

Righteous Pledge: The Pledge of Allegiance and the Implicit Curriculum of American Civil Religion in the Eisenhower Era

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Abstract

The insertion of the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 represents the implicit curriculum of American Civil Religion during the Eisenhower Era and attempts to preserve the place of religion in America’s public schools during the Cold War. This article examines efforts to amend the Pledge against the backdrop of trends in American society during the 1950’s and how it impacted the patriotic curriculum of both public and parochial schools.

Introduction

In 1954 the United States Congress officially changed the Pledge of Allegiance to include the words “under God,” which would be recited as part of a daily ritual already well-established in America’s public schools. At a time when religion was fading from the explicit curriculum in U.S. public schooling, this change symbolized a renewed emphasis on education for “godly citizenship” as part of the implicit curriculum of American civil religion in public schools in the 1950’s. This article explores how the notion of “one Nation, under God” represented attempts to infuse religion into the civics curriculum in public schools in the United States throughout the Eisenhower era. It contextualizes those efforts within broader social trends of a religious resurgence during the 1950’s. And it interprets those efforts against the backdrop of a renewed national narrative that saw America as a religious nation in opposition to the forces of “godless” Communism during the Cold War. While others have highlighted the symbolic significance of the change to the pledge as representing the wider culture of American civil religion in the 1950s (Marty 1996; Ellis 2005), I argue that “under God’s” addition to the pledge had educational significance as well by becoming part of a curriculum of civil religion

that recast the ideal of American patriotism as a religious value during the Cold War—a time of changing U.S. religious values and political interest in those values as part of the ideological arsenal against Communism. At the same time, I suggest that Catholics—who promoted the change to the pledge through the Knights of Columbus—saw this as an opportunity to bolster their place in the mainstream of American society by promoting the values of patriotic citizenship in Catholic schools. Overall, this article examines the way in which the change to the Pledge of Allegiance reflected wider shifts in American society in the mid-twentieth century and ways in which religious and patriotic sensibilities continued to influence the curriculum of public and parochial schools in the United States as part of a Cold War ethos.

Method and Sources

This article utilizes both archival and historiographical sources. It examines popular support for the revised Pledge and a renewed citizenship curriculum by civic and religious groups through an analysis of materials published during the 1950’s. It draws on archival sources from the Collections of the Knights of Columbus—which spearheaded the change to the pledge—whose Supreme Council Archives are located in New Haven, Connecticut as well as material from the Archives of the Religious Education Association in the Special Collections at Yale University Divinity School Library, also in New Haven. It uses material from the Papers of Francis Julius Bellamy, who authored the original version of the Pledge, archived in the Special Collections in the Riverside Library of the University of Rochester. And it analyzes educational policy and citizenship curricula at the state level by examining guidelines issued by various state education departments alongside

curricular material used to teach citizenship in public and parochial schools throughout the 1950s.

Insertion of the Words “Under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance in its original form-minus the words “under God”- had been composed by magazine editor Francis Bellamy, the son of a Baptist minister, in 1892 and was first published in the *Youth’s Companion*, a popular children’s magazine during the nineteenth century, whose contributors included Mark Twain and Jack London. James Upham, whose uncle, Daniel Sharp Ford, was owner and editor of the *Youth’s Companion*, was manager of the magazine’s Premiums Department and was responsible for boosting circulation. With an eye toward both advertising and advancing patriotism Upham devised a plan for the magazine to promote having a flag above every schoolhouse in America. In coordination with this effort, he commissioned Bellamy to compose a pledge that schoolchildren could recite while saluting the flag as part of their daily school ritual to coincide with the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ coming to the Americas. (Ellis 2005) As Bellamy later explained:

I was at that time with the *Youth’s Companion* of Boston doing work with James B Upham, a member of the firm. Mr. Upham felt that a flag should be on every schoolhouse. The *Youth’s Companion* fostered a plan of selling flags to schools through the children themselves, at cost, which was so successful that 25,000 schools acquired flags in one year.

Mr. Upham also had a greater scheme, the result of which was that every school in the land on a certain day would have a flag raising, under most impressive conditions. The day was to be Columbus Day 1892-the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America...I was made Chairman of the Executive Committee

for that work and immediately began to enlist the support of not only the superintendents of education in all the states, but also worked with governors, congressmen, and even the President of the United States. The result was a universal holiday for Columbus Day, 1892 by Proclamation of Benjamin Harrison (Francis Julius Bellamy Papers, Box 3, Folder 5).

Bellamy went on to describe how the Pledge itself came about: “Of course the nub of the program was to be the raising of the flag with a salute to the flag recited by the pupils in unison...It was my thought that a vow of loyalty or allegiance to the flag should be the dominant idea. I especially stressed the word ‘allegiance.’ So, Mr. Upham told me to try it out on that line” (Francis Julius Bellamy Papers, Box 3, Folder 5). The result was simple:

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.

