

When we look at our money, we see the words “In God We Trust” written on the coins or currency. This wasn’t always so.

There’s a story there... a long and complicated one that reflects an old division in American life.

Colonial America was mostly unchurched and not the model of piety we are presented with today. Religious colonies, like that of the Puritans, were the exception, not the rule, and active religious adherence in colonial times hovered between 20 and 35 percent of the population. Most were only vaguely Protestant, and more likely to understand spells, potions, and omens than theological doctrines.

Then a series of Protestant religious revivals – collectively known as the Great Awakenings – took place. Historians and theologians identify three or four bursts of religious enthusiasm that took place between the early 18th century and the late 20th century. Each of these "Great Awakenings" was characterized by widespread revivals led by evangelical Protestant ministers, a sense of transformation on the part of those affected, and an increase in evangelical church membership. Religious adherence increased to 60-75% and largely stayed there until recently.

One of those religious revivals took place in the mid-20th century, but it was a little different than the earlier ones. It was the beginning of the first coalition of business and religious forces to impose a set of Christian libertarian ideas about business and politics on the people of the United States.

Lead by white Evangelicals, it can be understood as a deliberate campaign to combat the social gospel of Jesus and turn back the New Deal.

Since the 1930’s, leading industrialists had sought to counter the New Deal. Franklin Roosevelt had sold his New Deal to voters in part by explaining economic justice in terms of the Social Gospel, a progressive interpretation of Christian doctrine.

These businessmen go looking for ministers to make the case against the New Deal, and they find them. They all come together around a common set of values: seeing the New Deal and the labor unions’ power as forces of “pagan statism.” Through that common enemy, they make an argument that Christianity and capitalism are one and the same.

They use the catch phrase “Freedom under God.” Which basically means freedom from governmental oversight of business, and religious oversight of government and the people.

In his presidential campaign of 1952, Dwight Eisenhower takes the language that these Christian libertarians are promoting and weds it to the state. Instead of “freedom under God”

as opposed to government, he promotes “government under God.” He promotes “one nation under God” and the motto “in God we trust.”

A campaign is launched by conservative pulpits and certain business interests to promote these ideas – ostensibly to fight communism, but mostly to enshrine these ideas into American life. It succeeds so well that most of those born in that era think America is indeed a Christian nation.

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One of the first casualties was the Pledge of Allegiance.

The first Pledge was composed in August 1892 by Francis Bellamy, who was a Baptist minister and a Christian socialist. His original version says:

I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

This was modified in 1942 to read:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

And then in 1954, the newly baptized as a Presbyterian President Eisenhower attends a sermon by the Rev. George Docherty.

“To omit the words ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance is to omit the definitive factor in the American way of life,” Docherty said from the pulpit. He felt that “under God” was broad enough to include Jews and Muslims, although he discounted atheists.

“An atheistic American is a contradiction in terms,” Docherty said in his sermon. “If you deny the Christian ethic, you fall short of the American ideal of life.”

The week of Docherty’s sermon, bills were introduced in Congress to add the phrase, and Eisenhower signed the act into law on Flag Day — June 14, 1954.

It is worth noting that Docherty was known for his support of racial equality, and his church was often a home for civil rights and antiwar demonstrations. Docherty was with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965 on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., during one of the civil rights marches across the bridge in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. Docherty also criticized the Vietnam War from his pulpit, even when Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was in the congregation.

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For many decades, it had been the practice of most public schools in the United States to start the day with prayer and either religious instruction or reading from the Bible.

Two legal suits put an end to that.

In one, the State of New York had created what became known as the Regents Prayer.

“Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country. Amen.”

The intention was that such a generic prayer would have a wide appeal, and could not possibly offend anyone. Which it didn't at the time, not even the ACLU took offense.

It was struck down – not because of its religious content – but because it was composed by the government, it crossed the line that separated church and state.

The other suit was brought by the parents of Ellery Schempp, a sixteen-year-old Unitarian enrolled in Abingdon High School in the suburbs north of Philadelphia.

A 1949 Pennsylvania statute required teachers in Pennsylvania's public schools to read “at least ten verses from the Holy Bible” to their classes each morning without comment, or be fired from their jobs.

The Schempp's contended that the statute violated their family's rights under the First and Fourteenth Amendments, and the district courts agreed, striking down the Pennsylvania law.

A similar case was brought by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who filed suit against the Maryland school system to make them cease compulsory prayer and Bible reading in public schools. The Murray case was consolidated with Schempp's on appeal to the Supreme Court, which upheld the opinions of the lower courts in declaring such laws unconstitutional.

The Schempp's name is not well known these days, but because she was a vocal atheist, Madalyn Murray O'Hair becomes notorious and is "the most hated woman in America."

