**[The "Separation of Church and State" Myth](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/710456/posts%22%20%5Ct%20%22_self)**
[**Jewish World Review ^**](http://www.freerepublic.com/%5Ehttp%3A/www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/chavez.html)| 7/3/02 | Linda Chavez

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[Jewish Law prohibits the writing of the Creator's name out in full. The spelling below is not intended to be disrespectful, particulary given this column's topic --- editor.]

As soon as the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals handed down its decision on the Pledge of Allegiance last week, the e-mails started pouring into my mailbox. Most railed against the idea that a couple of judges on "the Left Coast," as one person put it, could strike down the words "under G-d," which Congress added to the pledge in 1954. But a few, mostly from readers of my column, suggested that if I didn't like the decision, maybe I should try thinking about how I'd feel if Congress had inserted the words "under no G-d" instead -- a sentiment echoed by the Ninth Circuit. In order to protect religious liberty, they implied, we have to make sure government divorces itself from any expression of religious belief.

"Why did the Founding Fathers, a group of basically conservative, property- owning religious men find it necessary at all to put the separation of Church and State into the Constitution, if not because of the persecution suffered in the lands they left from those who felt that only they knew the truth?" wrote one of my interlocutors.

Good question, because it exposes one of the most widely held myths in modern America.

Ask most Americans what the First Amendment says about religion, and you'll get the standard reply (if you're lucky enough to get any answer at all) that it guarantees the separation of church and state.

It says no such thing, of course. What it says is careful and precise: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The First Amendment guarantees the freedom of religion, not from religion.

The Founders understood that religious belief was not incidental to the American experiment in liberty but was the foundation on which it was built. The whole idea that individuals were entitled to liberty rests on the Judeo-Christian conception of man. When the colonists rebelled against their king -- an action that risked their very lives -- they did so with the belief that they were answering to a higher law than the king's. They were emboldened by "the laws of nature and nature's G-d," in Thomas Jefferson's memorable phrase to declare their independence.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," he wrote.

It is impossible to overstate how important the Judeo-Christian tradition was IN guiding the Founders' deliberations. Yet, in recent years, we've virtually ignored this aspect of our history.

As scholar Michael Novak points out in his excellent little book "On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding," "Professor Donald Lutz counted 3,154 citations in the writings of the founders; of these nearly 1,100 references (34 percent) are to the Bible, and about 300 each to Montesquieu and Blackstone, followed at considerable distance by Locke and Hume and Plutarch."

Perhaps the most eloquent argument on behalf of the role of religion in preserving our democracy was George Washington, who cautioned in his Farewell Address on Sept. 19, 1794, that virtue and morality were necessary to popular government.

"And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion" he said. "Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 opened with a prayer, as does each session of Congress today. The motto "In G-d We Trust" is on our currency, and similar expressions adorn public buildings across the Nation. Even the U.S. Supreme Court, which has been the locus of so much recent confusion on the First Amendment, begins its proceedings with the phrase "G-d save the United States and this honorable court."

Perhaps our plea should be "G-d save us from the courts."

As Jefferson, perhaps the least devout of our Founders, once said to the Rev. Ethan Allen, as recorded in Allen's diary now in the Library of Congress, and quoted by Michael Novak: "No nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be."

Let us hope the Supreme Court in reviewing the Ninth Circuit's opinion does not insist on testing whether Jefferson was right.