

"Religions vary in their degree of idiocy, but I reject them all."
— Gene Roddenberry,
creator of "Star Trek"

Critical Thinker

The Bimonthly Newsletter of United States Atheists | November / December 2003

Supreme Court Takes Pledge Case

by **Kendall Auel** Co-host of "Bunk Busters," *United States Atheists*

The United States Supreme Court decided on October 14 to hear *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, the case which declares the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance to violate the First Amendment. Furthermore, Justice Antonin Scalia has decided not to participate in the decision. Michael Newdow earlier requested that Scalia stand aside because Scalia had publicly criticized the Ninth Circuit's decision. Scalia's decision to not participate surprised nearly everyone, including Newdow.

The Pledge of Allegiance was changed by Congress in 1954 at the height of the red scare, when atheism was linked directly with Communism in popular thinking. Just six months later, in December, 1954, Joe McCarthy was discredited and censured by the Senate. But the battle against atheism went on. In 1955, President Eisenhower signed a law placing the words "In God We Trust" on all currency and coins. A year later, the official U.S. motto became "In God We Trust."

The history of the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance clearly demonstrates that Congress was attempting to establish belief in God as the official U.S. religion. Granted, the word God can apply equally to a Christian or a Jew. Even a Muslim can translate God into his Allah. But the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals made it clear that "under God" does not apply to every religion.

Judge Alfred Goodwin (a former Portland resident) wrote in his controversial opinion: "A profession that we are a nation under God is identical, for Establishment Clause purposes, to a profession that we are a nation under Jesus, a nation under Vishnu, a nation under Zeus, or a nation under no god, because none of these professions can be neutral with respect to religion."

Atheists certainly do not believe that America is a nation under God. But the current Pledge attempts to establish, for all Americans, a relationship between our nation and a purported god. This is in direct opposition to the belief of even some theists that God is totally separate from our earthly politics. It is also in opposition to theists who consider the laws of America to hold a position above religious teachings. For example, many people agree that parents must allow their children to be treated by a doctor when the child's life is in danger, regardless of religious beliefs to the contrary.

While atheists are the loudest voices in favor of the Ninth Circuit's opinion, we are not alone. Consider what Brent Walker, the executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, has to say: "What is constitutional is not always helpful or conducive to a spirit of robust religious liberty. The vitality of religion in America is diminished by blurring the allegiance to government with our ultimate allegiance to

see **PLEDGE CASE** on page 3...

Upcoming Events

Annual Food Drive

Please bring non-perishable food to one of our meetings by Nov. 18. Details on page 2.

Adopt-A-Highway Cleanup

Saturday, Dec. 13, 9:00am Join us for about two hours of cleaning-up the stretch of highway "adopted" by USA. Meet at the Atheist Community Center. Dress for the weather and bring a pair of work gloves.

Solstice Social

Saturday, Dec. 20, 7:00-9:30pm Join us at the Atheist Community Center for good times, appetizers and an auction benefiting USA. Bring your family and invite a friend!

Weekly Meetings

Every Tuesday, 7:30pm Join us at the Atheist Community Center, 6514 SE Foster Rd., Portland. Guests and the public are always welcome to attend.

November 4, 11, 18, 25

December 2, 9, 16, 23, 30

"Bunk Busters"

"Bunk Busters" is the cable TV show produced by USA and co-hosted by Jerry Billings and Kendall Auel. It is cablecast through Portland Cable Access. For more information, contact Alfredo Torrejon at bunkbusters@unitedstatesatheists.com.

Schedule (subject to change):

Tuesdays 7:30pm Ch. 22

Saturdays 1:30pm Ch. 23

Sundays 2:30pm Ch. 11

For up-to-date schedule information, see: www.pcatv.org/programming/tab.htm#m2681_

Web Site

Be sure to check out our ever-improving Web site for the latest USA information. www.unitedstatesatheists.com

Dial-An-Atheist

For a weekly message of common sense, dial 503-ATHEIST (284-3478).

