

## ONE NATION UNDER GOD

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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The scripture selections today speak of God's sovereignty over matters of state. Psalm 33 explains that "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord."<sup>i</sup> The gospel lesson describes Jesus calling a tax collector for the Roman Empire as a disciple, and then dining with many other tax collectors whom he apparently intends to call to discipleship as well.<sup>ii</sup> More than 15 years ago, after the 1988 election that brought George Herbert Walker Bush to the presidency of this country, I preached a sermon entitled "One Nation Under God." In it I cited the dangers of reading the First Amendment to the United States constitution either as permitting religious dogma to be enshrined as government policy on the one hand, or as building an impenetrable wall of separation between church and state on the other. A recent book by Stanford graduate and fellow Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church has helped me revisit the question of whether the United States of America is, or should be, "one nation under God." It's called The American Creed.<sup>iii</sup>

The book is dedicated poignantly to Church's four children. As he explains, "I wonder...whether I have imparted to you just how much I love our county... You have often heard me criticize the policies of our government and the actions of our leaders... You might conclude that, in today's world, America creates more problems than it solves. When we exercise our power wantonly, we can do great damage. But...ours is a good nation that sometimes does bad things. To be mindful of the latter and forget the former is both cynical and wrong... Note especially how the song lines of faith and freedom play throughout [our history]."<sup>iv</sup>

Indeed, look at our patriotic songs like "America the Beautiful:" "O beautiful for pilgrim feet, Whose stern, impassioned stress, A thoroughfare for freedom beat Across the wilderness! America! America! God mend thy every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law."<sup>v</sup> Or, "My country, 'tis of thee, -- Sweet land of liberty Of thee I sing... Long may our land be bright With freedom's holy light; Protect us by thy might, Great God, our King."<sup>vi</sup> And when we look carefully at these songs, we see them not as assuming that God blesses America in some special way, but as beseeching God to bless America – including mending our flaws and helping us preserve our freedom. As Abraham Lincoln explained, we should never assume that God is on our side; instead, we should pray and worry earnestly as to whether we are on God's side.<sup>vii</sup>

So where did all this talk of "one nation under God" come from in the first place, and how relevant does it remain today? It's surely not enough for us to say that the critical moment was a Republican congress's decision in 1954, at the height of McCarthyism, to add "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. Nor for us to note that "In God we trust" was also officially made the national motto during Dwight Eisenhower's first term as President.<sup>viii</sup> The story begins back with those seventeenth-

century Pilgrim's and their stern, impassioned stress. The European emigration to America began by certain religious people seeking freedom to practice their religion. As Alexis de Tocqueville, the great early nineteenth-century French observer of America so aptly put it: "It must never be forgotten that religion gave birth to Anglo-American society. In the United States, religion is therefore mingled with all the habits of the nation and all the feelings of patriotism, whence it derives a peculiar force."<sup>ix</sup>

Forrest Church sees the 1776 Declaration of Independence as the centerpiece of America's claim to be "one nation under God." Here all of the foundational American values that we still hold are crystallized: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This is the American creed, which includes commitments to equality, liberty, and rights-based justice – not merely as a matter of human desire or principles of good government, but as having a transcendent source in the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God.

Oh, how we stand under God's judgment, though, for our shortcomings in fulfilling our creed! African-American slaves were not considered men at the time slave-holding Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence; it took a long, bloody Civil War to settle that issue. Women were not included in the term "men," and women's equality, in terms of suffrage alone, took another 144 years. Much of this country was stolen outright from its indigenous inhabitants, who were herded as supposedly sovereign nations onto reservations. Martin Luther King, Jr. had to invoke the Declaration of Independence again almost 200 years later at the Lincoln Memorial, along with explicit Biblical references, to talk about a dream of freedom not yet achieved.

So, what does our modern, pluralistic nation – with plenty of agnostics and atheists among us – gain now by calling ourselves "one nation under God?" First, an ironic result is that our creedal commitment to liberty as an inalienable right, as interpreted through the constitutional Bill of Rights, protects atheist and agnostic liberty not to be coerced by believers. Second, our American creed also protects liberty from itself – from its becoming such thoroughgoing individualism that we forget the transcendent referent that calls us together in covenanting community, that helps us to see ourselves as one nation, not just many individuals living in the same place – e pluribus unum -- "out of many, one."

