

“God and Country, Part II: Whose God, Anyway?”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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One of the best movies I've seen in recent years was “Good Night and Good Luck,” the Oscar-nominated film from 2005 that chronicled the real-life, high-stakes battle for the heart and soul of America that unfolded at the beginning of the Cold War, between CBS newsman Edwin R. Murrow, and Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy.

One of the best plays I've seen in recent years was Playhouse in the Park's adaptation of “The Crucible” – a powerful drama timed to coincide with the last presidential election – a production that gave Arthur Miller's searing allegory on McCarthyism new relevance for our day.

Perhaps I was so moved by both these works because I've always had a fascination for that particularly dark and troubled time in our national history. The 1950's provided a clear glimpse, as I said, into the heart and soul of America – both the good, *and* the bad. There was optimism, accomplishment, invention and innovation, and an improving standard of living. The interstate freeways we now take for granted were conceived and begun during this time. We started exploring space. There were great strides in medicine and human health. Desegregation became the law, if not yet the reality, of the land.

But there was also a deep, powerful, underlying anxiety in the American psyche during those years – much as there is again, today, in our time. Many white Americans felt threatened by the changes in our social structure that were beginning to lift up African Americans toward some degree of equality and justice. Many, *many* Americans – regardless of their race or class or ethnicity – were terrified by Communism, a strange and amorphous social system that seemed to put at risk the very lifestyle that some Americans were beginning to enjoy.

Is it little wonder, then – given the dark reality of those times – that on Flag Day, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower – himself no big fan of McCarthy, but nonetheless a man who understood the political winds that were then blowing across America – approved the addition of two small, but very telling, words to the Pledge of Allegiance? Since that day – since the height of the hysteria that was McCarthyism – the United States of America has been known, by every one of us – by every schoolchild, every housewife, every retired veteran – as “one nation, under God.”

Last week I cited John Adams and Thomas Jefferson – both Unitarian Presidents and among the most well-known of the so-called “Founding Fathers” – and I also quoted other, less prominent, historical figures – in order to make the point that America was never, despite right-wing claims to the contrary, founded as a “Christian nation.”

I quoted the Founders on the matter of separation of church and state – a principle they held as dear as any other. And while I doubt that any of those Founders would have had much of a problem with the words “one nation, *under God*,” in the context of a voluntary, public, patriotic statement (though I suspect Jefferson might have gone for something a bit more poetic, not to mention inclusive, something like maybe “one nation, guided by a beneficent Creator”) – I firmly believe that those Founders would have been horrified at the thought that the Congress of the United States might make such a pledge a part of something called the U.S. Flag Code, which it has done.

I also believe the Founders would have had serious issues with the official motto of the State of Ohio, which – as printed on your order of service, and on countless documents that represent the citizens – *all* of the citizens – of this state, reads “With God, all things are possible.”

Whether it be the Pledge of Allegiance, or the official state motto of Ohio, or any of the countless other pronouncements about God that are made, each and every day, by elected officials in this country (from the President right on down to school board members here in Cincinnati), I am compelled to ask one question: “Whose God, anyway?”

Whose God is this one nation claiming to be “under” (I won’t pursue the many problems inherent in that word “under” today; perhaps I’ll save that for another morning!) – but just *whose* God is it we’re referring to in the Pledge of Allegiance? Whose God makes all things possible, here in the State of Ohio?

Public opinion polls routinely indicate that upwards of 90 percent of Americans “believe in God.” Yet a pre-election survey showed that, while about a third of our citizens self-describe as Evangelicals – 25 percent more

are mainline Protestants. Twenty percent are Roman Catholics. Two and a half percent are Jewish. And as many as 20 percent belong to [quote] “other faiths” – other faiths that range from Unitarian Universalism to Islam, from Buddhism to Baha’i, Hinduism to Shinto. The list goes on.

