

# ONE NATION UNDER GOD?

INTERVIEWS BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

*"Whenever we remove a brick from the wall separating church from state, we risk religious strife and undermine the foundations of freedom."*

—U.S. SUPREME COURT JUSTICE JOHN PAUL STEVENS

Justice Stevens was speaking about the recent Supreme Court decision to subsidize religious and other private schools with public tax money, but he might as well have been referring to a ruling made the same day (June 26) by another federal court declaring the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional because the phrase "under God" inserted into it half a century ago violates separation of church and state.

A three-judge panel of the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco made the ruling in a case brought by a former emergency-room physician who would seem to be a successor to the late Madeline Murray O'Hare, once the nation's most prominent atheist who was murdered with a nephew. Dr. Michael Newdow brought the suit on behalf of his 2nd grade daughter whose First Amendment rights he said were being harmed by state sanctioned "monotheism."

Up until 1954, from its official adoption by Congress in 1942, the Pledge of Allegiance made no reference to God: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

The Pledge was written in 1892 by a Baptist minister, Francis Bellamy, and published in a magazine, *The Youth's Companion*. The original version did not mention the United States and was concerned with an "indivisible" nation because of the Civil War thirty years earlier. "United States of America" was added in 1923/24, and the offending "under God" on Flag Day 1954, ostensibly to "show atheistic communism" that the USA was a "Christian country" (the phrase was sponsored by Knights of Columbus) as well as a 'patriotic' repentance by conservatives for the downfall of virulent McCarthyism.

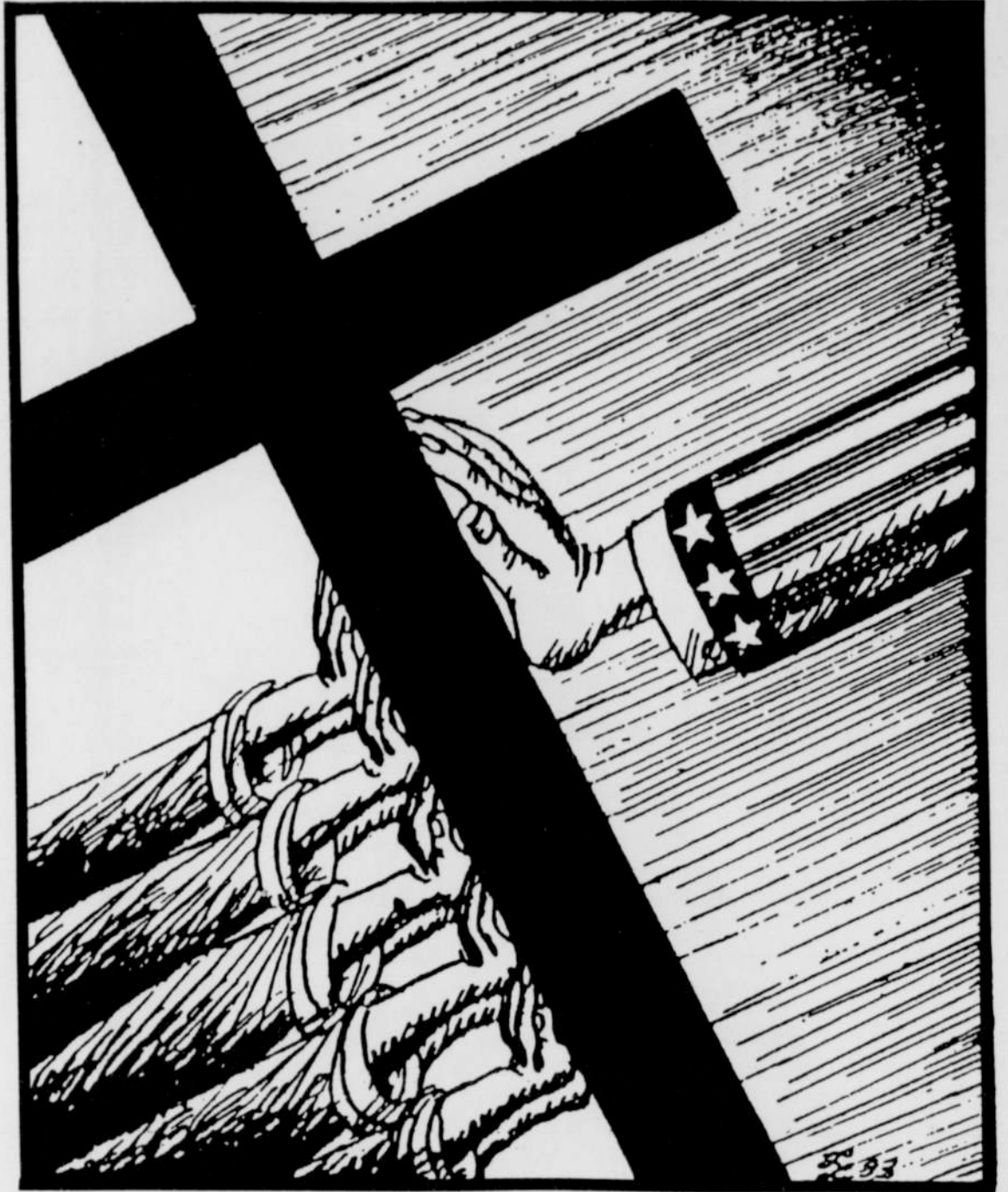
Reaction to the ruling has been immediate and harshly critical at its most vocal. Members of the House of Representatives recited the Pledge with "under God" from the Capitol steps and sang "God Bless America" for good measure; 99 senators (excluding the ancient Strom Thurmond who was hospitalized) signed a resolution denouncing the ruling. The President has declared in recent speeches, "We are one nation under God," and further blurs separation of church and state by extolling the Supreme Court decision to provide public funds for parochial schools and calling for tax support of so-called "faith based" social programs: "Our government should not fear faith in our society," the President says.

