

HOLY COWS, SACRED COWS AND HINDU PRAYER IN THE U.S. SENATE

By Don Feder

The latest skirmish in the culture war -- fought in the United States Senate last week -- might be called the battle of Krishna Gap.

On July 12, at the invitation of Senate Majority Capo Harry Reid, Rajan Zed, a Hindu chaplain from Nevada, became the first representative of a non-monotheistic faith to open the Senate in prayer. This created a minor furor (both literal and figurative) of the sort that enlivens an otherwise dull summer.

As Zed began his invocation, three demonstrators shouting "This is an abomination" were ejected from the Senate gallery, arrested and charged with disrupting Congress (usually a good thing). One unrepentant protestor told a reporter, "We are Christians and patriots." The journalist probably fled in horror and disbelief, after waving a picture of Hillary to ward off evil spirits.

Days before, Don Wildmon, chairman of the American Family Association, urged his members to contact their Senators opposing the choice of Zed as the day's guest chaplain. Wildmon quoted Wall Builders' David Barton that our motto is "One Nation Under God," while Hindus (like liberals) "worship multiple Gods."

The Family Research Council's Tony Perkins noted: "There is no historic connection between America and the polytheistic creed of the Hindu faith. I seriously doubt that Americans want to change their motto, 'In God We Trust,' which Congress adopted in 1955, to 'In gods we Trust.' That is essentially what the United States Senate did today."

Sanjay Puri, chairman of the U.S. India Political Action Committee, was beside himself. Wildmon's communication was "blatantly offensive and factually erroneous," while Perkins' comments were "ignorant and offensive," Puri huffed, in the best aggrieved-minority tradition.

"The Constitution assures every single citizen should have the right of religious freedom and we support that notion," Puri intoned.

Correct, but irrelevant in the situation at hand. The Constitution guarantees Santerians freedom of religion – up to a point. That does not give one of their priests the right to drag a goat onto the Senate floor and sacrifice it to Babalu Aye.

The First Amendment grants me religious liberty. That doesn't mean I have a right to serve as a guest chaplain of the U.S. Senate.

Easily (and predictably) the most inane comments came from Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (as the name implies, an organization based on a convenient distortion of the Establishment Clause). "Religious right activists want government to reflect only their religion," Lynn thundered.

While most "religious right" activists are evangelical Christians, I've never known one to object to a public prayer by a Catholic, Jew or Mormon. But how can that be, if they only want government to reflect "their religion"?

But Lynn was just warming up. "America is a land of extraordinary religious diversity, and the Religious Right just can't seem to accept that fact," Lynn declaims. "*I don't think the Senate should open with prayers, but if it's going to happen, the invocation should reflect the diversity of the American people.*"

Lynn believes: 1) The Senate should not open in prayer (a very bad thing), but 2) If this very bad thing – a supposed violation of the First Amendment (which started with the Constitutional Convention, by the way) -- has to take place, it should be in the name of one of liberalism's pantheon, diversity. Okay, I think I've got it.

Lynn's press release is headlined, "Disruption Of Hindu Chaplain's Senate Prayer Shows Religious Right's Intolerance." Please note, three protestors now represent an entire movement.

Say, Barry, if people like us are so intolerant, why is it that people like you are constantly writing books about the metastasizing evil of the religious right and the danger we pose to democracy and equality? We're so intolerant that they've given themselves permission not to tolerate us.

Why do the left's tolerance moguls periodically have conferences, like the one in Manhattan, in early June, that equate us with Nazis? The meeting was titled "Nationalists, Fascists, and Fanatics: The Christian Right's Threat to the Future of Democracy in America." – exemplifying the nuanced approach for which opponents of the religious right are famous.

I'm not particularly troubled by a Hindu prayer in the Senate chamber. I doubt it will presage the institution of the caste system or the practice of suttee in the United States.

There are several million Hindus living peaceably among us. As far as I can tell, they're good citizens, who aren't trying to blow up airports with car bombs. There is no Hindu equivalent of Al Qaeda. Their clergy aren't preaching holy war against non-believers.

I'm more concerned by a speech by Keith Ellison, America's first Religion-of-Peace congressman, who took his oath of office on a Koran in January.

