, moreover, some form of Christianity was officially established and supported by law and taxation. Establishment remained in Massachusetts and Connecticut for some fifty years after independence. While the Constitution specifically forbade religious tests for federal office, some states excluded atheists from holding state offices. Such evidence supports the “Christian nation” argument.

Other evidence admits some qualification. To begin with, to the extent that the United States was in its origin a Christian nation, it was specifically a Protestant nation. While most of the legal disabilities on Catholics had been removed by time of the writing of the Constitution, Protestantism and Americanism were closely identified throughout the nineteenth century. The American Party before the Civil War was explicitly anti-Catholic, and to the extent (and it was often great) that religion was part of the curriculum in public schools, it was Protestant religion. Most of the most vocal defenders of the Christian nature of the United States today are Protestants, although it was a Catholic organization, the Knights of Columbus, that led the campaign that added “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954.

When we turn to the Founding Fathers themselves, however, we find a mixed picture. Most of the Founders were members of churches, although some were more regular in their practice than others. Among the signers of the Declaration of Independence, John Witherspoon was a Presbyterian minister, and Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic, had been educated by the Jesuits in Europe; Samuel Adams, for one, was well-known as a dedicated Calvinist. But they were not the ones who wrote the Declaration and put into it an acknowledgment of God. Thomas Jefferson, while not the atheist his enemies painted him, was a Deist and certainly not an orthodox Christian. Benjamin Franklin, who participated in the writing of the Declaration and designed the Great Seal of the United States, held only slightly more orthodox views and was a Freemason, as were George Washington and other Founders who like him were nominal members of a Christian church.

Freemasonry was then—and to some extent still is—a religious movement, which is why Catholics and most Evangelicals reject it. Masons acknowledge a Deity, the “Supreme Architect,” but avoid any belief in a revealed theology. The God of the Masons is a Creator, a moral Lawgiver, perhaps even a Judge, but not the crucified Savior in Whom Christians put their faith. It is this God to whom

the Declaration of Independence alludes. It is the all-seeing eye of this God that surmounts the Masonic pyramid of liberty on the reverse of Franklin's Great Seal. Freemasonry is closely woven into the early history of the United States; although the order itself has been viewed in some quarters with suspicion, the Masonic God has been a convenient object of American civil religion, a Greatest Common Factor that can be conveniently identified with the One God worshiped by Christians—or not, if it suits you. A Christian and a Deist can both say “In God we trust” and mean it, even if they mean somewhat different things. The trick is not to ask what they mean.

There were not many outright atheists in the world at the end of the eighteenth century, and fewer in America. Belief in some sort of God was the normal background of life. In the sense of recognizing a Supreme Being, religion was so universal that it was almost perceived not to be religion. It was one of those things that could be taken for granted. Religion was perceived when it involved sectarian difference: for example, the Constitution provides that officers of the United States should serve on “oath or affirmation” since it was recognized that some religious groups (like the Quakers) forbade the taking of oaths. In that context “one nation under God” and similar phrases are not to be perceived as religious statements.

Belief in God becomes a religion in the presence of its opposite. The generic Deity of civil religion could stand in for the God of any specific religion, but not for the militant faith in the nonexistence of any god at all. Atheists are a small minority, but over the last forty years a series of atheist-inspired judicial decisions have eliminated references to God from a number of public places, in particular from public schools. The Greatest Common Factor was at least compatible with most religious systems, but anything multiplied by zero is zero. To make public places safe for atheism, they must be made atheistic.

Making public life atheistic is a decision in favor of a certain religious system. Atheism is not faith in nothing, it is faith in Nothing; not in *rien*, but in *le Néant*. An agnostic can (indeed must, to be consistent) acknowledge God-if-there-is-one; the atheist believes with religious certainty that there is no being ontologically superior to himself. Atheism is not freedom from religion, as some atheists profess, but a particular religion, in the sense that religion is a system of relating the individual with the most basic realities. The acknowledgment implied in “one nation under God” is not such a system in itself, but it may be interpreted as part of many such systems. To exclude it, however, is to embrace a system that excludes the possibility of a Supreme Being, that is, to establish one religion to the exclusion of others.

Here is the root of the controversy that has raged for forty years over public religion. The quarrel is not over mere words. Very few, I think, actually believe that the nation will stand or fall over whether or not schoolchildren say “one nation indivisible” as they did before 1954. The argument is more over whether or not theism is a religion. To the believer, theism is merely part of a religion; to the atheist it is a religion because his religion excludes it. The vast majority of Americans are not theists; they are Christians or Jews or Muslims or Mormons or Buddhists or Hindus or believers in a vague and undogmatic Pantheism. Few if any believe in the Masonic God of traditional civil religion *tout*

court; but they can all recognize in the generic God an element of their belief. What they cannot accept is a worldview that does not recognize any God.

Since the generic God is not an actual Deity in which anyone believes, believers coming to the defense of religion in public places are understandably perceived as arguing in favor of their own religion, since none would allow that generic religion is a system worthy of belief. It is easy at this point for atheists to exploit the fear of sectarian strife that arguments by believers in any particular religion raise. Since most American believers are Christians, raising the spectre of persecution by Christians of minority religions can at least silence other believers, if not actually win them to the side of political atheism. But in the end there is no middle ground, no neutrality: either the existence of a Supreme Being is possible, or it is not.

It would be clearly inimical to American constitutional principles, and unacceptable to a majority of Americans, to establish any particular religion in place of atheism. The consensus civil religion arose at a time when belief in God was nearly universal, in particular among the intellectual elite. Today, however, while the majority of Americans still believe in God, and indeed in some particular religion, among those who dominate intellectual life, the means of communication, and educational institutions, at least a functional atheism prevails. The cultural climate has changed during the last half of the twentieth century into one much more congenial to atheistic belief. The old consensus was founded on a tacit agreement, the kind of agreement that will hardly work if made explicit. We may be able to salvage a few formulas, but the attack will not go away, and will only become stronger.

Christians—and other religious groups—can no longer rely on a congenial environment where belief is taken for granted. Real religious belief has never been established in this country, only the atmosphere for belief. Now it appears that atheism may be the established order. Since we cannot rely on the public order and social institutions to sustain religion, we must rely on our own institutions. Hitherto this has been the practice of minority religions; now it must be the practice of a numerical majority that finds itself a collection of ideological minorities.