

“Crown Thy Good”
2003 Skinner Award Sermon
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Over on Turnpike Street, there was (last I drove that way) a huge patriotic billboard. I don't go that way often enough to know for sure when it went up or that it's still there, but I imagine that it went up in the wake of September 11th and that it's still there

First time I saw it, I felt agitated and uneasy.

Do you know which billboard I mean? Against a brilliant blue sky, flies a billowing “stars and stripes.” Two familiar slogans are blazoned across. One reads “In God We Trust” and the other “United We Stand.” I cannot now remember which comes first, but the layout makes perfectly clear that the two slogans go together, hand in hand¹.

But, they don't belong together at all. We Americans *don't* all trust in God. We don't all even *believe* in God. I consider myself a person of faith, but I don't trust or believe in the “God of our fathers” which, I am quite sure, is the God extolled on the billboard, the God whose “almighty hand” is praised in a triumphant—even militaristic—hymn that will no doubt be sung in many churches this Memorial Day.

Trusting in God is *not* what unites us as Americans. Rather, I think we are united by our steadfast commitment to each person's right to trust or not, to believe or not, in God and to mean different things when we use that word. In fact, I would say that one of the clearest principles on which Americans *do* stand united is our freedom to trust in God or not, as we each see fit—we stand united in, among other important principles, our religious freedom—*not* in our trust in God.

Did you know that “In God We Trust” was not always our national motto? It was adopted by Congress as recently as 1956. For 180 years prior, our motto was “E Pluribus Unum” which means “out of many, one.” Surely, the original was a much more useful slogan for these times of religious diversity and conflict than the new one.

Our motto, and that billboard, have it wrong.

So does the Pledge of Allegiance.

Did you know that the phrase “under God” was only added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, more than fifty years after the pledge was first written and twelve years after it was officially adopted by Congress? Didn't anyone in Congress challenge the addition of those two words as a violation of our Constitutional right to religious freedom?

The original words penned in 1892 were “I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

According to the author of The Pledge of Allegiance: A Centennial History, 1892-1992 [John W. Baer], the pledge was written by Frances Bellamy, a Baptist minister in Boston who lost his pulpit due to his Christian Socialist views and then worked for a widely-read youth magazine in which the pledge was first published.

¹ A November 4, 2001 sermon by the Rev. Ken Sawyer, who had seen signs bearing these same slogans, reminded me of the billboard I'd seen and stimulated my thinking about patriotic language.

Bellamy wrote the pledge for the National Education Association's nation-wide public school celebration of the 400th anniversary of the landing of Christopher Columbus. It accompanied the flag-raising ceremony on that day.

Bellamy said of his choice of words,

... it began as an intensive communing with salient points of our national history, from the Declaration of Independence onwards; with the makings of the Constitution...with the meaning of the Civil War; with the aspiration of the people...

The true reason for allegiance to the Flag is the 'republic for which it stands.' ...And what does that vast thing, the Republic mean? It is the concise political word for the Nation - the One Nation which the Civil War was fought to prove. To make that One Nation idea clear, we must specify that it is indivisible, as Webster and Lincoln used to repeat in their great speeches. And its future?

Just here arose the temptation [to use] of the historic slogan of the French Revolution which meant so much to Jefferson and his friends, 'Liberty, equality, fraternity.' No, [I thought], that would be too fanciful, too many thousands of years off in realization. But we as a nation do stand square on the doctrine of liberty and justice for all...²

Some of us are old enough to have grown up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance every day in school. As memorization often goes, we kids sometimes didn't have the words just right. For example, if you were like me, you just couldn't figure out how the nation, the country in which we lived, could be "invisible" since we could see it everywhere!

When I was young and reciting the pledge, it by then included the words "under God." I didn't think about, or perhaps I didn't even know about, Americans who did not believe in God. But, I wonder now how would it have felt to be the Unitarian kid in the class, whose parents were atheists or humanists, or the Chinese immigrant whose family were Buddhists, and each and every day have to recite something that conflicted with what your parents taught you? How do *our* children feel about it today?

Millions of Americans do not believe they are "under" God. Some find God within their own hearts. Others believe they are part of—not under—a sacred universe. Still others do not believe in God at all. Yet everyday the religious beliefs of these Americans are violated...in schools, in public meetings, anywhere the Pledge is recited.

Should our government tell its people what to believe about God? Is God more than something to be "under?" Is religious liberty promoted or damaged by government endorsement of a certain theology? Would you support a return to the original Pledge of Allegiance? Why? Why not?

Short of going back to the original, those who wish to acknowledge the religious diversity among Americans today, can elect to just *not say* the "under God" words. Some may want to abbreviate the pledge even further, starting with "I pledge allegiance to..."

² www.vineyard.net/vineyard/history/pledge.htm

but then skip right over everything else to the ending, so it would be “I pledge allegiance ...to liberty and justice for all.”

Immediately after September 11th, use of patriotic language and symbols was on the rise, especially the American flag. There was even one out on the First Parish front lawn for several weeks, next to the memorial to those who died on that day. Most of us don't even notice that one is hanging here in the sanctuary from the balcony, though the United Nations flag flies higher, reminding us visually that, as we sang earlier this morning, “other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as [ours].”

Among Americans there are diverse emotional responses to the image of the American flag. But that's ok, no one is telling us what the flag has to mean to us, other than it is the flag of our country. Visual symbols work flexibly that way much better than words in pledges and mottos do.