Thus, from its inception the Pledge of Allegiance was intended to be a part of the implicit curriculum of American patriotism and was designed to foster a spirit of patriotic fervor among America’s schoolchildren. It quickly gained in popularity and became a staple in American public schools by the early twentieth century (Ellis 2005; Leepson 2005).

Knights of Columbus and the Pledge of Allegiance

As early as April 1951, at the quarterly meeting of the Supreme Board of Directors, the Knights of Columbus voted to amend the Pledge of Allegiance by inserting the words “under God” after “one Nation” for use in its own Fourth Degree Assemblies throughout the United States (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, *Columbia Magazine*, August 1955).

The following year, various State Councils of the Knights of Columbus adopted resolutions that the Knights “instigate the general adoption of an amendment to the Pledge of Allegiance to read ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.’” Among these were Florida, New York, Michigan, South Dakota, and Georgia (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, *Proceedings of the Supreme Council 1952*).

In September 1952 Luke Hart, who had been elected Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, acting in his role as President of the National Fraternal Congress of America suggested adopting a resolution calling on the U.S. Congress to amend the Pledge of Allegiance to include the words “under God,” pointing out that it was a phrase used by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg address (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File 1998). The proposal was greeted with enthusiasm and was adopted by the national body with several state Fraternal Congresses following suit. A month earlier the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus had adopted a similar resolution petitioning Congress to officially change the Pledge and copies of the resolution were sent to the President, Vice President, and Speaker of the House (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, *Columbia Magazine*, August 1955). Hart, a lawyer from the Midwest, served as Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus from 1953 to 1964 and oversaw the expansion of the Catholic fraternal organization in the mid-1950’s and early 1960’s just as Catholics were entering the American mainstream (Kaufman 2000, 114). The 1960 election of fellow Knight and the first Catholic to become a U.S. President, John F. Kennedy, signaled shifting attitudes toward Catholics in American society-despite the persistence of anti-Catholic bias on the part of some-and indicated the eagerness of American Catholics to embrace their identity as patriotic citizens.

The Knights of Columbus had been founded in the previous century at a time when anti-Catholic bias was rampant. Established in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut by Father Michael McGivney, a parish priest concerned about the inability of many working-class Catholics to provide for their families in case of death, the Knights started as a way to provide life insurance benefits to low-income Catholic families and to promote fraternity among Catholic men, many of whom were recently arrived immigrants (Kaufman 1992). Quickly gaining in national popularity, the Knights of Columbus as a fraternal organization, at once, represented the desire of American Catholics to emulate the values of Americanism and, at the same, time defend Catholics over and against incursions by the Protestant majority. Throughout the nineteenth century anti-Catholic sentiment had found various expressions including the emergence of the “Know Nothing” party earlier in the century and attempts to keep Protestant values front and center in public schools-a move which sparked the development of a parallel system of parochial schools by U.S. Catholic Bishops (Loughery 2018, 111-138). When a Catholic, Al Smith, ran for President in 1924 the issue of his religion remained a stumbling block for many Protestant voters. By the mid-1950’s, however, Catholics were beginning to assert greater political influence and to find an even greater voice on the national stage (Dolan 1992, 417). The Knights of Columbus’ leadership over the issue of amending the Pledge of Allegiance offered an opportunity to demonstrate Catholics’ loyalty as Americans and to influence the public discourse over the place of religion in American life.

Creation of the Modern Pledge

In April 1953 Michigan congressman Louis Rabaut, a Catholic whose son was a Jesuit priest, introduced a resolution on the floor of the U.S. House of Representative to insert words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance-the measure previously proposed by the Knights of

Columbus and which had been replicated by numerous fraternal organizations throughout the United States including the American Legion. However, his efforts did not gain traction until 1954 when President Eisenhower threw his support behind the resolution after hearing a sermon at New York Ave Presbyterian Church by Reverend George Docherty, who was then chaplain to Congress. In his sermon, Docherty spoke of the “little Muscovites” who could pledge allegiance to the hammer and sickle, but who could not pledge allegiance to their nation “under God,” which he argued was “a distinctive factor in the American way of life” (Quoted in Marty 1996, 299). This sentiment resonated well with Eisenhower’s own belief in the significance of the religious character of the United States.

In many ways Eisenhower himself represented the revival of a religious spirit in American life during the 1950’s. Schooled in the Bible as young boy, yet not particularly religious himself, he said that during his time as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during World War II he had rediscovered his faith which led him to be baptized as an adult. He even went so far as to compose and deliver a prayer for his own inauguration, reportedly telling Evangelist Billy Graham “Billy, I believe one reason I was elected President was to lead America in a religious revival” (Quoted in Marty 1996, 306). After hearing Docherty’s sermon, Eisenhower enthusiastically endorsed the idea of inserting the words “under God” into the Pledge, believing that it was an opportunity to instill in American schoolchildren a firm conviction of the “dedication of our Nation and our people to the Almighty” (Marty 1996, 300).

