

# Atheism, the pledge and McCarthyism

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July 3, 2002 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1459

## Atheism, the pledge and McCarthyism

By DANIEL STURM

It could have been just me, having come from Germany where such events only occur in church. But I was surprised when at City Hall last Monday the entire Council stood with arms folded, silently attentive as Vice President Carol Wood gave a long Christian prayer as a prelude to the Pledge of Allegiance. Compared to her prayer, the words "under God" seem like a minor violation of the separation of church and state. Given the uproar over the court decision on the pledge, imagine what would happen if the court said prayers at governmental meetings were unconstitutional.

"It's not constitutional at all," Elliot Glicksman, Cooley Law School professor in Lansing, said about the phrase "under God." A three-member panel of federal judges, acting on a suit by a father against his daughter's school system, declared the pledge an unconstitutional separation of church and state. "The government cannot impose a prayer, whether it's written by the school system or whether it's sanctioned by the public school," Glicksman said. The judges put the decision on hold the next day after the strongly adverse public reaction.

"We are celebrating, it's wonderful," said Arlene-Marie, Michigan state director for American Atheists. "It is a very important step in the direction of establishing a separation of church and state. Our constitution is secular, not religious." Arlene-Marie said many public schools in Michigan force their students to say the pledge. "Of course they always emphasize that a child who doesn't want to doesn't have to." But Arlene-Marie, like other atheists, believes a child should never be forced to make that decision. She calls it subtle pressure. "I have to handle money which says 'in God we trust'; but there is no God in my life."

From an atheist's perspective, not only would the Pledge of Allegiance need to be revised, but so would the entire money system. The back of the dollar bill bears the label "In God We Trust," and the Latin inscription

"Annuit coeptis," which translates "He [God] agrees with what was begun." The Latin quote is from a poem by Vergil: "Novus ordo seclorum," another Virgil quote on the dollar, means "the new world order," written to praise Emperor Augustus and later used by Roman Christians to praise the Kingdom of Christ.

Glicksman said the arguments against the pledge were clear and convincing. "It was a school setting. If the Pledge of Allegiance took place at a baseball game, you wouldn't have the same legal fight."

Mahmoud Mousa, president of the Islamic Center in East Lansing, agrees with the new ruling. He believes the separation of church and state should be upheld as it was written in the Constitution, "as long as it doesn't touch the freedom to practice a religion, because that's constitutional as well."

It was under President Dwight Eisenhower that the phrase "under God" was originally added to the Pledge of Allegiance. The year 1954 had been the peak of McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings. The world was deep in the Cold War. The Korean War had just ended in a shaky truce. It was also a high point of forcing teachers and other public employees to take loyalty oaths. From 1892 to 1954, no one had had a problem saying the pledge without mentioning God.

"Apparently McCarthyism never went away," says Bonnie Bucqueroux, Green Party candidate for Congress from Lansing in 2000. She recently hosted a reporter from the Algerian newspaper El Watan. "Since she had always heard we were very clear to separate government from religion, she couldn't understand what was going on," she said. The Algerian woman put her life on the line to become a reporter when between 1993 and 1998 more than 100 of her colleagues were killed fighting for a secular society. Bucqueroux says that as a child she herself was sent out of the classroom for refusing to say the pledge.

In 1967, sociologist Robert Bellah coined the term civil religion to explain the role of religion in the United States. Bellah argued that religion and God played a key role within the political sphere without being linked to a specific church. He concluded that America's "own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols" included biblical archetypes such as Exodus, the Chosen People and the Promised Land. He concluded that civil religion made America "a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it and a light to all the nations."

When on Sept. 14 President Bush declared in Washington's National Cathedral that Americans now had the responsibility "to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil," (later to become the "axis of evil") Bellah, now emeritus professor at the University of California at Berkeley, was shocked. "It was a stunningly inappropriate talk by Bush, basically because it was a war talk," he told The Washington Post.

It was during the war against Vietnam in 1967 that Bellah argued in his book "Religion in America" that America's civil religion model could be misused to divide the world into us and them, to make God serve as cover for something else. "With respect to America's role in the world, the dangers of distortion are greater and the built-in safeguards of the [civil religion] tradition weaker," Bellah wrote.

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**Lansing City Pulse (MI)**

**Date:** July 3, 2002

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