

“Under God” is Un-American

by Jim Heldberg, Pacifica, 28 June 2002

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We're all born as Atheists. Many of us stay Atheists. Some choose Atheism after trying something else.

About 1 in 7 Americans are religion-free, according to the latest and most complete survey. If we were a religion, we'd be one of the largest.

About 6 in 7 Americans choose religion, whether brand C, H, I, J or any other major or off-brand.

That's American freedom of religion. Our Constitution says our government won't get involved in religion. It says government will govern, not preach. If we had obeyed our Constitution in 1954, we wouldn't be arguing about the Pledge of Allegiance today.

In all the distracting smoke, we should remember that the Pledge isn't a legal document. It is a custom. It is powerful poetry, written by a private citizen to express his dedication and pride. Interestingly, the author didn't think religion belonged in it. Federal bureaucrats have altered it twice, reducing its poetic and universal value, but it has become an American tradition. Surprisingly, it is both embraced and shunned for religious reasons.

America lived without a Pledge for half its life, surviving a civil war that nearly killed our country. During the first half of the Pledge's life, before “under god” was added, America survived 2 World Wars and a crushing Depression. Obviously, America doesn't need to be “under” anything, whether kings or gods, real or imaginary.

Thomas Jefferson and the other American founders wanted a fresh start. They knew from their experiences in Europe and their own colonies how church and state could corrupt each other. They said “NO” to religion in the very first item of the Bill of Rights.

Saying “NO” to religion was also done for a very practical reason. The founders wanted to get the new Constitution adopted quickly so they could prepare for war, and they knew that religious arguments never end. If Maryland

had pushed for national Catholicism, Pennsylvania held firm for Lutheranism, and Rhode Island insisted on Quakerism, Great Britain would have us tithing to the Church of England.

Saying “NO” to religion has important practical benefits today, too. It encourages science. It attracts worldwide immigrant talent and energy. And it increases our international influence.

Our religion-free government is respected worldwide. Our religious neutrality gives America the capacity to act for human rights in the world, regardless of religions involved. We are strong when we are neutral, and weak when we choose sides in deadly fights over religion. A good referee doesn't choose sides.

Unfortunately, our ill-informed president has chosen to take sides in the world's oldest religious war, weakening both our national strength and worldwide respect.

If our government had stayed out of religion, Muslim maniacs might not have “praised allah” by leveling the World Trade Center. If our government had stayed out of religion, Jews might not have leveled Muslim Palestinian refugee camps. If our government had stayed out of religion, China might not have religiously persecuted its citizens. Even Hitler acted for strong religious reasons. Have we forgotten the horrors of the Inquisition, inflicted by governments controlled by religion? We must do better.

In this world of nuclear dangers, we need to minimize religion's inherent divisiveness.

America must return to our “religiously neutral” position to regain respect at home and abroad. It is the law. It is our most important law. Anything less is illegal, as the court said.

It takes courage to stand for the law, when the public is filled with mindless religious fervor. But calm in the face of fervor is exactly why we have courts. We should applaud their sensible handling of this old mistake.

Atheists are patriots, too. Our dedication to American values is undiluted by religion. I'm a full-fledged American voter and veteran. I want to pledge allegiance to my country, not to someone else's religion.

America's pledge should include all Americans. All Americans, especially our younger people, fervently want us to fix this. Let's make it legal again. Let's use this opportunity to quickly return the Pledge of Allegiance to its original full-

strength version, so all Americans can pledge proudly. Let's be One Nation Indivisible, not divided factions fighting over illegal foolishness.