On February 10, 1954, Senator Ferguson of Michigan introduced a resolution calling for the amendment of the Pledge on the floor of the Senate. When he discovered that a similar resolution had been pending in the House for ten months, he withdrew the resolution and Rabaut’s resolution to insert the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance-with Eisenhower’s endorsement-received unanimous bipartisan

support in both the House and the Senate with not a single dissenting vote (Marty 1996, 301). Louisiana congressman Overton Brooks captured well the spirit of the resolution when he endorsed it by saying, belief in God distinguished “free people of the Western world from the rabid Communist;” that “We in effect declare openly that we denounce the pagan doctrine of Communism and declare ‘under God’ in favor of free government and a free people” (Marty 1996, 301). This sentiment echoed the feeling of many, including the President, that the religious character of the United States needed to be preserved and codified for future generations.

On Flag Day, June 14, 1954, on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Senator Ferguson and Representative Rabaut recited together the newly revised Pledge. This marked the culmination of a concerted effort to maintain a religious emphasis in the implicit curriculum of American patriotism and marked the beginning of further efforts to ensure that religion would not disappear from U.S. public schools.

Supreme Court Cases Involving the Flag Salute in Public Schools in the 1940s

Ironically, in the decade prior to the insertion of the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance there had been legal challenges to the intrusion of the state into religious matters of conscience precisely around the issue of saluting the flag in public schools. During the 1940s the U.S. Supreme Court heard two significant cases that dealt with freedom of conscience regarding students’ refusals to salute the flag based on religious reasons. The Jehovah’s Witnesses objected to saluting the flag which they believed served as an idol and was therefore prohibited. Listing “Reasons Why a True Follower of Jesus Christ Cannot Salute a Flag” they outlined their case stating that not only was a flag salute a form of idolatry, but also “flag saluting is part of a creed of a sect of so-called patriots, teaching a ritual of patriotism and from such, all true Christians are commanded to turn aside” (Quoted in Fennell 1936, 8-9). In

1938, the Gobitis, a Jehovah's Witness family from Minersville, Pennsylvania won a district and appellate court ruling that allowed their children to return to school after they were expelled from the local public school for refusing to salute the flag based on their religious convictions. The school district appealed the ruling of the lower courts and the case *Minersville School District v Gobitis* appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1940. Surprising many, Justice Felix Frankfurter, who had been appointed to the court by FDR and had a reputation as a civil libertarian-having helped organize the ACLU in the 1920s-sided with the school district in this case. Writing the majority opinion of the court he stated that "The ultimate foundation of a free society is the binding tie of cohesive sentiment" and that since the flag was "the symbol of our national unity," public schools were allowed to compel students to salute the flag in order to promote "that unifying sentiment without which there can ultimately be no liberties, civil or religious" (*Minersville School District v Gobitis* 310 U.S. 586, 591-601 (1940)). This ruling only served to underscore the place that the daily recitation of the pledge held in U.S. public schools as part of the implicit curriculum of American patriotism and it reinforced the significance of the pedagogy of symbols in promoting American values and the American way of life.

A related case also involving the Jehovah's Witnesses and the saluting of the flag in public schools came before the court in 1943-*West Virginia State Board of Education v Barnette*. The Barnett sisters had been expelled in 1942 from their local four-room schoolhouse in Charleston, West Virginia for refusing to salute the flag since, like the Gobitis, they too were Jehovah's Witnesses. In this case, however, the court reversed its earlier ruling in *Gobitis* and ruled that students do have the right to refuse to salute the flag based on religious grounds. The Court noted that "the compulsory flag salute and pledge requires affirmation of a belief and an attitude of mind" (*West Virginia State Board of*

Education v Barnette 319 U.S. 624 (1943)). Thus, if this belief conflicted with one's religious beliefs it was a legitimate expression of religious freedom to refuse to salute the flag. By then, the backlash against the *Gobitis* ruling had mounted in both the religious and secular press. The *Christian Century* said of the ruling it is "bitterly ironical that a free government should inflict a penalty for refusal to salute a symbol of freedom" (Quoted in Marty 1996, 217). The secular press also balked at the ruling with 171 newspapers attacking the decision. A year before *Barnette* came before the court, Congress had also considered the issue of requiring the flag salute and passed a law officially recognizing the Pledge of Allegiance while also making the flag salute and recitation of the pledge voluntary. It is also interesting to note that this same law changed the flag salute from the traditional "Bellamy salute" with a raised right arm-which was considered too reminiscent of a Nazi salute-to the right hand placed over the heart (Ellis 2005).

Writing the majority opinion in *Barnette*, Justice Robert Jackson cited the purpose of public schools in a free society, emphasizing that schools serve the vital role of "educating the young for citizenship." He went on to state that public education in a democracy should "not strangle the free mind at its source [or] teach youth to discount important principles of our government as mere platitudes." Rather, public education should lead students to make their own informed decisions about what they believe, value, and cherish most as free citizens. Here, the court recognized that a patriotism that it is compulsory is weaker than that which is voluntarily. Jackson concluded: "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in matters of politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion... or force citizens to confess by word their faith therein." (*West Virginia State Board of Education v Barnette* 319 U.S. 624 (1943)).