So I ask again: Just *whose* God are we talking about here? While I have no doubt that many Evangelicals would insist *their* God is the one in question – the fact remains (and it is an indisputable fact) that there are many different faiths represented in this melting pot we call America. The amazing religious diversity that makes up our society makes it impossible to claim that we share the same God. We may strive to be “one nation” – but the God (or Allah, or Krishna, or Jehovah) under which we live is a matter of considerable difference of opinion. Even here in Ohio, the God that many of us believe makes all things possible – is truly a *multi-faceted* God.

And whereas what those Founding Fathers knew about religious diversity was pretty much limited to Protestant and Catholic and Jew – nevertheless, they had the foresight and the wisdom to insist that the governing of our society, and the worship lives of its citizens, should be kept separate. *Totally and completely separate.*

Their warning is even more important today – when literally hundreds of different faiths compose the fabric of our culture, and when the powerful emotions evoked by religion are being used to divide us, as never before.

Let me mention, as an aside, that this afternoon I’ll be participating in a group called the Religious Diversity Task Force of Greater Anderson – a group that grew out of an “a-ha moment” I had last spring – a realization that if we are to address the issue of diversity in our city, we must look not only at race and class – but also at religion. This winter, we have assembled a group of Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Unitarian Universalists, Hindus, Mormons, Baha’is, Muslims, Quakers and Buddhists – and we’re now planning our first public forum and discussion of religious diversity in our community.

That event will be held sometime in late April; as soon as I have a date and more details, I’ll let you know – because I feel strongly that Unitarian Universalism should be well represented in such conversations. Congregations like ours are, after all, a living laboratory of religious diversity.

Which brings me, for a moment, to us. To those of us assembled here in this sanctuary. I have alluded to my concern about the misuse of the word “God” in the realm of politics and government. But what about its use *here*? Periodically, some express their discomfort with our congregational covenant, which ends with the historic words, “Thus do we covenant with

each other, and with God.” Some UU churches have even dropped that final phrase, and now end their covenant simply with “Thus do we covenant with each other.”

But I do not see any inconsistency in my stance – which finds the use of “God” in the motto of Ohio to be problematic, yet embraces the historic covenant we say each week here at Heritage. In fact, the difference between these two contexts is precisely my point – it is the difference between *church* and *state*. Here, in a *church*, it is appropriate to speak of God; out there, in the state – where decisions are made by elected representatives, where taxpayer dollars are appropriated and spent, where public acts represent of the will of the people – it is distinctly inappropriate to include such religious terminology. There are simply *too many* beliefs about God – including non-belief – to allow for anything less than the full separation of church and state.

But as we know that, here, too, in a Unitarian Universalist church, there are *also* many different beliefs about God – including non-belief. Yet in our version of religious community, in our diverse faith tradition, we acknowledge – in fact, we embrace – the importance of today’s question: “Whose God, anyway?” We believe that God is in the eye – or better yet, the heart – of the beholder. We lift up and celebrate the differing spiritual paths that fill this sanctuary. We encourage one another on our journeys of faith, fully aware those journeys are as unique as each individual who enters here. And we never – ever – tell you what the word “God” should mean to you; our answer to the question “Whose God, anyway,” is: “Everyone’s God.”

Now, if only *that* were the way our politicians and institutions of state approached the question! But even if it were, I’m not so sure there still wouldn’t be trouble over religion. Which is precisely why church and state must always remain separate, if this nation is to remain truly free. And it’s why we cannot overlook, or candy-coat, the disturbing slide in the other direction this nation has taken in recent years.

A *New York Times* analysis of legislation passed in the U.S. since 1989 has revealed “more than 200 special [legal] arrangements, protections, or exemptions for religious groups or their adherents... Breaks have also been provided by a host of pivotal court decisions at the state and federal level, and by numerous rule changes in almost every department and agency of the executive branch,” said the *Times*.

This trend has prompted John Witte Jr., of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University in Atlanta, to offer the following bleak analysis: “Separation of church and state was certainly part of

American law when many of today's public-opinion makers were in school, but separation of church and state is *no longer the law of the land.*"

Such statements, by those who are in the know and study these things, chill me to the bone. They make me fear for the future of my country.

