

'UNDER GOD': The push to eliminate our "civil religion" by tabooing its language

Founding papers rife with religious phrases

In his July 2 letter, Jesse Kushin is wrong in stating that the U.S. Constitution "knows nothing of God." It is specifically, pointedly Christian in calling Jesus "our Lord."

Yes, the affirmation that the signers were Christians is pro forma, in the phrase "in the year of our Lord." But pro forma religious phrases are a constitutive aspect of America's political language, as in "In God We Trust" and "this nation, under God" and (in the Declaration of Independence) "Creator."

In banning the public use of religious language, the USSR was not neutral on religion. Our public, surely, can see through the deceptive notion that dropping the religious language embedded in our civil religion would be only neutral, rather than neutralizing and hostile.

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Luther said something like "Let me control the hymns the people sing, & I will control their theology." **Language is power**, & tabooing language is disempowering. (The Ottomans tried to eliminate Greek, but Greek-speaking parents sent their children to the monasteries to learn Greek.) At the just-concluded Craigville Theological Colloquy, no UCC clergy (except the Bible-studies leader, me) used the Bible's (all-masculine) pronouns for God: liberal religion has so vigorously tabooed the Bible's all-masculine (no feminine, in titles or pronouns) language for God that the punishment for "he-his--him-himself" is shunning, if not ostracism.

This same severity is now being exhibited, in the public sphere (ACLU, etc.), against *all* religious language. Re-imagining **deity** by censoring the God-pronouns & thus eroding the personal God-titles (Father, Lord, King, Son) is driven by the same negating spirit as re-imagining American **history**/present/future by censoring out religious language.

THIS LETTER in today's CAPE COD TIMES was held up by the letter editor's request that I explain "civil religion." Here is my post-response.

The letter's last sentence says more than that religious language is embedded in America's founding documents; it's a strand in the American language, our historic common speech, as in Lincoln's Second Inaugural. If we do not fight against the religion-amnesia mythized by the secularists, the false notion that we were founded as a secular (rather than only a non-eciesiasical) nation will prevail.

Please contrast "God is with us" (as on the Nazi belt-buckles "Gott ist mit uns") with "under God: no "American exceptionalism" here: we are not over any other people/nation, even in mission. Contrast also "annuit coeptis" (the claim that the USA is a new beginning for humanity, as in "novus ordo seclorum") & the possibly-read-as-boast "in God we trust." "Under God" signals only our inferiority (no superiority), our responsibility, our cosmic accountability. The phrase is sobering, the opposite of puffery. And it's in a straight line from the Declaration of Independence's derivation of our rights from the "Creator," to whom thus we are responsible for their use.

"Civil religion" is a phrase U. of Cal. sociologist Robert Bellah came up with about a score of years ago to describe (1) the configuration of the Founding Fathers' religious assumptions & (2) the religious language they used (in our founding documents, as well as their own formal & informal writings) expressive of those assumptions. For America's religion scholars, that is what "civil religion" signals. About the same time as Bellah's now-classic HABITS OF THE HEART, Richard John Neuhaus (the founding & present editor of FIRST THINGS) came out with his classic THE NAKED PUBLIC SQUARE, another phrase in the current coinage of America's religion scholars. The latter author makes the point that neglecting a language results in its becoming first strange & then unintelligible. Brought up in home & school without the religious language of either church or state, the majority of America's children are estranged from the holy words of America's primary religious heritage. The secularist push to elide religious words from the public square, including public education, is further deepening that alienation & ignorance. Now, by an overreading of the First Amendment (which merely enjoins Congress from voting in one organized religion as the country's official "church"), the country is unwittingly sliding down into a "politically correct" linguistic atheism almost as deep as was the official atheism of the USSR--a slide certainly in violation of (1) our Founders' intent (beginning with the Mayflower Compact, our first official political document) & (2) the desire of ca. 96% of our citizenry.

Culturally, we are in a profound linguistic crisis when both houses of Congress vote unanimously against a decision of a federal court, viz. California's 9th Circuit's anti-"under God" 2-to-1 subcommittee vote. The resulting national uproar was a wake-up call; so was the Supreme Court's voucher decision.

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