Conservative religious groups are the most fervently derogatory of the ruling, and the quite often reproached Jerry Falwell has started a petition to the Supreme Court to overturn the circuit court.

Dr. Newdow's life has been threatened by several phone callers.

The circuit court panel's decision, which will not take effect for several months to allow for appeals and quite likely a hearing before the U.S. Supreme Court, would if not overturned ban the Pledge of Allegiance in the nine western states of its jurisdiction — Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon and Washington.

A few Oregon North Coast residents who would conceivably be affected by the ruling were interviewed by the NCTE for their opinion of God & Flag.



LEONID LAMM

## MISTY O'BRIEN

It just makes me sick to think people are taking this to court. People complain about the country not having morals, and then they try to take anything with any reference to morals out.

We have freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.

I'm surprised that portion "under God" was put into the Pledge of Allegiance as recent as 1954 — but atheists aren't required to say it. I don't think people should be restricted from saying it.

## MARYANNE MEYERS

I think we shouldn't be saying a Pledge of Allegiance in the schools — I don't think we ever should have. And I don't think we should be praying in school.

I think prayer is a uniquely personal ritual and the minute you organize it, it takes on a smarmy aspect that mocks the process.

I think it is anti-American that we are asked to pledge allegiance to anything. Standing next to our desks with our hands over our hearts to pledge allegiance to our country has an Amway aspect that is unappealing as a way to revere our nation. And it is meaningless. It doesn't make us better citizens and it doesn't benefit anybody.

## JUDITH GRIFFIS

I don't see the problem. The words "under God" were an afterthought added years after the Pledge of Allegiance was adopted. Just take them out. As long as the words remain they sound like a government endorsement of religion.

## JIM STANOVICH

I think the ruling is ridiculous. I don't see how "one nation under God" can be so offensive to anybody, even an atheist. Why should any religion be offended if the Pledge of Allegiance has 'God' in it?

Nowhere in the 1st Amendment do I see the elimination of 'God'. Separation of church and state has become the elimination of church and state.

At Boy Scouts last night we successfully said the Pledge of Allegiance without the black helicopters swooping down on us, so I guess we're still okay.

