

COLUMNISTS

Wording of pledge might contain pitfalls

I write this just a few hours before July 4 celebrations. This year we're cognizant of the foundation and history of our country, but also of September 11 and all that has come to mean as well. We're also drawn into a new controversy about the meaning of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

To be honest, I hardly ever say the Pledge of Allegiance. I can remember having to re-learn the pledge, since the first version I learned did not include the words "under God." That phrase was added the year after I started attending grammar school.

After last month's court decision declaring the phrase to be unconstitutional, talk radio went into orbit. Everyone was outraged. The hosts were aghast and wildly denounced the judges involved in the decision. Callers from every walk of life were similarly outraged.

As a member of a Roman Catholic religious congregation, I thought my first reaction should be along those lines. Taking "God" out of the Pledge of Allegiance sounded pretty gruesome to me. Since I work for the church and care about it very much, I assumed that my outrage over this judgment should be at least as intense as the "secular" radio waves.

Strangely, my thoughts went along an entirely different path. I tried to imagine the motivation behind adding the phrase in the first place. I read that the 1950s were ablaze with anti-communist fervor



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

and that "God" was added to the pledge to help us express our opposition to the godlessness of communism. Communist governments apparently had a stake in reinforcing and rewarding atheism as an "official creed." Our country thought we had to add the phrase in order to confront the ideology of the political system that had become our enemy.

From the perspective of my understanding of the actions of our nation's founders, I think we definitely needed to counter the Soviet Union's adoption of a particular belief about God as the official belief system for all citizens. That sort of oppression runs directly against our idea of freedom. In our country, no religious belief receives official government sanction. In our country, belonging to a religion brings neither advantage nor penalty. The Bill of Rights and the First Amendment guarantee the separation of the state from any and all churches and religious institutions. My understanding is that "the free exercise of

religion" is assured to all denominations equally.

Until all the hubbub of last week, I had assumed that in our free society, neither religion nor irreligion enjoys any official status. We are all equal under the law, regardless of our beliefs. With respect to religion, the government adopts an attitude of "benevolent neutrality." It undertakes its operations independent of any church or belief system. People are free to believe whatever their conscience holds. Churches are free to undertake their worship and religious activities free from government intrusion. It appears to be historically accurate to say that both churches and governments work better when they are not dependent on one another.

The reaction that followed last month's ruling actually caused me to see a few possible dangers in leaving the phrase "under God" in our pledge of loyalty to our country. The first is that we might come to associate a "good American" with someone who believes in God. That goes against, I think, the original intention of what kind of country this would be. It actually contradicts the freedom we prize so highly. Nonbelievers as well as believers have a right to be here and have a right to be good Americans. If we come to associate loyalty to the state with a particular attitude toward God, we will have sacrificed something essential to our freedom.

A second reservation I have also in-

volves a too-close association of God with government. Couldn't we unwittingly give the impression that the actions of our government are somehow the equivalent of God's actions and intentions? Couldn't this make us complacent and less vigilant regarding the activities of our government, when as citizens we need always to be vigilant regarding the justice of our government toward all its citizens and in the world at large?

Third, if the government takes on the role of purveyor of religion, won't the churches and their traditions become increasingly privatized? To whatever extent an "official" religious viewpoint is adopted by the state, the religious traditions themselves are deprived of a public voice and increasingly associated exclusively with "heart and hearth" and not with public discourse in America. Privatizing religion removes the critical voice of the Gospel from political life and the affairs of state and society. Religion is not just "a private matter." The separation of church and state was never meant to deny the right of the churches to be involved in the body politic. It was intended to guarantee the freedom of all.

I'm not sure yet whether I'm for or against the court's ruling. I am sure that a "knee-jerk" reaction to it might carry some dangerous consequences for the church and the state.

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