In his dissenting opinion, hearkening back to his earlier decision in *Gobitis*, Justice Frankfurter stressed “We are told that a flag salute is a doubtful substitute for adequate understanding of our institutions. The states that require such a school exercise do not have to justify it as the only means for promoting good citizenship in children, but merely as one of diverse means for accomplishing a worthy end.” He recognized that while “patriotism cannot be enforced by the flag salute,” in this case “The right of West Virginia to utilize the flag salute as part of its educational process is denied” since “Only a persistent positive translation of the faith of a free society into the convictions and habits and actions of a community is the ultimate reliance against unabated temptations to fetter the human spirit” (*West Virginia State Board of Education v Barnette* 319 U.S. 624 (1943)). No doubt, Frankfurter believed that the flag salute in schools played an important role in the implicit curriculum of American citizenship by symbolically reinforcing those values around which a democratic society ought to be unified. Yet, the *Gobitis* and *Barnette* cases and the controversy surrounding them in the 1940s—a time when American democracy was seen as under attack around the globe—reveal the inherent tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces within American democracy itself—whether the *unum* ought to overshadow the *pluribus* or whether there truly can be an *e pluribus unum*. Debates about how best to instill those same democratic values in American schoolchildren reflected that same tension and seemed to tip the scale to one side or the other while trying to maintain a delicate balance between the two.

By the mid-1950s, however, after emerging victorious against threats to democratic freedom in the form of Fascism during World War II and after entering into the Cold War struggle against forces of Communism, there was a decided shift in American society back toward Frankfurter’s earlier notion that “The ultimate foundation of a free society is the binding tie of

cohesive sentiment” and that the flag served not just as “the symbol of our national unity” but as a sacred symbol of our democratic values. This shift toward the *unum* laid the groundwork for the insertion of the words “under God” into the pledge, thus enshrining it even more prominently on the altar of American civil religion during the Eisenhower era.

The Implicit Curriculum of American Civil Religion

In 1955—the year after the words “under God” were inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance—President Eisenhower told the American Legion as part of their “Back to God” campaign that “Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first, the most basic expression of Americanism. Without God there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life” (*New York Herald Tribune* February 21, 1955). That same year, sociologist Will Herberg published a book that captured this American creed at mid-century. The book titled *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* emphasized the “common faith” of the American people and the United States as a “Judeo-Christian” nation. To describe the essence of this “common faith,” Herberg coined the phrase the “civic religion of the American way of life” (1955, 101-2). This description reflected well the religious values that were on display during the Eisenhower era—an era that produced religious celebrities who reflected popular religiosity in the United States represented by figures such as Billy Graham, Fulton Sheen, and Norman Vincent Peal who used the media to appeal to wider audiences beyond traditional sectarian boundaries. The era also gave a receptive public platform to theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Abraham Joshua Heschel who became members of a new religious intelligentsia, often appearing in the popular press and offering intellectual justification for the emergence of a uniquely American approach to religion that was broad, inclusive, and cohesive.

Pulled to the center of American life by the homogenizing effects of suburbanization in

the post-World War II era, many Americans found comfort in the values of family, stability, and prosperity-values that seemed to converge at the confluence of politics, economics, and religion in the 1950s (Krause 2015). At that center, both church and school offered stabilizing influences to counterbalance fears-both real and imagined-of the Communist menace that seemed to threaten that very way of life. In the wake of the baby boom and riding the crest of post-war prosperity, the suburbs grew at a tremendous rate. Between 1951 and 1970 the suburban population more than doubled in the United States, going from thirty-six million to seventy-four million in just twenty years (Kaledin 2000, 121). As a largely white emerging middle class migrated to the suburbs previously marginalized ethnic and religious groups were integrated into the modern democratic experiment of suburbia, while cities themselves became increasingly more segregated along racial, ethnic, and economic lines.

Moving beyond the ghettoization that many Catholics and Jews experienced in American cities earlier in the century, the newly created suburbs invited a new way of being religious as part of the American mainstream. Church basements became the new meeting houses where school, religious, and civic groups converged around a culture of conformity marked by bake sales, pot-luck suppers, and Jell-O molds in support of raising children in the American way of life. Among the rows of freshly built houses, car lined driveways, and non-descript houses of worship, civic associations, like the American Legion and the Knights of Columbus dotted the landscape of America's suburbs and became agents for promoting the American creed. Schools, both public and parochial, became central to their project as places of socialization into this common faith in the 1950's and the Pledge of allegiance became a rallying point for various groups seeking to reassert the central place of religion in American civic life.

