

Reviewing God in the Pledge

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The Pledge of Allegiance is back in court. Earlier this month, U.S. District Court Judge Lawrence Karlton ruled that requiring school children to recite the pledge, which contains the words “under God,” is a violation of the First Amendment’s establishment clause. Karlton said he was bound by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals’ 2002 ruling on the matter.

The decision is already causing wailing and moaning about the decline of American values. But one good result is that the will be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which will have to decide this issue once and for all.

In 2004, the high court rejected the 9th Circuit’s ruling on grounds that Michael Newdow, the California atheist who filed the suit on behalf of his daughter, lacked legal standing. Newdow was not his daughter’s custodial parent, and his ex-wife had no problem with her daughter reciting the pledge.

This time the Supreme Court doesn’t have a convenient dodge. Newdow, who is also a lawyer, filed the suit on behalf of three parents who do have standing. They object to their children’s being put in a position of reciting what they see as an oath affirming a belief in god, not as a mere recitation of ceremonial boilerplate with no religious connotation.

There is another positive as well. The case promotes a national dialogue on whether we really need those words in the pledge. It’s a debate that is more than 50 years overdue.

Many people see the words “under God” as acknowledging that the United States was founded upon Judeo-Christian principles. But this is a rationalization that came up later. The words were added to a perfectly good pledge 62 years after Francis Bellamy, a minister with socialist leanings, wrote it for The Youth’s Companion magazine. The magazine was campaigning to get an American flag in every school. President Eisenhower signed legislation adding the reference to God in 1954.

In truth, God was inserted for political reason. The Cold War was going full blast and Sen. Joseph McCarthy was attacking Eisenhower and his administration for being “soft” on communism. Adding a reference to deity seemed to clarify the battle lines between “righteous” Americans and “godless communists.”

The 1950s would have been the perfect time for atheists to have challenged the wording, since it was a change whose implementation came slow. It was not universally accepted right away; many people still recited the God-less pledge – “one nation indivisible” – until well into the 1960s.

A court challenge back then would have been politically risky. It was an era in which people were hauled before government committees, blacklisted and ruined on mere suspicion of having pro-communist sentiments. McCarthy would have had a field day with someone challenging a reference to God.

But now, whether people like it or not, Michael Newdow has provided us with the opportunity to have this debate without the fear of some Red Menace. We can calmly ask ourselves how restoring the pledge to its original format could possibly damage the country.

There’s no denying that religion has played a role in the formation of our country by European immigrants. The first elected government in the colonies was organized in a church at Jamestown, Va. The colonies of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and Maryland were established by people seeking religious freedom.

George Washington and Abraham Lincoln issued thanksgiving proclamations, while President Franklin D. Roosevelt went on the radio to offer a prayer for the allied troops who were securing a beach-head at Normandy.

Likewise, religion played a role in the settling of the American West, from the Spanish Missions in New Mexico and California to the Mormon trek to the Salt Lake Valley.

Ours is indeed a culture steeped in religion, and many believe that including deity in the pledge highlights that. But the genius of America is that the government stays out of religion and leaves eternal verities to individual conscience.

The U.S. Constitution does not mention God even once. The First Amendment was drafted to ensure that people could worship – or not – as conscience dictates, rather state-sponsored show of faith. We wouldn't have a country but for the addition of the Bill of Rights, which protects individual liberties, even the liberties of atheists.

Our government has been, and should always be religion-neutral, neither endorsing nor prohibiting the exercise of individual conscience. People should decide for themselves if there is a God, and how to go about their worship. Thomas Jefferson said, "religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship."

Some could argue that the words "under God" are religion-neutral in that they don't refer to a specific deity. People can just imagine that it means whatever God they wish.

But from an atheist's point of view, the pledge as now constituted is a government endorsement of theism. Including that in what they correctly view as a loyalty oath is tantamount (to them, at least) to affirming that God exists. It's a valid concern, and it demonstrates that some people actually take the pledge seriously.

While the courts have said reciting the pledge is voluntary, it is nevertheless formalized as a ritual observance at what should be secular venues – schools, for example. It may be harder for a child to exercise his right of conscience in a room full of peers who have no problem reciting the pledge. A subtle pressure to conform, though it appears in many aspects of social life, should be eliminated insofar as possible when it comes to matters of conscience, which lies at the core of one's self-identity.

Would removing God from the pledge somehow damage the country? We don't think so. If the words "under God" were stricken, the government will not start closing churches. It won't start burning Bibles or ordering people not to pray.

Love of country was every bit as strong (perhaps even stronger in light of WWII) before God was added to the pledge. Why do so many Americans today seem to feel that returning to the original language somehow signals moral decline?

We are eager to find out what the Supreme Court, soon with conservative John Roberts as chief justice, will say about the words "under God." If it chooses to strike them, it should not shake anybody. It will only affirm that the government should be religion-neutral and that the wise course leaves faith to individuals - even those in small minorities.