

Is America 'under God'?

Is America a nation "under God"? Michael Newdow, a well-known atheist, doesn't think so. In late March the U.S. Supreme Court will give him a chance to tell why public schools may not constitutionally ask willing students, including his 9-year-old daughter, to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Recently I had occasion to debate this issue with Newdow at the Stanford Law School. A medical doctor with a law degree, Newdow has made a career of litigating against public religious references; he is a self-assured product of the Enlightenment.

What other purpose, Newdow asks of the Pledge, could a reference to God have than to unconstitutionally establish religion?

The answer that eludes Newdow is: Plenty.

The words are an accurate summary of our historical origin. Newdow may disagree with that history, but he has no license to rewrite it. He may think the founders would have been better advised to place their trust in skeptics and materialistic philosophers who shunned the divine, but the facts are to the contrary: Every U.S. president has asked God to bless the nation.

Newdow may find the self-evident truth of inalienable rights traceable to a Creator to be absurd or ridiculous, but again, Jefferson, Adams and others contributing to the Declaration of Independence thought this the very foundation of a



Douglas W. Kmiec

democratic republic. Rights that depend on government alone — even Newdow's constitutional right to disbelieve — can be withdrawn at will if they are anchored on no source higher than man.

Newdow makes much of the fact that "under God" was not added to the Pledge until 1954. Seeking to tarnish by the time frame, he alludes to Joe McCarthy, by many accounts a demagogue, and the "red scare."

There was, and is, something scary about a worldview that has as its central tenet, as the Congress said of communism, "the subservience of the individual." That some in Congress voted for the addition out of their personal religious motivation is no more objectionable than Newdow making up his mind; the freedom is mutual, the principle reciprocal.

The Supreme Court has written approvingly twice of the Pledge in opinions dealing with public religious displays: It "does not establish a religion or religious faith" or "communicate an endorsement of religious belief." It is not a prayer, but a pledge of loyalty and statement of

patriotic unity for a republic founded on certain principles: indivisibility, liberty, justice and equality in basic human right.

Moreover, the court differentiated between religious displays that were overly specific and those that more inclusively capture American tradition and its transcendent premise. These holdings give lie to Newdow's argument that there is no difference between "under God" and "under Jesus, Vishnu or Zeus."

During the debate, it occurred to me that the real contestants were not Newdow and the school district, but censorship and freedom. Newdow wants to censor what his daughter can learn of the nation's religious origin. But he misconstrues his own unquestioned parental right to express his ideology to include a right to suppress the teaching of her mother, her school and the larger society. There is no such unilateral right of censorship.

Following the debate, Newdow's little girl came over to greet her father. It was obvious that she is a great object of her father's love, and I told him so.

Newdow seemed surprised by the candor of my observation, but readily welcomed and affirmed it. A remarkable illustration of how love of neighbor, even in the midst of serious constitutional argument, triumphs.

Douglas W. Kmiec is a columnist for Catholic News Service.

Upset over story, column

To the editor:

The article "Mixing religion with politics" (Feb. 12) implies that Sen. John Kerry is Catholic but does not mention that he is divorced, remarried and unabashedly supports abortion including partial birth abortion. The fact that the article mentions that he was raised Catholic could encourage those Catholic voters ignorant of his marital status and positions on abortion to vote for him.

Father Richard McBrien's Feb. 12 discussion of "The Passion of Christ" is full of distortions and appears to be a paraphrase of Newsweek's review of the film. To borrow Father McBrien's phrase, "Is there any wonder suspicions abound regarding the religious integrity of his columns?"

It saddens me to see his column featured within a "Catholic" paper and its possible deleterious effect on the faith of the people within the Diocese of Rochester.

Henry M. Korytkowski
 Solmar Drive
 Rochester

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Feb. 12 Catholic News Service story highlighted the decisions by would-be Democratic presidential candidates to begin talking — however opportunistically — about religion; it could not address the backgrounds and posi-

tions of what was still such a broad field of candidates. We will provide ample issue-oriented coverage once the major-party tickets are established.

Minimum's not enough

To the editor:

Seven hundred thousand New Yorkers receiving the minimum wage are forced to make daily decisions between rent, heat, health care and food for their families. More than 40 percent of the guests who use food pantries and soup kitchens in our state have a job. They simply don't earn enough to meet their families' basic needs. People who work hard shouldn't have to beg for additional assistance to feed and house their families.

It has been more than 30 years since New York last raised its minimum wage above the federal level of \$5.15 an hour. Today the state minimum wage would be \$8.83 an hour if it had kept pace with inflation.

Several of our neighbors in the Northeast have raised their minimum wage above the inadequate federal level, including Vermont (\$6.75), Massachusetts (\$6.75), and Connecticut (\$7.10). That only makes sense since housing and utility bills are much higher in the Northeast than in places like Texas and Arkansas.

The state Legislature is now considering raising the minimum wage to \$7.10 an hour in three increments. While \$7.10 an hour would still leave minimum wage workers struggling to make ends meet, it would at least be a step in the right direction.

Kim Gilliland
 Associate Director
 Hunger Action Network
 of New York State

Pols won't walk the walk

To the editor:

Democratic candidates are indeed beginning to talk

Catholic Courier

© 2004 Rochester Catholic Press Assn
 1136 Buffalo Road
 P.O. Box 24379
 Rochester, NY 14624

585/529-9530
 800/600-3628 outside Rochester
<http://www.catholiccourier.com>
 e-mail: info@catholiccourier.com

President
Bishop Matthew H. Clark
 General Manager Editor
Karen M. Franz
kfranz@catholiccourier.com

Editorial Department

Assistant Editor
Jennifer Ficaglia
jficaglia@catholiccourier.com

Staff Writers
Rob Cullivan
rcullivan@catholiccourier.com

Mike Latona
mlatona@catholiccourier.com

Jennifer M. Burke
jburke@catholiccourier.com

Staff Photographer
Mike Crupi
mcrupi@catholiccourier.com

Editorial Assistant
Louis Litzenberger
llitzenberger@catholiccourier.com

Photo Intern
Lauren Long

Business Department

Office Manager
Mary DiPonzio
mdiponzio@catholiccourier.com

Administrative Assistant
Arlene S. Gall
agall@catholiccourier.com

Circulation Manager
Donna Stubbings
dstubbings@catholiccourier.com

Graphics Department

Graphics Manager
Kim Parks
kparks@catholiccourier.com

Graphic Artist
Linda Jeanne Rivers
lrivers@catholiccourier.com

Advertising Department
 Advertising Director
Daniel M. Zollo
dzollo@catholiccourier.com

Display Advertising Executives
Jerry Rivers
jrivers@catholiccourier.com

Donald P. Wilson
dwilson@catholiccourier.com

about
 running
 professional
 courts
 voting
 tion i
 ize th
 the
 year,
 to be
 cal n
 gious
 their
 arms
 does
 profes
 is ab
 you c
 At
 U.S. C
 Bisho
 ops s
 type
 cusse
 Bisho
 vent
 their
 giving
 recep
 of the
 licly
 God a
 of Go
 ple. S
 the li
 apt to
 and I
 In
 strivi
 ance
 ranks
 zero t
 who a
 disme
 ing of
 womb
 will w
 ment
 Faith
 seems
 when