

WPM News

Pantheists unite for “under God” case

Last year, in a case brought by atheist Michael Newdow, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a public school may not sponsor a daily recitation of the Pledge that includes the words “under God.” The U.S. Supreme Court heard the appeal against this decision on March 24, and their decision is expected in July. Elk Grove Unified School District, now backed by the Bush Administration, argues that school children are likely to perceive “under God” as a statement about the nation’s history and political philosophy rather than as the promotion of any particular religious belief.



In December Americans United for the Separation of Church and State asked the World Pantheist Movement if we would be interested in filing a friend-of-the-court brief along with other pantheist organizations, and we agreed. A separate invitation was issued to Buddhist groups.

Pantheism and Buddhism were the only religious movements that filed briefs supporting Newdow by the end of February.

The inclusion of non-theist religious groups in a Pledge case is a new departure which significantly expands the set of atheist, humanist, civil liberties and religious freedom groups who usually criticise the “under God” wording. It shows that these words run counter to the convictions of many religious non-theists too. Of course they also run against the beliefs of polytheists and worshippers of female deities, and it is to be hoped that future cases about separation of state and religion would include pagans, Hindus and other theists as well.

We recognize that some WPM members don’t have a problem using the word “God,” although very few of us would agree that a nation can be “under” God. We also recognize that people are free to opt out of reciting the pledge. What concerns us is that people can find themselves either pressurized to recite words they don’t believe in, or may be exposed to ridicule or ostracism if they opt out. This is especially important with impressionable children and youths, and it may even be one of the reasons why strongly Christian America presents an anomaly among rich countries where traditional religions are losing ground.

The pantheist brief was written and filed pro bono by attorneys Dov Szego and Michael Worsham, with input from the WPM, the Universal Pantheist Society and Pantheist Association for Nature. It argues that Congress’s addition of the words “Under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 violates all the tests used by the Supreme Court in weighing whether government actions are barred by the Establishment Clause

of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. It also argues that to require recitation of the Pledge including "Under God" constitutes compulsion of speech as prohibited by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. You can read the full pantheist brief online at: <http://www.pantheism.net/documents/pledgebrief.pdf> and the Americans United brief at: <http://www.au.org/press/pr040213.htm>

WPM Members speak

The words "under god" are an unacceptable expression in the Pledge of Allegiance. My 15-year-old daughter, during the first invasion in Afghanistan, decided not to participate in the Pledge because she did not want to support a country initiating an unjustified war. She is also an atheist. My daughter sat quietly during the Pledge, and respectfully refused to stand and/or participate in any way, in addition for stating her reasons for doing so. Her teacher removed her from class and required her to sit in the office.

I was notified that although she was not required to say the Pledge, she was required to stand, and if she did not stand she would be suspended. I countered that it was unconstitutional for the school system to require my daughter to stand during the Pledge as she was not creating any disruption or disturbance in class. The principal then told me I would have to go to the Board of Education with further complaints. After discussing this with my daughter, she decided that she would stand, because she felt that students and teachers were ridiculing and alienating her, in addition to creating a hostile learning environment.

I find it reprehensible, in a country founded on freedom of expression, of religion, and of speech, that we suppress our children's freedom to think or make choices if those thoughts or actions are outside the parameters determined by select few.

Bridget Chaney.

When I was in school, and now when I'm at athletic or other events where the pledge is recited, I simply omit the phrase "under god." The phrase implies an omnipotent male deity and therefore excludes not only atheists, animists, pantheists, agnostics, etc., but also all those who believe in the concept of female deity. It would be my preference to have the pledge restored to its pre-1954 status, but I'm much more concerned with the granting of our tax dollars to religious groups for supposed charity work under the "faith-based initiative." These groups are free to discriminate against those who do not practice their particular faith, and they are not prohibited from pressuring these poor and desperate folks to adopt their particular beliefs and practices. So far, every penny of "faith-based initiative" funds have been granted to conservative Christian organizations.

Lorraine.

These words were added to the Pledge by an act of Congress back in the 50's. I don't think that it necessarily impinges on religious freedoms, in that the phrase does not act negatively - to deny another person's beliefs. I think the addition of the phrase works its mischief in a positive sense - to elevate one particular view

of God over others. The recitation of these governmentally sanctioned words carry the implication that "my religion is better than yours."

Tony Van der Mude, New Jersey.

As a long time member of Toastmasters and a past area governor, I was sometimes asked to lead the pledge of allegiance. I had always remained silent at the phrase "one nation under God" when reciting the pledge, but I found this awkward when I myself was leading the pledge. The group became confused at my silence, stared at me with the "deer caught in the headlight" stare and finally uttered the missing phrase, whereupon I would resume the rest of the pledge. Recently I said I thought it would be better if the pledge were led by someone willing to repeat the entire pledge.

I feel that it is implied that the "God" in reference is the one belonging to the Christians. If it is felt that a reference to a deity is essential, there should be a brief period of silence, between "...the republic for which it stands..." and "Indivisible..." In that moment of silence, each pledger would be free to think of any deity - or none.

Ernie Hopkins, San Diego.

Our official statement

*This is the WPM's official statement
approved by the directors:*

Pantheists give religious reverence to the Universe and Nature rather than to a Creator God. Some pantheists are comfortable with using the word God as shorthand for this feeling, but many are not. A recent Internet survey of Pantheists showed that only 36 per cent were comfortable with using the word God (except inside quotation marks) in relation to their own religious beliefs. Even for those pantheists who use the word God, the phrase "under God" is difficult to endorse. Pantheists believe that the Universe is a unity of which each human and every other existing thing in the universe is a part. God is seen as the totality or community of all of us. The expression "under God" implies a separate God who is in control of us.

Clause nine of our belief statement states: "We uphold the separation of religion and state, and the universal human right of freedom of religion." The World Pantheist Movement in principle cannot support the inclusion in a national pledge of a religious phrase associated with only some of the USA's many religious and non-religious orientations - a phrase which is not inclusive of beliefs that are non-theistic or polytheistic. In our opinion the "free exercise" of religion stipulated in the US constitution requires freedom from fear of religious persecution - whether that persecution is exercised formally by the state, or informally by individuals and social groups. We have reports that children who opt out of the Pledge have in some cases suffered ridicule or ostracism by their peers and in a few cases sanctions by their teachers. This constitutes a social pressure on people to change their religious beliefs to those of the majority, and it arises from the pledge phrase "under God" and the need for objectors to opt out. Thus any requirement of a daily pledge recital including this religious wording may result in an infringement of the "free exercise of sincerely held beliefs."