

Few understand religious freedom

By James A. Haught

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Freedom of religion means the government can't tell you what to believe, or which deities to worship, or whether to worship any at all. Each American is free to make a personal, private decision about this profoundly important topic. Politicians and government agencies mustn't do it for you.

Religious freedom is a core guarantee in America's Bill of Rights, locked into the First Amendment. It was drafted by America's visionary founders - Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, George Mason, etc. - who were horrified by Europe's bloody record of government-enforced religion.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson wrote:

"Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned, yet we have not advanced one inch toward uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half of the world fools and the other half hypocrites."

Mason, Adams, Madison, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin and even Ethan Allen wrote similar warnings. The only cure, they said, is separation of church and state. Government mustn't try to dictate religion, and churches mustn't try to use government power to impose their beliefs on others.

However, few Americans understand this crucial component of democracy. Instead, the majority endlessly seeks government imposition of belief through school prayer, posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings, banning evolution from science classes, giving tax money to church schools, erecting religious monuments in public parks, and the like. It's a struggle that never ends.

Shrewd politicians see that America is more religious than other democracies - thus they know they can win elections by posing as pious. Proclaiming faith wins votes. Doing the opposite could bring swift defeat.

That's why Congress adopted "In God We Trust" as the U.S. motto in 1956 (after decreeing it for gold and silver coins in 1908, and putting it on paper money in 1955). That's why Congress amended the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 to declare that America is one nation "under God."

Now a federal court has ruled that the latter violates the separation of church and state - and politicians are trumpeting outrage. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., called the judge who wrote the ruling an "atheist lawyer." Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., said the court decision is "just nuts." Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn. (who is so pious that he won't drive a car on the Sabbath), called it a "senseless, ridiculous decision." Attorney General John Ashcroft (whose church specializes in "the unknown tongue") vows to fight the court ruling.

Overwhelmingly, members of Congress say they'll seek to alter the Bill of Rights to let the government endorse religion. If they put such a constitutional amendment on the national ballot, there's no doubt that Americans would pass it in a landslide.

Personally, I hope this spasm of political piety subsides before the landmark principle of the founding fathers is damaged. Perhaps it would be better if the California ruling is overturned, as most legal experts predict it will be, rather than wreck religious liberty.

After all, "under God" and "In God We Trust" are mostly lip service. Legendary Justice William Brennan wrote that they are mere "ceremonial deism" and "have lost through rote repetition any significant religious content."

I'm always leery of politicians who broadcast their religion. The more they have to hide, I figure, the louder they pray.

After President Clinton was caught in the Monica mess, he paraded to church each Sunday with a Bible tucked conspicuously under his arm.

While President Bush was taking vast sums from the Enron crooks, he proclaimed "Jesus Day" as governor of Texas, and never missed a chance to display sanctimony.

Corrupt West Virginia politicians were mainstays at prayer breakfasts. In 1988, the top three supplicants at the state's annual legislative prayer breakfast were Gov. Arch Moore, Senate President Dan Tonkovich and visiting Georgia congressman Patrick Swindall. Within a couple of years, all three were in federal prisons.

I don't want pious politicians tampering with America's precious religious freedom. So I hope the "under God" uproar fades before lasting harm is done.

(Haught is editor of The Charleston Gazette, West Virginia's largest newspaper.)