Critical Thinker

For complete submission guidelines, go to www.unitedstatesatheists.com/critical-thinker/. The deadline for next issue is December 15, 2003. Send to the editor at criticalthinker@unitedstatesatheists.com, or mail in care of the USA address. Contact the editor if you are interested in placing advertising in the newsletter.

USA Solstice Social

You and your family are invited to join us on December 20 from 7:00–9:30pm at the Atheist Community Center for our annual Solstice Social. Appetizers and beverages will be served. We encourage you to bring family and friends to join us in the celebration.

We will also conduct an auction benefiting United States Atheists. If you have items you would like to donate, please contact Wyatt Fitch at billgatesisacrook@yahoo.com, or drop them off at any Tuesday meeting. ■

USA Annual Food Drive

Hunger is a growing problem in Oregon. Please help USA aid a needy local family with food. Be generous and bring non-perishable food to the Atheist Community Center during any of our Tuesday night meetings through November 18. The most useful items include: canned meats (tuna, chicken, salmon, etc.); canned and boxed meals (soup, chili, stew, macaroni and cheese, etc.); peanut butter, canned or dried beans (black, pinto, lentils, etc.); pasta, rice, cereal, canned fruits and 100% fruit juice (canned, plastic or boxed). To ensure safety, we cannot accept the following: rusty or unlabeled cans, perishable items, homemade items, non-commercial canned or packaged items, alcoholic beverages and open or used items.

You may donate money to this cause as well. Donations will be used for a grocery store gift certificate to enable the purchase of perishable items. Your generous gifts will be delivered to a needy family in time for Thanksgiving. ■

Religion-Free Weddings

by Nancy Powell Vice President, United States Atheists

I have just returned from a wonderful trip to Georgia, where I was fortunate to join a special friend of mine in attending the wedding of his niece. I love weddings... the smiles, the family, the love... the food! I am a hopeless romantic. I didn't even mind that it was in a church, as this was important to the couple getting married. But what if it isn't important to you? Take it one step further. What if you would not get married in a church — period? That is how I feel and I am sure that since you are reading the *Critical Thinker*, chances are you feel the same way.

I am not religious and under no circumstances would I fake that I was — not even to get married. So what are the options for people who aren't religious? First off, you could go to the courthouse and simply have a judge marry you. But there are no guarantees that he won't slip in a little religion in the service as you have no control over what he says. Everything said is preplanned by him, and what he says goes. You might get lucky and have one who doesn't slip in a "God bless you" but you wouldn't know until you were done.

What if you want control over your own wedding? With flowers, a long white dress, maid of honor, music, your own vows or ones that you helped prepare? What if you want poetry or words from a family member included in the service? What if you always wanted to be married at the Rose Garden or the place the two of you met? What if you want everything your way, including the choice

to not have religion injected into your marriage? The answer is to have an atheist minister perform your ceremony. I am one of them, and am proud of the kind of weddings I perform. They may be formal or casual, large or small, day or night, traditional or non-traditional. They are the exact same kind of weddings we have all attended, simply without the religion.

Is this legal? Yes, of course it is. I have been licensed in Oregon and Washington to perform weddings for many years and I have officiated over dozens of them. Each one was unique and wonderful. Most of the time there is simply no distinction between the religious and non-religious services. I have even done weddings in churches, including the Old Pioneer Church owned by the City of Portland near Oaks Park in Sellwood. I have married people who were not atheists. They just didn't see a need for religion in their service, or didn't share the same religion. There are many reasons to use a non-religious minister for a wedding.

Atheist ministers can assist with funerals, same-sex marriages, birthing celebrations, renewal of vows and other special services. If you or someone you know is planning to get married and wondering where to turn for the perfect secular service, the answer is right here. Religion need not play a part in your special day. Please feel free to contact me, Nancy Powell, anytime at (503) 281-1741 to discuss your plans. I can help you every step of the way. Together we will make your wedding "Beyond Belief!" ■

Join us for lively discussions and good times at our weekly meetings. We meet every Tuesday night, 7:30pm at the Atheist Community Center, 6514 SE Foster Rd., Portland. Bring a friend!