Third, it should ideally help us in the face of fundamentalisms that challenge the amorality or materialism or self-centered excesses or spiritual emptiness of certain forms of modern secularism. As the English author, G. K. Chesterton put it, "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed," one set forth "with theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence." That creed can both face down sectarian fundamentalist attempts to impose a different creed upon the body politic and also co-exist with many different forms of sectarian religion – which can be freely exercised as long as they don't try to become the established religion of the state. If we didn't have a common vision of being one nation under God, we'd be much more vulnerable to specific fundamentalist challenges to make our nation over in their image. We've seen this, for example, in the religious revolution in Iran that toppled the secular government of the Shah, and imposed its own sectarian authority, not to mention the twentieth century problems with secular fundamentalisms like Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism or Maoism.<sup>x</sup>

Fourth, our American creed has given rise to a robust and respected tradition of civil disobedience, from Henry David Thoreau's refusing to pay war taxes to Martin Luther King's refusal to obey Jim Crow laws. Calvin Coolidge once said, you may "speak of natural rights, but I challenge anyone to show where in nature any rights existed."<sup>xi</sup> As Coolidge saw it, that's what positive laws established by legislatures are all about. Laws create rights, and they do not exist otherwise. Of course the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany was in large part based on duly passed laws, carefully administered by legally authorized agents of the state. Coolidge was wrong. The genius of the American creed is that it produces moral checks and balances to positive law. On the basis of inalienable rights with which we're endowed by Nature's God, Martin Luther King, Jr. could write from the Birmingham City Jail that "There are two types of laws: there are just and there are unjust laws...A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God... An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law...All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority."<sup>xii</sup> As I look at King's statement, all of the basic values of the American creed are implicated here, including equality, liberty, and rights-based justice, each with a transcendent source.

Fifth, our American creed has given rise to a powerful tradition of social service and social justice work. Equality, liberty and justice are ideals to strive for as part of our national duty. Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address at the end of the Civil War calls his newly reunited Americans to respond in this way: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."<sup>xiii</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in their struggle for women's equality, rewrote Jefferson's words in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, to say: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."<sup>xiv</sup> President Kennedy in his Inaugural Address, after noting that "the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God," went on to say that "the trumpet summons us again...[to] struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself."<sup>xv</sup>

Sixth, our American creed has served as a source of solace and strength when our nation is under attack. Our religious institutions were filled after September 11, 2001, and in the public square as one Episcopal bishop noted, from diners to bait and ammo shops, signs reading "God Bless America" outnumbered those for hot coffee.<sup>xvi</sup> The creed supported pluralism as well, as Americans of every faith expressed deeper kinship with their Muslim neighbors, even though the attack had been at the hands of Muslim extremists. Despite some hate crimes around the country, a Reuters poll found that the number of Americans viewing Muslims favorably went from 45% before 9/11 to 59% two months after 9/11. The change was most pronounced among Republicans, whose favorable opinion of Muslims more than doubled from 29% to 64%.<sup>xvii</sup>

No matter what I may think of other words and actions of our current President Bush, I think he got the spirit of our “one nation under God” right in a speech he gave at a university in Beijing, China, five months after 9/11. Listen to some of what he said: “Faith points to a moral law beyond man’s law and calls us to duties higher than material gain. Under our law, everyone stands equal. No one is above the law, and no one is beneath it...Faith gives us a moral core and teaches us to hold ourselves to high standards, to love and to serve others and to live responsible lives...In a free society, diversity is not disorder. Debate is not strife. And dissent is not revolution. A free society trusts its citizens to seek greatness in themselves and their country...The United States has its share of problems, and we have our faults...We’re on a long journey toward achieving our own ideals of equality and justice. Nonetheless, there is a reason our nation shines as a beacon of hope and opportunity.”<sup>xviii</sup>

So, in conclusion, I believe America is, and should be, one nation under God. In the words of the Psalmist, “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord.” May we not be ruled by the gods of materialism, military power, selfishness and greed. Nor may we be ruled by any particular sectarian religion’s notion of what’s good for us. May we remain the land of the free and the home of the brave. May we glory in our pluralism, including, of course, those who believe in no God at all. E pluribus unum. Out of many, one. One nation committed to the God-given, inalienable rights of equality, liberty and justice for all. AMEN.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Psalm 33: 11-12.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 9:9-13.

<sup>iii</sup> Forrest Church, The American Creed: A Biography of the Declaration of Independence (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>v</sup> Katherine Lee Bates, "America the Beautiful," as reproduced in Services of Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1937), #383.

<sup>vi</sup> Samuel Francis Smith, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," as reproduced in Services of Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1937), p. 384.

<sup>vii</sup> Jim Wallis, God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. xiv.

<sup>viii</sup> Church, American Creed, p. 105.

<sup>ix</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (New York: Knopf's Everyman's Library, 1994), Vol. II, p. 6.

<sup>x</sup> Church, American Creed, pp. xii-xiv.

<sup>xi</sup> Calvin Coolidge, Vice-Presidential Nomination Speech (1920), as cited in Church, American Creed, p. 35.

<sup>xii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," as reproduced in James M. Washington (ed.), A Testament of Hope (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 293.

<sup>xiii</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, as cited in Church, American Creed, pp. 55-56.

<sup>xiv</sup> "Declaration of Sentiments" (Seneca Falls, N.Y., 1848), as cited in Church, American Creed, p. 63.

<sup>xv</sup> John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address (1961), as cited in Church, American Creed, p. 109.

<sup>xvi</sup> Church, American Creed, p. 121.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>xviii</sup> George W. Bush, The New York Times, February 22, 2002, p. A1.