Here's the part that most of us don't know about. In reaction to the decisions by the courts, the US Congress drafted more than 150 resolutions to overturn the ruling by amending the constitution. The one they united around was called the Becker Amendment, which read in part:

“Nothing in this Constitution shall be deemed to prohibit the offering, reading from, or listening to prayers or biblical scriptures, if participation therein is on a voluntary basis, in any governmental or public school. . . Nothing in this Constitution shall be deemed to prohibit making reference to belief in, reliance upon, or invoking the aid of God or a Supreme Being in any governmental or public document, proceeding, activity, currency, school [or] institution . . .”

A furious political battle ensued. On one side were groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals and the fundamentalist International Council of Christian Churches. On the other were the American Civil Liberties Union, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the National Council of Churches.

The amendment died in committee after months of hearings, only because it was chaired by a Democrat, Emmanuel Celler, who worked tirelessly to give opponents of the amendment the political cover they needed. Had it gone to a vote in Congress, there is little doubt that it would have passed, and we might have constitutionally approved prayer in our schools.

Soon after, Celler is defeated in a Democratic primary for his opposition to feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment. Like I said, the story is complicated.

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The legacy of this bitter fight is with us today. Those who believe that this is a Christian nation and that the Bible is a source of moral instruction for ALL our citizens were deeply wounded by the decisions of the courts and the failure of the amendment. In response, they dug in for a long struggle to restore what they see as a nation ruled by God’s laws. A nation of rugged individualists unfettered by government or social justice.

They created schools, and think tanks, and political action committees. They began to focus on gaining political victories in state and local races for school boards and legislatures. And over the past 70 years, they have achieved remarkable success, culminating in the last election.

They are currently packing the courts with judges who oppose the previous decisions of the Supreme Court concerning prayer in schools, abortion rights, women’s rights, protections for LGBTQ Americans, and a whole host of other legal precedents that support our liberal values.

The coalition that was formed over a century ago is still with us, still seeking to impose its values and beliefs on a diverse nation of many faiths, or no religion at all.

Our struggle for our kind of freedom goes on.

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It's hard for us to know how many various deities were named and called upon here in the Americas before the first Europeans arrived, because so much knowledge and culture was lost or destroyed in the conquest and colonization.

But there were many. From Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic Circle, the Americas were rich in gods and goddesses and spirits of the land and the ancestors of the native people.

The lists of their names run into the thousands. Here are just a few: Azeban, Tabaldak, Napi, Nanook, Sedna, Kokopelli, Gitche Manitou, Wakan Tanka, Iktomi, Whope, Niltsi, Yaya, Atabey, Apu, Mama Pacha, Bacab, Chaac, Itzamna, Kukulcan, Huēhuecoyōtl, Chantico, Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc ...

And then the Norse brought their gods, although they didn't stay. Odin, Frigg, Baldr, Heimdalr, Loki...

The Spanish arrived in Mexico, bringing their Christian triune god, and the Virgin Mary goddess, and a whole panoply of saints and angels and demons. They encountered the Aztec, whose pantheon was even richer and more diverse.

Other Europeans colonized the north, bringing their versions of Christianity, but also the folklore and folkways of the common people. Boggarts and brownies and hobgoblins, spells and amulets.

Later on, French Huguenots, Catholics, Jews, Dutch Calvinists, Anabaptists, Scottish Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and other denominations began to arrive in growing numbers, and most colonies had little choice but to display some degree of religious tolerance – for their mutual God seemed to have many faces, depending on who was looking, and where.

The slave trade brought Africans and their indigenous pantheons, as well as Islam. One estimate is that somewhere between 10 and 30 percent of the slaves brought to America were Muslim. Allah arrives, along with Mahu, Mawu, Legba, Agbe, Chukwu, Nyame, Olodumare, Ngai, Roog...

There came Chinese, Japanese, people from India, and many others, who brought a whole host of other cosmologies and religions to these shores. Shiva, Kali, Vishnu, Brahma, the Buddha, and a host of other deities arrived with them.

And although we don't have deities, we atheists and agnostics and skeptics bring other things to the mix: reason, philosophy, science. (Although I think we have Gaia...)

To say that this is a Christian nation is true, but only partly true. It is also an Indigenous nation, a Muslim nation, a Jewish nation, a Hindu nation, a Daoist nation, a Buddhist nation, a Pagan nation, a nation of Reason and tolerance, etc. etc. etc.

What binds us is not Freedom Under God, but Freedom for – and from – all our gods and goddesses and spirits and beliefs. All of the traditions I mentioned provide moral and ethical guidance, and while any of them could guide a nation – and does – together they provide a broader, deeper and richer foundation than any one of them alone.

The original motto of these United States was not “In God We Trust.”

It was E Pluribus Unum – “Out of Many, One.”

That is our true motto, our true north star. One worth fighting for.

May it be so.