These values were also reflected in the ubiquitous medium of television which spread the gospel of middle-class prosperity. Alongside religious celebrities, like Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen, who offered an explicit curriculum of a generic "feel-good" faith well suited to the era, television presented an implicit curriculum of a new social imaginary of solid, middle-class values that reinforced the culture of affluence being lived out in the newly emergent suburbs (Krause 2015). Margot Henricksen observes that "Reflecting American society of the baby boom and suburban sprawl, television upheld the family as the unifying center of values and as the firm base of American security." She contends that "This world focused itself internally, particularly on the lives of the children" as found in popular television shows of the era such as "Leave it to Beaver" which portrayed the nuclear, suburban family as a stable place for children to grow up (1997, 90). Here, "parental authority was wise, necessary, and beneficent" as "parents taught their children to be responsible and honest citizens" (Henricksen 1997, 90). Although not explicitly religious, such portrayals neatly coalesced with the aims which the advocates of American civil religion sought to promote: God, country, and family.

The Cold War and a "Common Faith"

The insertion of the words "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance and subsequent revisions to the citizenship curriculum in the nation's public schools in the 1950s represented an attempt at introducing an implicit curriculum of American civil religion at a time when religions' explicit influence in public schools was beginning to wane. It was a revision of the curriculum of American patriotism which recast the traditional Protestant trope of America's providential destiny in a new light to reflect a new national awareness of America as a "Judeo-Christian" nation. Or, as President Eisenhower suggested, "millions of our school children will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and rural schoolhouse, the dedication of

our nation and our people to the Almighty. To anyone who truly loves America, nothing could be more inspiring than to contemplate this rededication of our youth, on each school morning, to our country's true meaning.... reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future" (Eisenhower, 1954). Such sentiments openly expressed by a U.S. President reflect the religious ethos of the 1950s which became the high-water mark for formal church affiliation with nine out of ten Americans professing belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ according to one survey in 1954 and ninety-six percent of respondents professing a particular religious faith in 1957 (Whitfield 1996, 83).

Historian Martin Marty argues that this religious resurgence in American society in the 1950's was tied to a popular patriotism framed over and against the "godless Communism" of the Soviet Union (Marty 1996, 313). To be a good American meant to be a religious citizen and to be a religious citizen meant to be a good American. This sparked a renewed emphasis on developing a moral education for godly citizenship in public schools. Encouraging a non-sectarian approach to teaching the value of religious faith and common moral principles consistent with the American way of life became of paramount concern for many civics educators who stressed the religious character of American citizenship. For example, the Religious Education Association's journal *Character* which was started in the 1930's became *Character and Citizenship* in the 1940's and simply *The American Citizen* by 1950, taking the religious aspect of good citizenship as a *sine qua non* (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Boxes 38-39).

Along similar lines, a 1956 report by Waco Public Schools in Waco, Texas emphasized "respect for symbols of democracy" as an essential component of the civics curriculum. Here, a group of junior high school teachers asserted that "The corner stone of our American way of life was faith in God" and that

"Christianity in action is the essence of democracy" (Waco Independent School District 1956, 15). Listed among the "symbols of democracy with which all American schoolchildren should be familiar" was not only the Pledge of Allegiance but also "Grace ("Each in his own way")" (Waco Independent School District 1956, 45). It stressed belief in God as foundational to democracy in the United States, not only respecting but endorsing religious principles and practices as part of the school civics curriculum. Such sentiments were reflected in similar reports and various civics curricula from school districts throughout the United States during this period. A year later, a report on Nebraska's public schools stated "In our school program, and especially in our social studies, we have much opportunity to emphasize moral principles which undergird our nation's liberties. We have furthermore the opportunity to develop in our young people an appreciation and understanding of the significant part that faith in God has played in the development of our great country." Citing the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and the recently added inscription, "In God We Trust," to U.S. currency, it affirmed that a common faith in God is foundational to the principles of American democracy wherein belief that "Man is a spiritual being of dignity and worth because he has his origins and destiny in God, his creator" is "fundamental in our nation's moral and spiritual foundation" (Nebraska Dept of Education 1957, 10). Yet, this emphasis on teaching the moral and spiritual foundations of the United States was not limited to schools in the South or Midwest; rather, even more liberal states such as New York adopted "an appreciation of the moral and spiritual values of the past" and an "enthusiasm for the American way of life" as aims for its civics curriculum during the 1950's (Bureau of Secondary Curriculum Development 1954, 13).

As a 1955 report of the National Education Association on *Public Education and the Future of America* states: "The great ethical concepts of Judeo-Christian morality could be

taught without reference to particular sectarian interpretations. The moral foundation of the school program could be preserved while the rights of individual conscience were honored” (NEA 1955, 20). It goes on to extol the value of public schools as promoting those values whereby “public schools contributed magnificently to making ‘One nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all,’” highlighting how public schools have “sought to develop in children the moral and ethical commitments which are common to all of the great religions” and that “This common basis of ethical values has both raised the level of the nation’s morality and left each individual free to pursue the religious dictates of his own conscience” (NEA 1955, 68-69). “Thus,” the report concludes, “while public schools are prohibited by their very nature from teaching sectarian religious doctrines, they have contributed immeasurably to the spiritual growth of the American people, to the ethical foundation of American democracy, and to harmonious working relations among the varied groups within the United States” (NEA 1955, 70).

