

“GOD IN OUR NATIONAL LIFE”

A Sermon Preached at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
on November 4, 2001
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

In times of ordeal, people are good about rallying ‘round. They put aside their differences and pitch in to help, to comfort each other, drawing strength and hope from the sense of their connectedness. In the days and weeks after September 11, that spirit was much on display in our land.

People who attempted to raise points of view that would threaten our sense of unity – from any angle, from Pat Robertson’s to Susan Sontag’s -- were appreciated by a few but harshly assailed by popular opinion. It seemed the people did not want debate, however thoughtful or sincere. We seemed to want, more than anything, to be one.

I have a sense, though, that that sense of national unity is beginning to fragment or fray. This is hardly surprising. Two reasons come quickly to mind. First, for a variety of reasons people are trying to associate the mood of common endeavor with their own pet project, which could be low, low financing on a new car they have to sell, or some tax plan, or some tendentious view of human history.

Second, despite the ubiquitous sense of pain, loss, anxiety, and fear, there are actual issues at hand about which people disagree passionately. If you doubt it, next time you are with more than one or two other people, ask, So what do you guys think about our policy toward Israel? Or just observe, in as neutral a voice as you can affect, Boy, there are sure a lot of flags around these days. I find feelings run high, and quickly.

I talked a little bit about the flag last week myself, and more about the pledge that people make to it, about which *I* have some high feeling. In response to a number of conversations and requests, I’m going to return to that theme again this week at greater length, and the whole question of the use of the word God in our national discourse because I think the way it has been used amounts to another attempt to commandeer our unity of utter dismay to advance a particular political point of view, one with which I disagree.

What happened for me was, I started seeing signs out in front of businesses that said, “United We Stand” and right under it, “In God We Trust.” Those two don’t go together, if the “we” who stand united is meant to be the people of this country. Because some of us believe in more than one god, or no god, or a goddess, or whatever. When it comes to Americans, in God only some of us trust, and I think we all have a commitment not to care one way or the other, however much we may ourselves believe in God or not.

But it’s not a simple matter, is it. After all, “In God We Trust” is our national motto. The words are on our coins, on our bills, on our courtroom walls, and if a current national effort succeeds, they will be on the walls of our children’s classrooms as well. It can seem as if this is a theistic, even a Christian, or at least a Judeo-Christian nation, and always has been, one nation under God, like it says in the pledge of allegiance. But it didn’t always say that, and it shouldn’t say that now.

For those who weren’t here last week, I have to take a paragraph and tell what I said when the children were still here then. I said most people love their country,

whatever it is. It's good if they love the whole world, too, but most people love their country in some way; and there are lots of things to love about our country. Then I said there were lots of ways of loving a country. I didn't mention any of the nasty ways. I mentioned some ways everyone can love the country, like being kind. I mentioned others things that some people did, like voting, or keeping up with the news if you still a kid. Some people love the country that way; some people don't. Eventually I got around to loving the flag, which is important to some people as a way to love the country, but isn't to others. "Some people even pledge allegiance to the flag," I said, "and the children may be asked to do that sometimes in school. And you may really like doing that. It may seem like a good way of saying, you love the country. So you can say that if you want ... but if you don't want, you don't have to. This is America, and one of the things we most love about our country is its freedom, especially our religious freedom, and if you don't want to talk about 'one nation, under God,' you certainly don't have to. Me, I never do. But if you want to say the pledge, that's fine to do, too, if that's what you believe."

I didn't know how to say that any better to kids who range in age from 6 to 12, so after they left I encouraged parents to consider talking about the subject more with their children, because I knew at least the older children could understand that it's not just a question of being true to your own faith when you're asked to spout theological doctrine, but it's also about being true to our national commitment to keep the state out of the business of fostering religion, particularly any one version (like belief in God). So even if you did believe in God, you might want to refuse to acquiesce in a practice so antithetical to American freedom.

I knew the older children might get that, because I was ten when I got it myself. That was the year the words "under God" were added to the pledge, and I knew that was un-American. I have to confess, my 10-year-old political consciousness had already been raised because it was 1954, the year of the Army-McCarthy hearings, therefore the year that the Sawyers finally got a television set. So I saw Sen. McCarthy in action, and I knew he was a bad guy. Not that I imagined the Communists were the good folk. No, to me heroism was to have had no connections to the Communists party but still to refuse to answer questions the Committee had no business asking, questions about one's political views, which should be off limits to governmental intrusion.

So then along comes the change in the pledge, and I wouldn't do it, and I never have. Mostly I'd say the pledge, but without those two words. These days I don't say it at all. By now I know more of the history, how in 1940 the Supreme Court upheld the expulsion of two Jehovah's Witnesses from a public school in Pennsylvania for refusing to say the pledge, which their religion forbids them to do. It was a disastrously bad decision, followed by ugly incidents of intimidation against Jehovah's Witnesses, most famously in Kennebunk, Maine. In 1943 the Supreme Court reversed itself in another case involving Jehovah's Witnesses. This gives me a chance to quote the notable sentences by Justice Jackson, writing for the Court: "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein. If there are any circumstances which permit an exception, they do not now occur to us."

And, at least here in Massachusetts, children are not required to take part in the pledge, and teachers, while they are expected to initiate the pledge in their classes on

occasion, need not say the words themselves. Or – here’s an idea that’s been going around of late, as the pledge is being initiated more often at schools and other public gatherings – people can tinker with the wording. You can just leave out “under God,” but one person substitutes the word, “many faiths” – “one nation, many faiths, with liberty and justice for all.” Another person just says the beginning and end: “I pledge allegiance to ... liberty and justice for all.”

(It reminds me of the story of the child who grew curious that every week in church her father recited the Apostle’s Creed, even though she knew he was an agnostic and a skeptic. She asked him about that, and he replied cheerily that it was really no problem, he just left off the first three words: “I believe in.”)

