



Does 'Pledge' have a place in schools?

Clear implications to this blending of church/state separate interests

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A challenge to the “Pledge of Allegiance” recently came before the Massachusetts Supreme Court from a group of atheists objecting to its language of “under God.” As reported in the Boston Herald, the couple believes that “the two words exclude their three children from declaring their patriotism.” The real problem with the “Pledge,” though, goes far beyond these two little words.

In a recent column for Salon, author Mary Elizabeth Williams profiled the case and found herself asking the bigger question, “Why are school children still saying the Pledge of Allegiance, anyway?” As she notes, “love and loyalty don’t spring from standing up and dully parroting a creed because the state says the teacher has to get up and do it.”

Continuing this practice in Richmond Community Schools deserves no less scrutiny. It’s true that many may feel the “Pledge” is an important practice rooted in the founding principles of our country — democracy, liberty and a Christian heritage. The reality, though, is that it may actually serve to undermine these very ideals.

What are the implications of so closely connecting worship of God and allegiance to a symbol of state authority, for instance? For Christians, the two words “under God” explicitly link the state with religious belief. Sociologists classify this blending of government with worship as “civil religion.” It is a bastardization that differs markedly from most all expressions of faith.

The “Pledge of Allegiance” was first drafted by the Baptist minister Francis Bellamy in 1892 in order to inspire greater devotion to the state. The American revolutionaries who fought against British rule

sought freedom from such blind obedience and symbol-worship. To impose it today as a daily “opt-out” ritual in our schools undercuts the very values upon which our nation was founded.

“The concept of ‘allegiance’ is feudal. In medieval Europe, the liegeman, or subject, pledged allegiance to his liege lord,” explains New America Foundation co-founder Michael Lind. “In a republic, the people should not pledge allegiance to the government; the government should pledge allegiance to the people.”

Gene Healy, a senior editor for the conservative Cato Institute, directs Williams’s concerns about the purpose of the “Pledge” not at atheists, but religious conservatives. He asks, “Why do Christian conservatives say it’s important for schoolchildren to bow before a symbol of secular power?”

For Richmond residents, we must likewise ask ourselves whether reciting the “Pledge of Allegiance” truly reflects our values. Simply falling back on arguments that it’s how we’ve always done it or unreflectively declaring the “Pledge” a valuable tool for inspiring loyalty and patriotism are not satisfactory responses. It is time for us to have an informed discussion about the role the “Pledge” should play in our classrooms.