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The Pledge of Allegiance
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The religious character of our country is founded upon a paradox. On the one hand, we have a government of the people, by the people and for the people. On the other hand, the people have near total freedom to practice and believe in any religion they wish, or no religion at all, because our government is barred from passing laws that would prohibit the free practice of religion or would privilege one religion over others. The current controversy over the Pledge of Allegiance is a clash between the two sides of this paradox.

The Supreme Court has interpreted Article 1 of the Bill of Rights, the legal basis for the United States' freedom of religion, as meaning that government officials, such as school teachers and principals, may not use their position to coerce their students into religious activities or beliefs. They are banned from doing or saying religious things when acting in their official capacity. This is frustrating to many Americans and some even find insulting the notion that their religion could be "coercive."

When my own students express this frustration, I suggest they think about it this way. This law is not about your religion, it is about other religions. Think about the religion that makes you most uncomfortable. Then think about its members doing what you want to do as a member of your own religion. If that does not seem OK to you, then that action or belief should probably not take place under government auspices.

So how does this principle apply to the Pledge? First, no monotheistic religion (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism) would have problems with saying the words "under God." Members of each religion would simply understand their own version of God when saying them.

Second, members of the largest polytheistic religions would have little trouble saying these words. Hinduism and Buddhism, the world's third and fourth largest religions, believe in an over-arching unity above the polytheistic realm, which they may refer to

as "God." Many other polytheistic religions either promote one divine being as being more important than the others, or permit their followers to do so.

Third, most agnostics would not have a problem with saying the words "under God" either, since an agnostic is one who allows for a divine being, but does not claim to know the details.

Finally, the one category that has difficulty with this test is atheists, people who believe in no god at all. It is for them that the words "under God" become coercive. And that brings us to the current problem, that the Pledge promotes religion and thus gets in the way of the free exercise of a lack of religious belief in a non-coercive environment (e.g., a public school).

But here is where the paradox kicks in. Ours is a government of, by, and for the people. Religious belief and religious freedom are important aspects of this country and are personally important to millions of its citizens. Can a representative government ignore that importance?

I do not have an easy solution to this problem; that is why it is a paradox. Let me suggest a possibility, however. This disagreement is about present-day freedom to practice or not practice religion. But there is no disagreement that this country was founded by religious people who acted upon their beliefs in working to establish this country. Since its founding, it has been maintained by people who are willing to dedicate and even to sacrifice their lives for their nation because of their religious beliefs. So perhaps a recognition of historical importance of religious belief, of belief in God's guidance, provides a way out of this paradox. Maybe the past is a key to our present.