Our diverse emotional responses to the flag originate in our own personal histories, perhaps especially our histories in regards to the wars in our lifetimes. The flag fluttering in the breeze signifies freedom to many and to others security, to give just two examples of qualities especially desired in the aftermath of September 11th. Many of us displayed flags on our lapels, windshields, bumpers and front porches and took comfort and courage from them.

But, to me the flag is as much a symbol of oppression as it is of freedom, security, comfort and courage. In part this is so because the American flag reminds me of how years ago I felt rejected and misunderstood by that other flag-associated slogan, “Love it or leave it.” To me, it was love of my country that called me to question its policies during the Vietnam War era. But, to those who waved the flag and shouted that slogan, love of country meant one must support its policies no matter what.

For some American families—the ones that experienced a cultural, political and emotional divide at the time of the Vietnam War—the words and symbols associated with patriotism became painful reminders of those differences, especially between fathers and sons. One such divided family was that of author and former Catholic priest James Carroll. He tells that story of family conflict in his memoir, *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*. But, in that memoir, there is also a poignant story about how American bedrock freedoms can bridge those painful differences about patriotism.

James Carroll's father was Lieutenant General Joseph F. Carroll, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency through much of the Vietnam War, a lawyer, a former FBI man who as head of the DIA helped choose the bombing targets in Vietnam. He was a man who had dedicated his life to the military. James was one of four sons, the one who became a Catholic priest to fulfill the dream his father had had for himself but abandoned. But, James' vocation as a priest brought him into direct conflict with his father, as he aligned himself with radical Catholic war resisters. His brother Brian would become an FBI agent assigned to track down draft dodgers, one of whom was another brother, Dennis. The family was deeply divided.

The story of how freedom bridged their divisions involved not James but his brother Dennis. After a couple years in exile, a fugitive from the draft, estranged from their parents, Dennis decides to return to the U.S. and face the music of the Selective Service Board. He figures, and James concurs, that the climate had changed so that he might win conscientious objector status even though his reasons were moral not religious.

He believed U.S. military involvement in Vietnam was wrong, whether God existed or not.

Against James' objections, the estranged Dennis asks his father, the three star general and director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, to be his lawyer before the Selective Service Board. Amazingly, Joseph Carroll agrees. He studies the law carefully and helps Dennis prepare a statement, which the father described as "a forthright definition of the war's immorality and of a citizen's obligation to oppose it." (p. 247).

For the hearing, Joseph Carroll wears full dress uniform, his three stars matching the three stars of the Selective Service director. Dennis reads the statement and then is asked to leave the room, whereupon the director asks his father for *his* views. He responds, and it is his statement that I find to be such a testament to the bridging capacity of the principle of freedom, not to mention a testimony to Joseph Carroll's incredible authenticity. He said,

The right to conscientious objection is basic to the American idea. The board's task is only to determine if the application for exemption from military service was authentically based on conscience. I am here today not because I agree with what my son has just said—obviously, wearing this uniform, I don't—but because I know with absolute certitude that his position is sincerely held, prudently arrived at, and an act, if I might add, of heroic integrity. (p. 248)

Compare that patriot's conviction with that of our current Attorney General, John Ashcroft, who said the following last December about those who were questioning the war on terrorism. "To those who... scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty; my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists—for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America's enemies, and pause to America's friends..."

"Phantoms of lost liberty..." ?

Here we have the Attorney General, the chief law enforcement officer at the federal level, top champion of the U.S. constitution, ridiculing those whose conscience requires them to stand up for the very freedoms that secure the "American way of life" that the war on terrorism purportedly defends.

We have already seen this morning how one important freedom, freedom of religion, was eroded in the 1950's by the addition of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and the substitution of "In God We Trust" for "E Pluribus Unum" as our National Motto. Unless words are unimportant and falsehoods ignored, that is no "phantom" lost liberty. Unless words are unimportant and falsehoods ignored, that is a *real* lost liberty.

Since the 1950's, it is said that the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on the earth. Our need is now greater than ever for patriotic language that brings us together. But these phrases actually divide us. For it would be impossible to achieve an American consensus on the meaning of the word "god," never mind unity standing on the idea that it is *that* "God" under which we all live and in which we all trust.

In a few moments, we will be singing "America the Beautiful," yet another national treasure in which the word "God" appears. Here, though, it's not as an affirmation of belief, like in the Pledge of Allegiance and the National

Motto. Instead, it's a petition for God's help—for, among other things, mending our every flaw. I can easily affirm the hopes this song expresses!

It's my deep hope that all those who, like me, feel excluded by "in God we trust" and "under God"—all those atheists and agnostics, all those believers in the goddess or in many gods, all those who find God, not over, but within themselves and others and all around them in the natural world—it's my deep hope that we *all* can sing "America the Beautiful," assenting to the love of country that it conveys without quarrel about the one whose grace it implores.

"America the Beautiful" expresses much of what I love most about our country—its physical beauty and the abundant harvests it produces, the fine qualities of its pilgrims and heroes which any of us may aspire to be like, its commitment to freedom, its dream of cities undimmed by human tears, and most of all the dream that brotherhood—which I take to mean fairness, equity, kindness, justice, and compassion in human affairs—and, most of all, the dream that *brotherhood* might be our crowning glory.

So may it be. Amen.