Can you tell me what a Biblical theme park in Florida and a church-run fitness center (complete with tanning beds) in Minnesota have in common? Both have been granted tax breaks by their respective states. And did you see the cover of Newsweek magazine this past November? A picture of a cross, wrapped in an American flag. A picture, indeed, worth a thousand words. The two most powerful and emotionally charged symbols in America, literally, *wrapped up together.*

But I would contend there's no arena in which the need for maintaining the separation of church and state is in more vivid relief – and no arena where the emotions of Americans run as high – as in the matter of how we educate our children. You may not realize that it was another Unitarian, Horace Mann, whom we have to thank for public schooling in America. Known as the "Father of Public Education," during the 1820's Mann championed the idea that education should be free, nonsectarian, and available to all.

Mann's innovation was controversial from the beginning, with advocates of religious indoctrination arguing that spiritual instruction, prayer, and a reverence for God were necessary components of any child's education. To which Mann replied, "Whose God, anyway?" The Supreme Court agreed, in a series of decisions which – over the next several generations – upheld the ideal of a nonsectarian, state-supported education, one that should be made available to *all* children.

Oh, but the times, they are a changin'. Did you know that state funding for private schools – the vast majority of which are *religious* schools – has increased in Ohio by *59 percent* in the past decade? That 185 million dollars of our state's budget is being used to support private – again, almost exclusively parochial – schools, through various services and reimbursements, the most infamous of which is the newly enacted school voucher program?

In Hamilton, Butler, Warren and Clermont Counties alone, more than 40 million dollars of state money went to private schools last year. I took a look at that list, published in the Enquirer, and I saw only a couple of names that aren't clearly either Catholic or Protestant.

Folks, that's *our* tax dollars – yours and mine! Let me just say that, as a Unitarian Universalist, I have just as much right to be upset that my money

is being spent to teach someone else's kid creationism, as any Catholic has to be upset that his money is being spent to teach my child evolution.

I have just as much right be outraged that my money is helping pay for children to read – in the Bible – that homosexuality is an “abomination” – as any Fundamentalist has to be outraged that his money is helping pay for kids to learn yoga.

By the way, did you hear about that one? It was all over the news last week. Here's the article from the Enquirer, under the headline, “Public Schools Fight Yoga's Spiritualism.” Apparently, a lady named Tara Gruber was rebuffed by the School Board in Aspen, Colorado, when she offered to teach yoga to the children there – rebuffed on the grounds that, and I quote, “Yoga's Hindu roots conflicted with Christian teachings.”

Apparently those who objected were ignorant both of what goes on in a yoga class, and of the increasing amount of data supporting a positive correlation between meditation, breathing, and physical exercise, and better test scores and behavior in schoolchildren! Apparently the same kind of people who have no trouble with the idea of kids hearing a prayer that concludes with “in Jesus' name we pray” at a high school football game, can't seem to abide the idea of children saying “Namaste” or “Om” at the end of their gym class.

Have we really come to this? Millions of public dollars subsidizing private, parochial schools, while we can't even teach yoga in the public schools?

And so again I say, the separation of church and state to which we, as Unitarian Universalists – we as Americans – are pledged, is under attack. And I find myself agreeing, more and more, with Edward Everett Hale, the Unitarian minister who served as Chaplain of the U.S. Senate from 1903-1909 – put your mind around that double, if not triple, irony! – I find myself agreeing with Edward Everett Hale, who – when a member of his congregation asked him if he ever prayed for the senators he served, replied, “No. But I often look at the senators, and *pray for the country.*”

I, too, pray for this country. I pray for the freedoms it stands for – including, and perhaps most of all, freedom of religion. I pray that, as Americans, we will learn to live with one another and respect one another; that we will learn to honor and celebrate the religious diversity that I believe is our greatest strength.

And I pray that the laws of this land, and its constitution, will always protect the rights of those in the minority, from the oppression of those in the majority.

May it be so. Amen.