## BERNIE BURGER

Jesus Christ, is *nothing* sacred?

The whole thing is to keep church and state separate.

## JESSE WOITAS

I was kind of surprised. What's so bad about it?  
(He is 10 years old and going into the 5th grade.)

## MAURENE WOITAS

You have to get to the money. Doesn't all our money say *In God We Trust*?

I teach 1st grade and we say the Pledge of Allegiance all of the time. Especially after September 11, how could anyone dispute it?

(She is Jesse's mother.)

## CRAIG P. COSTELLO

The inference that using the term "under God" denotes a religious context is assumptive. There are many groups and people that use the word 'God' and they are not religious.

Belief in God could mean belief in a power greater than oneself but does not define what the word 'God' means, be it singular or plural — and it does not define what God is.

God could be a river, for many people believe rivers are more powerful than man is, and that they should be left alone and not be controlled by man.

The word 'God' could mean a spirit being. It could mean spirit beings, plural. It could mean anything that is. It does not have to be used in a religious context.

Many people who are not religious use the term 'God' separate from religion. A lot of people do not believe in the infallibility that religious fellowships or entities believe they possess.

## SARAH PATENAUDE

I thought it was a good idea because not every one believes in God and I don't think they should force people to say it if they don't want to.

I'm not saying I don't believe in God, but if people don't they shouldn't have to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

It's very boring, anyway.

(She is about to be a 9th grader at Astoria High School.)



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## PATRICK KEEFE

I was delighted at the news. It gave me hope in the American Way. I was really caught by surprise the original Pledge of Allegiance didn't have "under God" in it and that it was inserted. When I realized Congress inserted it, I knew that of course it was unconstitutional — and so it was not such a surprise the court made the decision. It was an obvious decision.

I wanted to listen to the conservative talkshows on the radio but never got around to it. I did watch some TV and heard the distaste — the "How could they do this?" attitude.

## FRANK MANGELSDORF

In 1943 the Supreme Court ruled that students didn't have to say the Pledge of Allegiance, but had the right to.

The Constitution provides freedom of religion, but not freedom from religion. We are not to have an atheist state. Religion cannot be banned.

All American money, coin and paper, says *'In God We Trust'*. Should we outlaw money in public schools?

(Actually that's not a bad idea in failed schools.)

You're aware that 99 Senators condemned this ruling and called it "Asinine"?

## CYNDY LEE

As a devout atheist I would love nothing better than to have the Christian deity separated from government so we can have a genuine Pledge of Allegiance embraceable by 21st century citizens. The problem right now is in order to embrace your country you have to embrace God and religion. That is a tremendous loss of emotional resource for our country.

Don Imus had a problem with Alcoholics Anonymous until someone suggested he think of the God part as just a generic reference to a higher power. That is a difficult distinction to make when it comes to swearing allegiance to your country.

If we have learned anything from the Taliban and fundamentalist theocracies, we need to preserve the freedom from religion, which is the clear distinction between church and state.

The Pledge is not the property of Christians only. If it were returned to its pre-1954 version it would embrace diversity and I would certainly say it without wincing and without being disingenuous when I say the Pledge of Allegiance. The way it is now is the same as saying "God Bless the Queen." We do not deify or even recognize royalty. "One nation under God" is tantamount to deifying government. Deities are not accountable to the people.

Preachers who politic from the pulpit should be taxed, and politicians who preach should be impeached.

Because it is a national value statement I would like "under God" taken out of the Pledge of Allegiance and changed to "One nation in pursuit of truth."

## JIM HANSEN

Those advocating "under God" should go to court and prove the existence of God. If it is proven we can all sit around and pray and maybe burn one or two virgins at the stake. And if it is not proven have done with all this nonsense.

## JACK SCHARBACH

Don't you think this is revealing of the time. You take a nonissue and enlarge it into something big. This thing about the Pledge of Allegiance is minuscule but the attention it's getting is out of proportion.

We are so devious about everything. Judges throw something in our faces and we react as expected. It is an indication how brittle and emotionally we are divided along conservative and liberal lines.

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