Tinkering with the text on an official level has been going on from the beginning. The pledge was written in the summer of 1892 by Francis Bellamy for the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ landing in the New World. It was published in a popular children’s magazine where he worked, and used in Columbus Day celebrations all over the country, which were planned by a committee of state superintendents of education, a committee Bellamy chaired.

Originally, the pledge said, “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands: one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.” He had thought of saying “with Equality, Liberty and Justice for all,” but knew the other committee members opposed equality for women and African-Americans. (Of course, you can put the word back in if you want, as some people do, just as some anti-abortion groups end the pledge, “with Liberty and Justice for all, born and unborn.”)

A few months after it was first published, a small change was made in the pledge [“and to the Republic”]. “In 1923 and 1924 the National Flag Conference, under the leadership of the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, changed “my Flag” to “the flag of the United States of America,” apparently wanting to make sure that the millions of new American immigrants understood what flag was intended. “Bellamy disliked the change, but his protest was ignored.”¹

(Bellamy, by the way, was a cousin of Edward Bellamy, who wrote the hugely influential utopian novel, *Looking Backward*. Like his famous cousin, Francis was a socialist, which seems to have been the reason he was pressured into leaving his job as a Baptist minister in Boston.)

In its updated form, his pledge finally received official recognition from Congress in 1942 as part of an act regarding the use of the flag. And then came 1954 and the last official change, adding God. It was that kind of a time about then. The tag line “So help me God” was added to the oaths of office for federal judges and justices. In 1955, the phrase “In God We Trust” was required on all coins and bills. The year after that, “In God We Trust” became our national motto.

Our motto always had been “E Pluribus Unum,” ever since 1782. It means, one from many parts. “In God We Trust” first appeared on coins during the Civil War, in 1864, echoing the words of Francis Scott Key in the fourth and final verse of the Star-Spangled Banner, “Then conquer we must, when our cause is just, And this be our motto: ‘In God is our trust.’” (By the way, that song, first published in 1815, didn’t become our

¹ John W. Baer, “The Pledge of Allegiance: A Short History”
(<http://www.vineyard.net/vineyard/history/pledge.htm>).

national anthem in 1931. Few of these designations and practices are as old as some may think.)

There have been at least three legal challenges to the theistic addition that have reached federal appeals courts, but each court has ruled that the use of the word God is not religious, which I don't understand. But I do understand that even if it's legal so far, to my mind it's still not right. It's not in the best American tradition, which does not presume to take sides in matters of faith.

Which may just mean it's not in the tradition favored by me and by our religious movement ... at least the tradition that has been favored by our religious movement for the second half of our time here in Wayland. The first half, especially at the beginning, we were pretty cozy with the idea of church and state working so closely together they were two parts of one whole. When the congregation was gathered here in 1640, it was understood that the colony was a theocracy, governed by God as revealed in the Bible as interpreted by Calvin as taught by the clergy. In 1660, for example, the legislature (the General Court) of the Bay Colony ordered the county courts "to purge all churches within their several jurisdictions of unorthodox teaching."² Comparisons to the Taliban go a bit far, but there certainly was the same sense of religious certitude and intolerance.

And that insensitivity is an American tradition, too. I have found this notion of dual traditions helpful when it comes to the inclusion of religion in our national public life. The notion is nicely developed in a book I've cited here before, *The Godless Constitution* by historians Isaac Kramnick and R. Lawrence Moore. Because there certainly is a history of official favoritism, especially on the state level, not just toward theism but toward Christianity in general and Protestantism in particular, even particular denominations (as anyone from Utah can tell you).

Kramnick and Moore document it. When the Constitution was written in 1787, "eleven of the thirteen states had religious tests for public office written into their constitutions."³ To hold office in Massachusetts, you had to believe in the Christian religion (and even that was a lot more liberal than the earliest days of the settlement, when you had to belong to a church to vote, and to belong to a church you had to be able to tell of your conversion experience). "Pennsylvania required its officials to be Protestants who believed in God and in the divine inspiration of the Old and New Testaments; in Delaware all elected and appointed officials were required to profess 'faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only son, and in the Holy Spirit, one God blessed forevermore."⁴

One could go on, and I have been known to. There are some pretty colorful, passionate passages from orators who argued for including religious tests for office-holding in the Constitution, or who later argued from the Civil War on for a Constitutional amendment affirming "Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Governor among nations, and his revealed will as the supreme authority." I like quoting that because I get to quote as well Horace Greeley's reply when the amendment was first proposed. He said, "Almighty God

² Jacob C. Meyer, *Church and State in Massachusetts From 1740 to 1833* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1930) 7-8.

³ Isaac Kramnick and R. Lawrence Moore, *The Godless Constitution* 30.

⁴ Kramnick and Moore 30

is not the source of authority and power in our government; the people of the United States are.”

That catches the spirit of the other tradition Kramnick and Moore track, which has been the dominant one from the start. The people who drafted the Constitution knew the practices in most of the states – and they chose not to repeat them on the national level. Religious as they were individually, they chose not religious but secular government, which takes no interest in religion except to protect its exercise.

We are not the country some like to imagine, devoted to Jesus and God and the Bible. Oh, most Americans may be so in their personal practice and in their beliefs. But the numbers grow yearly of those who are not part of the national consensus. The scholar and author Diana Eck writes that the United States is the most religiously diverse society on earth.

But just as important as the practical reality is the age-old national commitment, so humane and essential, to be a people who do not imagine that a person’s citizenship or goodness or worth depends on any religious test, a people whose public life struggles to be free of every religious confinement, a people devoted to freedom of faith. In times of ordeal, we need to rally ‘round and stand united in *that* trust.