Against the backdrop of such concerns for finding ways to promote a moral education rooted in a common faith which supported the principles of American democracy were fears that the American way of life itself was under a constant existential threat both ideologically and materially by the forces of an atheistic Communism. The year after the NEA report was issued, for example, the Civil Defense Education Project of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare published a manual titled *Education for National Survival: A Handbook on Civil Defense for Schools* (U.S. Dept of Health, Education, and Welfare 1956). Opening its first pages with a photograph of a hydrogen bomb exploding over Bikini Atoll along with an artist’s rendition of “a hydrogen bomb fireball over the skyline of New York,” it cautions that “Civil Defense is today a vital aspect of our daily lives and probably will remain so for some time,” covering topics such as “the nature of possible

enemy attack,” “warning time,” and “civil defense planning” (U.S. Dept of Health, Education, and Welfare 1956, 5, 8, 10-12). Civil defense films, pamphlets, and even comics books instructing student what to do in case of a nuclear attack became a regular staple of classroom life across the United States during the 1950’s alongside “duck and cover” air-raid drills which impressed upon schoolchildren a real sense of potential imminent danger lurking just over the horizon. As Margot Henricksen observes in *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*: “American children perhaps felt the psychological impact of living in the atomic age most keenly, but their anxious experiences spoke of the larger cultural anxiety that impugned, if quietly and underhandedly, the tranquil reputation of postwar America.” She argues that “The civil defense debate revealed an America divided between the nervous and the calm (whether that calm was real or induced), and children were introduced to this split life through school drills, where fear suddenly intruded, then receded, where—as one educator put it—children were trained to become both ‘disaster-minded’ and ‘competent to survive’” (Henricksen 1997, 108).

These cold war fears helped shape the curriculum of American civics throughout this period and gave an added sense of urgency to concerns for bolstering religious values in public schools under the broad canopy of promoting a common faith in American civil religion in juxtaposition to the “Communist threat.” Schools relied on the implicit curriculum of American civil religion to reinforce the values of the United States as a “Judeo-Christian” nation, seen as essential for upholding the American way of life. Such concerns crystalized around the insertion of the words “under God” into the Pledge as a concrete expression of that common faith not only in “One nation, under God, indivisible,” but in the very future of the United States itself.

American Civil Religion and the Pledge of Allegiance

In his analysis of civil religion in U.S. public schools, sociologist Adam Gamoran emphasizes that the daily ritual of saluting the flag and the content of the Pledge of Allegiance was designed to promote belief in a national community, that the nation is subordinate to God, and that loyalty is owed to the nation. (1990, 235). Along similar lines, Peter Gardella argues that the American flag itself came to be seen as “a sacramental object” which symbolizes the land, the people, the government, and the spirit of the United States (2014, 81). Gardella points out that “The values and icons of American civil religion serve to help unify the ethnically and religiously diverse citizens of the United States, and to help them identify as Americans” (2014, 7). Thus, the ritual aspects of schooling serve to reinforce the implicit curriculum of patriotism through the values, behaviors, and expectations embedded in the daily rituals of school life (Eisner 1985, 90-97). In the case of the Pledge of Allegiance, the values of conformity and uniformity are reinforced through unison recitation, collective participation, and shared attention to the flag as an object of ritual devotion. Leisa Martin in her contemporary study of students’ perceptions of the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in schools concludes that it does, in fact, reinforce the values of loyalty and patriotism and serves to instill in students a sense of pride in the nation (2012, 58). These were precisely the educational aims that the originators of the Pledge hoped to achieve and ones that those who amended the Pledge in the 1950’s hoped to promote.

Gamoran argues that “schools may be the most important agent of civil religion in contemporary American society” through its “symbols, rituals, and holiday celebrations” (1990, 236). Such was certainly the case in the 1950’s with its stress on the United States as “one Nation, under God” (Marty 1996, 294). Educators, politicians, and religious leaders during the Eisenhower era found solace in extolling this ideal as expressing their aspirations of what they hoped and believed America to be.

The daily recitation of the Pledge, the singing of patriotic songs such as “God Bless America,” and the reading of foundational documents in American history which made explicit reference to God such as the Gettysburg Address served to promote the implicit curriculum of American civil religion in public schools and foster a collective sense of national unity which merged patriotism with piety in pursuit of a national identity.

In 1956 Congress passed House Resolution 243 which adopted the motto “In God We Trust” as the official motto of the United States, having already made it mandatory to be imprinted on all U.S. coins the year prior (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 417, File 011). Along with the insertion of the words “under God” into the Pledge, this move further solidified efforts to place religion at the center of American life in the 1950’s.

