

One Nation Under God

The recent ruling and then retraction about the constitutionality (or not) of the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance raise a number of interesting questions and call for some kind of response. At the same time, the realization that much nonsense has been written on many sides of the issue encourages a certain modesty and wariness.

As a part of this, I have to wonder what the exact status of the pledge is. I do not know that persons born as American citizens are required to take the pledge. I do understand that school children are not required to recite it. So, it would seem that efforts have been made to insure that no one’s conscience is bound by it against his or her will.

It seems to me that at the very least the pledge serves as a device to teach school children patriotism (which, it also seems to me, is a very good thing for schools to do). It is also used in a number of public ceremonies and civic occasions to allow adults voluntarily to recommit themselves to the nation.

Still, it is significant that the Congress of the United States of America has acted upon, amended, and adopted, the wording of the Pledge of Allegiance. To that extent, it has some official status. And that, of course, is where it gets interesting.

I do not need to rehearse here the historical arguments that the people who founded this nation came here with the understanding that they were very much on a mission from God. Nor do I need to go through an explanation that “separation of church and state” is nowhere mentioned in the Constitution, which instead disallows the establishment of a religion.

What fascinates me, however, is what the words “under God” actually accomplish in the Pledge of Allegiance. What do they do? What purpose do they serve? How do they function in the pledge?

It occurs to me that their single most important function in the pledge is a negative one, and therefore to some extent hidden, but extraordinarily important. What these two words say is that the state is *not* absolute. What these two words say is that the government is *not* the final authority over our lives. And since the Congress has adopted the pledge, it is the government of the state itself which has affirmed its own limitations. That is mindboggling! It is a rare privilege to live in such a state.

The great temptation of any state is to believe that it is absolute, that its authority is final and complete, and that its life is eternal. States do not like to bow before other states, and they even try to deny that they have to bow before the powers of nature and the forces of history. These temptations tend toward absolutism and totalitarianism. Citizens then exist only for the sake of the state and may easily be disposed of when they no longer contribute to the cause of the state. Other states are only obstacles in the way.

It is a great relief to me that the government of this nation has officially declared that it does not believe that its authority is absolute! It does not have the final say so about who I am, what I think, what I believe, or how I live. It certainly has the limited authority to use its police force to encourage me not to exhibit criminal behavior, and I am grateful for that. Throughout the years, there have been different understandings about how such behaviors are defined. Still, in principle, the state has acknowledged that it is not absolute. That is a rare and precious admission, and one that we should all strive to preserve. Moreover, it is good to realize that this is not an anomaly of the pledge. The same limited nature of the sovereignty of the state is officially enshrined in the Constitution's division of powers, limiting of federal authority, and protection of individual rights.

The Pledge of Allegiance does not define God, and it should not. That is to say, on the positive side of the contribution of these two words, "under God," there is very little, and that is good. There is no danger of theocracy here. The state is not seeking to establish any one religion over another, and it should not. The suggestion that these two words even tend toward establishing a religion is ridiculous and should be rejected as such. More to the point, such a suggestion is mortally dangerous.

The two words are almost just a marker, and that is the way it should be. There are many different views of God, and each religion is free here to promote its own view, even those who make a religion out of saying there is no God. So, while from any particular religious point of view the positive contribution of these generic words to the pledge is minimal to the point of being problematic, that is good and is the way it should be. What we must not do is allow misguided atheists to cajole us into allowing the state to forget and then to deny that it is not absolute. That would be an unmitigated disaster for all.

For the government to say that we are a nation "under God" does not say a thing, positively, about the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and that is good. We do not want the government telling us about God. But negatively, these two words tell us in a very clear, powerful, and compelling way that our own government does not understand the state to be absolute, and that is an incredibly important realization and affirmation for which I am profoundly grateful (to the state and to God!).

Religion in general gets bad press these days, and Christianity in particular gets the worst. Many anti-religionists would have us to believe that most of the wars and killing that go on in the world have to do with the excesses of religion. The reality is that by far most of the killing that took place in the twentieth century was carried out by officially atheistic governments against their own citizens. Those governments had no safeguards. There was nothing to hold them back from the temptation of thinking that their states were absolute. They acted without regard for God, and therefore, inevitably, they acted without regard for human life.

The words "under God" function in the Pledge of Allegiance as that much needed safeguard. Without them, nations tend toward murderous totalitarianism. With them, there is at least the possibility of some restraint. A little humility goes a long way. Ironically, one of the very things that can continue to make this nation great is the healthy awareness that this nation is not

absolute. It is not only the case that this restraint makes room for religion. It is also the case that this restraint makes room for human life and therefore makes possible true greatness of nation.

As for worshiping God, offering prayer, teaching faith, and encouraging mission, we can leave all that to the churches.

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