In a recent address to 300 members of Atheists for Human Rights, Ellison compared 9/11 to the 1933 Reichstag fire, which paved the way for the Nazi dictatorship – not that he's a conspiracy nut or anything.

The comparison implies that the World Trade Center attack was an inside job, an excuse for Bush to launch a war and seize dictatorial powers. (Heil Dubbyah?) As the follower of a religion steeped in paranoia (the Zionists did it!), Ellison's raving is understandable. I'm only surprised that he didn't suggest that the attack was a joint operation of the National Federation of Republican Women and Hadassah.

Perkins et al. have a valid point. America was established on the Christian Bible, not the Bhagavad-Gita. (Though another Indian classic -- the Kama Sutra – profoundly influenced the Clinton administration.)

The backlash against Hindu prayer in the Senate is due in part to the efforts of Americans United, People for the American Way, the ACLU and others to convince Americans of the greatest lie ever sold – that this nation was founded as a secular republic and the Founding Fathers intended the First Amendment to guarantee freedom from public display of crèches and Christmas decorations in elementary schools.

In his thoughtful new book “Americanism – The Fourth Great Western Religion,” (the title is somewhat misleading), David Gelernter writes:

“America is not only a nation; America is a religious idea. America is a biblical (not a secular) republic. ... America and Americanism were shaped by Christianity, especially Puritan Christianity. Puritan Christianity was shaped by the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible. The idea that liberty, equality and democracy were ordained by God for all mankind, and that America is a new promised land richly blessed by and deeply indebted to God – that is Americanism.”

Gelernter is not a member of the religious right, an evangelical Christian, or even a Christian. He’s a professor of computer science at Yale and a Jew.

Gelernter is saying that without reference to the Bible (Christianity’s Old and New Testaments), America is impossible to understand – in fact, America would never have happened.

The piety of America’s founders can be seen in the multiple references to God in the Declaration of Independence, in the Constitution (dated in the Year of our Lord 1787 – not a reference to the Lord Krishna), in the monuments in our nation’s capital, in our patriotic songs, and in our laws and institutions.

From the Mayflower Compact and the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut to the Declaration, from George Washington’s Farewell Address to the Gettysburg Address, from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address to FDR’s address to Congress the day after Pearl Harbor, our most significant historical documents and speeches are full of Biblical allusions.

Our Bill of Rights, America’s passion for justice at home and abroad (sometimes imperfectly expressed, but never absent) and the crusader character of America’s military and foreign policy all derive from the ideals which took shape in ancient Israel and were transmitted to the West by Christianity.

From the Puritans who set foot on these shores early in the 17th century, to the Congregationalist and Presbyterian clergy who preached liberty during the Revolution, to the mid-19th century abolitionists, to the social reformers of the early 20th century, to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement – Christians made us the nation we are.

Democracy, human rights, capitalism and courts of justice that are the envy of humanity – these all can partake of equally, Christian and non-Christian alike. But the debt for this bounty is owed to Protestant Christianity.

There's another reality we often lose sight of – the American people are between 80 % and 90 % Christian. As a percent of the population, America is more Christian than India is Hindu – more Christian than Israel is Jewish.

The young men and women who are dying to uphold this nation's ideals in Iraq come from all races and creeds. But they are overwhelmingly Christian.

What's called the religious right asks for a recognition of that reality, an acknowledgement of our origins and the genesis of our governmental institutions – of the special and unique contributions of Christianity.

If that offends your sense of diversity and universalism – too bad. As Perkins observes, our coinage bears the words *In God* – not in gods – *we trust*. Our National Anthem resounds with the lyrics, “Then conquer we must when our cause it is just. And this be our motto: In God is our trust.” Every president from George Washington to George W. Bush has taken his oath of office on a Christian Bible, a tradition started by the father of our country.

Surrounded by potential enemies (Islamists to the north and west of them, communists to the east) someday soon India may call on the American military for the defense of its fledgling democracy. If that comes to pass, the boys who hit the beaches on the Indian subcontinent won't be Buddhists, Sikhs or Zoroastrians.