Popular Responses

Popular support for the change to the Pledge was largely favorable. Hearst newspapers under the direction of William Randolph Hearst Jr.-a rabid anti-Communist like his father who died in 1951-promoted the insertion of the words “under God” from the beginning. In 1954 the *Journal-American* published an editorial, which ran in all Hearst papers, titled “Under God” and suggested that “all Americans support a worthy change” (Editorial *New York Journal-American*, May 3, 1954). Other news organizations such as CBS news televised the recitation of the newly revised Pledge in front of the U.S. Capitol on Flag Day 1954 under the story heading “New Glory for Old Glory.” Popular television journalist Walter Cronkite, who covered the event for CBS, commented “if we remember to display our flags today and every special day, we will remember more clearly the traditions of freedom on which our country is founded” (Quoted in Bishop 2007, 78). As the flag was raised, a bugler played *Onward Christian Soldiers* in the background. Yet, despite the hype

and despite Hearst's propaganda, not everyone supported the move. A Gallup Poll in 1954 found that 69 percent of Americans favored the change, while 21 percent opposed it (Gallup Vault 2017). And a small minority of religious groups, such as the Unitarian Ministers' Association of Boston, also voiced opposition, suggesting that it threatened religious liberty (Marty 1996, 300). Nonetheless, the change to the Pledge appears to have received widespread popular support, sentiments echoed by one local newspaper which suggested "America, whose foundations were laid in a deep-felt respect for the Almighty, is today a God-fearing nation" (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File SC-1). Such comments reflect the general pulse of a Cold War, Anti-Communist ethos and the renewed religious sensibilities of the United States at mid-century.

The Curriculum of American Patriotism in American Catholic Schools

In August 1954 President Eisenhower sent a letter to Supreme Knight Luke Hart expressing his gratitude for the Knights of Columbus' role in promoting the change to the Pledge:

I am happy to send greetings to the Knights of Columbus on the occasion of the annual meeting of your Supreme Council. Your tireless work for charity and brotherhood in communities throughout our land has long done much to keep Americans aware of the religious values which we hold. And this year we are particularly thankful to you for your part in the movement to have the words "under God" added to our Pledge of Allegiance. These words remind Americans that despite our great physical strength we must remain humble. They will help us to keep constantly in our minds and hearts the spiritual and moral principles which alone give dignity to man, and upon which our way of life is founded.

For the contributions which your organization made to this cause, we must be genuinely grateful (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File 2004).

This letter was enlarged and prominently on display behind the rostrum at the gathering of the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus in St. Louis in August 1954 where it was greeted with enthusiasm by the delegates for whom it represented the Catholic move toward the center of American life—a move which would further crystalize with the election of John F. Kennedy as President of the United States six years later.

Yet, despite Eisenhower's recognition, there were numerous attempts on the part of others to take credit for originating the idea of inserting the words "under God" into the Pledge, including Reverend Docherty and Congressman Rabaut. Against these, Hart vigorously and vociferously defended the place of the Knights of Columbus in the history of the Pledge, writing to small, local papers such as *The Huntington Advertiser* of Huntington, West Virginia as well as national ones like the *Washington Post* to correct the record (See Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File 2000). In one such letter, dated July 25, 1957, to the editor of the *Tri-City Herald* in Pasco, Washington which failed to credit the Knights in an article about the Pledge, Hart told the editor "This is a complete fraud and there appears to be a studied campaign to promote it" (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File 2011). Or, in a detailed six-page letter to the *Washington Post* in March 1955 outlining the role the Knights played in amending the Pledge, he rebuked the editor for an article it published suggesting Docherty was the originator of the words "under God" in the Pledge: "I am quite surprised that Dr. Docherty would make such a claim and I am just as greatly surprised that you would write an article setting forth such a claim" (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File 2012). Hart's zealous defense of the Knights' role in the history of the

Pledge indicates the importance which he attached to it and the value he and others saw in fixing the place of American Catholicism in the patriotic imagination of the United States.

Catholic Schools and Civil Religion

While the Catholic school system had been established in the nineteenth century as a bulwark against the Protestant-dominated public school system and while it continued to offer an enclave for American Catholic schoolchildren well into the twentieth century, by the mid-1950's most American Catholic schools were just as eager to appear American as they were Catholic.

A letter to Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, Luke Hart, dated June 25, 1956 expressed thanks for the Knights' production of posters of the Pledge, stating, "the Holy Name Men's Club placed framed copies of the Pledge of Allegiance in each of the seventeen school rooms and we encourage many societies and organizations to do likewise for their schools and soon we may look forward to the time when every Catholic school room will display these works of art, piety, and patriotism" (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File 2000). This illustrates the patriotic fervor which American Catholics at mid-century embraced as part of their identity in the American mainstream. As a recruiting poster for the Knights of Columbus from this period asked "Why be an American? Why be a Catholic? Why not be a Communist?" It implored "To meet this [Communist] threat to our precious freedoms—save our American Constitutional form of government, our institutions of freedom, and our way of life" (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 646, File 2016).