What Would Jerry Do?

by **Jerry Billings** Treasurer & Co-host of "Bunk Busters," United States Atheists

Dear Jerry,

I pray for you every day, Mr. Billings, but you and your kind make me sick. You fight against the Honorable Judge Roy Moore's display of the Ten Commandments in the Alabama Courthouse. Don't you and your stupid atheist friends know that the laws in our country are all based upon God's laws? Why do you hate God?

A Southern Gentleman

Dear Gentleman,

The title of this column says it all. It lets you know that I am willing to share my views with you and I will do that right now.

First, let us assume that you are correct and that all laws in this country are truly based upon your God's laws. Since the Ten Commandments display has been found to be against the law, how can you possibly believe that it is alright to violate laws which you so loudly proclaim are from your God? Do you see any inconsistency there?

Now, let us take a look at those Ten Commandments because not so much as a single one of them is in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

Neither the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, seventh or tenth is a part of American law in any jurisdiction (one God, no graven images, don't take his name in vain, keep the sabbath, honor your parents, no adultery, no coveting neighbor's wife or any other of his property). This leaves only numbers six, eight & nine (you shall not kill, steal or bear false witness), which can possibly be interpreted as a part of our laws. Have you ever read the Ten?

Whenever a state agency approves of a version of the 10 C's, such action requires the state to approve of one

version and to reject all other versions; for example is number six applicable to killing or to murder? Should the state decide its application? Another example — I will argue that coveting is the basis of a capitalistic society. We all want to better ourselves and have the things that we have seen. And, of course, the Roman Catholic version differs from the Protestant one.

No *Bible* of which I am aware offers Judge Moore's condensed version of the 10 C's. Get out your *Bible* and read it. You will find the Ten in Exodus ch. 20 and Deuteronomy ch. 5 (by the way, they are in contradiction). Also, you might want to consider that the U.S. Constitution provides for amendments by representative consent. For example, the 10 C's have no means to modify that wives are no longer considered their husband's property, but rather as free persons with the same rights as their marital partners. You should also note that preachers have a habit of leaving out parts of the 10 C's. Take a look at Commandment number two where it lays a curse on descendants of wrongdoers, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them [idols], nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me..." Most Christians that I have met have no idea that their God punishes your children, grandchildren great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren if you violate his law. Christians should live in fear because they may go to a burning Hell for something that a male ancestor who they never even met was a sinner.

I was particularly taken by the use of the religious slogan from the back

of a U.S. bill, "In God We Trust," on Moore's monolith. Wow! First pass a law requiring the slogan on paper money, then using the fact of the slogan to prove its authority. Talk about circular reasoning.

Judge Moore's religious beliefs, taken at face value, establishes that it is impossible for a his-kind of Christian to be 100% American. Roy Moore Americans can pick and choose which laws are to be followed and which to reject. Such is the strange mental attitude of the born-again — laws are God-given but it is okay to break the ones that you don't like.

Oh, yes, why do I hate God? It's pretty hard to hate something that does not exist. I don't hate Santa, the Tooth Fairy or the Easter Bunny either.

— *Jerry Billings*

Pledge Case

...continued from front cover

God. Are we any more religious today than we were before 'under God' was put into the pledge in 1954?"

Even with support from some members of the religious community, it is very likely that there will be a huge uproar in America if the Supreme Court rules in favor of Michael Newdow. We can expect Congress to act in very irrational ways, for example creating a constitutional amendment allowing the Pledge of Allegiance to be recited in schools and other government institutions.

I urge everyone to write letters to the editor, e-mail your representative and senators, and otherwise make your opinion known.

The court will hear the case in 2004 and is expected to make its ruling by next summer. ■

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