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Patriotism Is Not a Religion ... 10/13/2002

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Patriotism Is Not a Religion

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Criticism of the recent federal appellate court ruling that the phrase "One Nation Under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance violates the separation of church and state furthers a false impression lingering since the burst of patriotism following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks: Namely, that one must believe in God to be a good American.

The religious rhetoric of patriotism impugns the political ideals of the Bill of Rights and the Constitution in at least two ways. First, connecting citizenship with religion is mistaken; there is no contradiction in being an exemplary citizen and an atheist.

Second, and more egregious, such rhetoric implies that not only must one believe in a god to be a good American; one must believe in the right god.

When someone affixes a placard to his or her automobile proclaiming "God Bless America," it is unlikely that Allah, Yahweh, Zoroaster, Vishnu, or The Great Spirit is being evoked. Rather, it is the Lord, the Christian God -- and less the God of the Pope than the God of Luther, Calvin and Protestants in general.

So the message is that being a true American entails believing in the right God, the Protestant God.

Some will protest that when the word "God" is evoked, the referent is not a specific God but a generic god. It is extremely dubious, however, that this could ever be the case. Language and religion are first and foremost social practices. When the phrases "God Bless America" or "One Nation Under God" or "In God We Trust" are uttered, the entity evoked is not some generic being.

Rather, these phrases, when spoken from social group X, elicit a being which favors social group X, not social group Y or Z.

Every religion sees itself as more "true" than others, else there would be no reason why being Christian is better than being Buddhist, Jain or Jewish. In America, religious rhetoric favors the post-Reformation varieties of Christianity. So to attach patriotism to religion automatically alienates those from different social backgrounds.

Religious rhetoric is not as embedded in the American psyche as many think. The phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance by Congress in 1954 in the height of Cold War paranoia that godless communists might overrun America. "In God We Trust" is minted on our money for the same reasons.

In short, our nation is founded on constitutional freedoms, including the freedom of religion and the freedom from religion.

Therefore, citizens who broadcast the religious rhetoric of patriotism reject the very ideals that define our democracy. Persons of faith should be among the staunchest supporters for the separation between church and state.

Many of our ancestors did not believe in the "right" God and emigrated from the Old World for that very reason. To assert that it is necessary to believe in a certain god -- or in any god at all -- to be an authentic American is itself un-American.

David Keller lives in Salt Lake City and is an assistant professor of philosophy at Utah Valley State College.