Father Gerard Sloyan of the Catholic University of America insisted at the beginning of the decade: "The child in Catholic the school is being formed in the national tradition. Patriotism does not suffer the slightest threat within the walls of the Church's institutions...One of the achievements of

American democratic life is its unity in diversity. The Catholic curriculum prepares children for worthy participation in the life of the nation, with all the rights and obligations attendant thereon" (Sloyan 1950, 77-78). A sociological study of a typical middle-class parochial school in the Midwest toward the end of the decade by Jesuit Father Joseph Fichter bore this out. He observed that in addition to the teaching of civics and the assigning of "citizenship" grades on report cards, the school's Parent Teacher Association included committees on "Citizenship" and "Character Education" which alongside a parish-sponsored Boy Scout troop and Camp Fire Girls Troop were designed to promote civic virtues among the students (Fichter 1958, 264). Fichter stressed that in Catholic schools, "the next generation are here being socialized as maturing Catholics in the American culture" (1958, 1). He went on to observe that the students had moved beyond the "ghetto-mentality" of earlier generations and displayed the traits of "conformity and self-control" which he identified as "integral values of the American culture" (Fichter 1958, 134). Overall, he found that, like public schools, parochial schools in 1950's by and large promoted an implicit curriculum of American citizenship that encouraged Catholics to assimilate into the dominant mainstream culture.

Catholic Reaction to American Civil Religion

Yet not all Catholics were happy to assimilate. Criticizing what he called a "homogenizing Americanism," Father Leonard Feeny in a 1952 editorial in his archconservative Catholic magazine *The Pilot*, warned that "the generic religion of the United States of America is a meetinghouse Christianity" which, he argued would lead to "a confused Christianity" (Knights of Columbus Supreme Council Archives, Box 417, File 005). These sentiments reflected the tension in American Catholicism between traditionalists who saw American civil religion as a threat and progressives who saw entry into the American mainstream as vital to promoting American Catholic values. Feeny who was later

censured by the Vatican for his views that salvation was reserved only for Catholics represented the more extreme traditionalist view (Marty 1996, 407). In contrast, more liberal Catholic commentators in publications such as *Commonweal* and the Jesuit weekly *America* expressed hope at the opening of American Catholicism up to the center of American life (See Marty 1996, 416-433).

More broadly, the Knights of Columbus' efforts to insert the words "under God" into the Pledge represented the Catholic rapprochement with American values in the Eisenhower era, a rapprochement that would find further expression in the following decade not only with the election of John F. Kennedy, but also with Catholic involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and the implementation of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) which made explicit efforts to update the Catholic church, bringing it into dialogue with the modern world. By defending their role in inserting the words "under God" into the pledge, the Knights of Columbus hoped to recast the trope of American patriotism, which had deep roots in American Protestantism, as inclusive of Catholics as well. In one sense, it was seen as a mark of Catholic respectability in American culture just as Catholics were moving in large numbers from cities to suburbs in the 1950s. There, they built Catholic schools which continued to promote the values of American patriotism where Catholic schoolchildren, like their public-school counterparts, would daily recite the Pledge of Allegiance, professing a common faith in "One Nation, under God."

Conclusion

While the implicit curriculum of American civil religion in the 1950's found various expressions, nowhere was it more prominently featured or enduring than in the insertion of the words "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance. In one sense, it represents the Cold War mentality that dominated the Eisenhower era that saw the American way of life

besieged by the forces of "godless" Communism. Yet, in a larger sense, it also represents fears that the American way of life was somehow losing its religious moorings. The secularization of American society which fueled those initial fears which led to efforts to amend the Pledge continued to accelerate throughout the following decade. Supreme court cases in 1960's that deemphasized religion's place in public schools firmly established a strict wall of separation between church and state, forbidding the devotional reading of the Bible as well as prayer in public schools (DeFattore 2004, 52-66). The culture of conformity that appeared to mark the Eisenhower era seemed to give way to a culture of confusion which marked the next decade. Just ten years after "In God We Trust" was adopted as the official motto of the United States, *Time* magazine featured a front cover asking the question "Is God Dead?" (Elson 1966). On the one hand, such dramatic shifts in American religious sensibilities seem to make the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance appear to be a quaint relic of a bygone era. On the other hand, they also reflect more perduring concerns over the place of religion in public schools. At a time when religion was fading from the explicit curriculum, proponents of the change to the Pledge sought to ensure that religion would remain, at least, part of the implicit curriculum, lest it fade completely into the null curriculum of American public education. Given the rapid changes in society in the later half of the twentieth century, their concern was not wholly unfounded; nor was their desire to preserve an appreciation for the religious heritage that shaped American values. At the same time, as Catholics entered the mainstream and asserted their right to be called loyal Americans, the Pledge became for them a symbol of their loyalty to the American creed. Thus, the insertion of the words "under God" into the Pledge continues to serve as a reminder of the struggles over the implicit curriculum of American civil religion and debates concerning the role of religion and

patriotism in American education both public and private.

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