

# **“God and Country (Part I)”**

**a reflection  
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“God and country” – two powerful words that evoke very powerful emotions.

I’ll always remember the way I felt one night in 1988, when the national anthem was being played at a simple, otherwise unremarkable sporting event. The following day, I was to leave the country on a month-long trip to what was then the Soviet Union – and there I was, a liberal cynic opposed to many of the policies of my government and its president, with tears flowing down my cheeks – tears elicited by the *national anthem*, for goodness’ sake, tears elicited by the thought of the freedoms that anthem represented – freedoms that for much of my first 30 years, I had taken for granted.

I’ll never forget the controversy that took place during my childhood over by a woman named Madalyn Murray, who had dared to challenge the idea of Bible study and prayer recitation in public schools. As a boy, I lived in a part of the country where the long arm of the Supreme Court didn’t fully reach, and where the real institutions of power – school administrators, local sheriffs, and such – did pretty much as they pleased, thank you very much, and didn’t much care for the thoughts of a group of liberal judges up in Washington. Yes, I remember the strong feelings evoked by Madalyn Murray, and the Supreme Court – and I remember being taught in my public high school, by my biology teacher, that evolution was a lie.

“God and country.” Two very powerful concepts. Is it any wonder, then, that the founders of our nation – recognizing their combustible nature, especially if kept in too close proximity to each other – were so adamant that government and religion remain separate? Is it any wonder, on the other hand, that politicians and religious leaders down through the years have

intentionally blurred the boundaries of the two, all the better to tap into their combined, emotional power?

The specter of such a manipulation of the masses kept Thomas Jefferson awake at night – and as a result, he dedicated both his political life and his considerable will – thankfully, with great success – to fighting the political and legal battles necessary to bequeath to us that “wall of separation between church and state.” In doing so, he earned the enmity of all those – in his day and since – who would gladly have created an unholy alliance between their government, and any of the many Christian denominations that were springing up throughout the land.

But Jefferson feared another specter as well – that of future generations of Americans whom he believed would be tempted, as history has borne out, to mix the sacred and the secular, with potentially devastating results to the individual freedoms and “natural rights” he so cherished.

Of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which he authored, Jefferson said, “Though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, has no power to restrain the acts of succeeding assemblies . . . yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted [including the right of religious freedom for all] are the natural rights of mankind – and that if any act shall hereafter be passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, [it] will be an infringement of a natural right.”

The price of freedom – in this case, *religious* freedom – is indeed eternal vigilance. There are always those who would take it away.

Less than a dozen years after Jefferson left office, President James Madison was called upon to carry the torch for the First Amendment. Madison grew so weary of the loud and persistent voices clamoring for the Christianization of American politics during his administration that he wrote, “They seem to imply, and certainly nourish, the erroneous idea of a *national religion*. The idea – just as it related to the Jewish nation under a theocracy, [and] having been improperly adopted by so many nations which have embraced Christianity – is [all] too apt to lurk in the bosoms even of Americans.”

Well, my friends, it still lurks there today! This morning’s service, as well as next week’s, is a reaction – a Unitarian, Universalist reaction – a faithful reaction grounded in our historic tradition of religious freedom and tolerance – to the slow and insidious hijacking of our government by people whose intention – often, their stated intention – is to create a Christian society, with the Ten Commandments (ironically, a set of Jewish laws, but who’s to quibble?) and a narrow, fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible

at the heart of all public decision-making. From the School Board in Mason, Ohio, all the way to the halls of justice in Washington, D.C., we who cherish religious freedom, diversity, and tolerance, face the very same challenges that Jefferson envisioned, that Madison struggled against – and that they and their peers wrote the Bill of Rights specifically to protect us *against*.

There was a time, not that long ago, when few would have had the audacity to say the kind of things that regularly come out of politicians' and pundits mouths these days. People talk about the United States as an instrument of God. They talk about a divine plan that is being fulfilled by our military adventurism in the Middle East. They talk about our national "mission" in apocalyptic terms riddled with quotes from the Book of Revelation.

A generation ago, such people were well out of the mainstream. In fact, they would have been considered kooks. Today, such people have the ear of the most powerful man in the world. In fact, they're among the few people he will even listen to!

Case in point, Pat Robertson – who, lest we forget, actually ran for president himself a few years back. Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition (arguably the most effective *political* machine in the history of religion), recently said these words: "There will be no world peace until God's house and God's people [– by which, in context, he meant America, and those Americans who share his religious views –] ... There will be no world peace until God's house and God's people are given their rightful place of leadership at the *top of the world*."

As I said, such comments would have been dismissed as those of a crackpot just a generation ago. But no more. They were made by a man who has bragged that he can pick up the phone, anytime, and call the President of the United States, and be immediately put through.

The scary thing is, he also believes he can put a call in to God, and be put through with equal dispatch.

God, and country. A powerful combination. A dangerous combination.

Which is why, to sound that familiar refrain once again, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.

Yet there is hope. More and more Americans – as evidenced in each and every public opinion poll you read these days – are waking up to the fact that the separation of church on which this nation was built, the separation of church and state which we perhaps have taken too much for granted, is under siege. And they are taking our country back.

There are other signs of hope – and one in particular that I want to lift up. Last month, the first Muslim ever elected to Congress took office – and as he did so, Keith Ellison took the oath of office with his hand not on a Bible, but on the Koran. A Koran, it should be noted, that had once been owned by Thomas Jefferson.

Of course, to those whose avowed goal is to tear down the Jeffersonian “wall of separation between church and state,” Ellison’s swearing-in simply poured fuel on the fire. One good, God-fearing Congressman warned that “unless immigration is tightened, many *more* Muslims” might be elected to national office. I guess he didn’t check before speaking; Ellison was born in Michigan!

A senatorial candidate this fall was quoted as saying, “If you’re not electing Christians, then in essence you are going to legislate sin.” Presumably, by her definition, only a Christian – and, I imagine, only a certain *type* of Christian at that – is going to vote in a way that is not “sinful.”

I say it’s about darn time Americans rose up and began kicking folks who make comments like these out of public office! I don’t care what political party they, or you, belong to – but I do care, and care deeply, about what policy decisions our elected leaders make – decisions like whether or not to send our young men and women to war. And I want those decisions to be made by people of good will, people whose hearts and minds have room in them to accommodate those of differing religious beliefs.

Because, like it or not – and we know, all too well, that there are people who do not like it – there are many, many different faiths that compose the American mosaic. Ours is a *country* whose citizens worship many Gods. Ours is a nation founded primarily by those who had either fled, or been evicted from, *other* countries where they were persecuted, where they were in the religious minority.

Religious *pluralism*, not religious *conformism*, is our birthright, and our heritage.

May this always remain one nation, with liberty and justice for all. May this once again become a nation where the halls of government and the institutions of the state are free of religious doctrine and orthodoxy – one nation where each is free to worship and believe as he or she sees fit.

And may this church remain one where, to return to the words of John Adams, the “pulpit resounds with the doctrines and sentiments of religious liberty.” I assure you, next week, it will!