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"'WE DON'T MENTION JESUS IN SCHOOL'"

In our church a few Sundays ago, I asked a 12-year-old what else he's been learning in (public) school about religion: he'd just proudly displayed to me his knowledge of the roots & artifacts of Chanuka, a somewhat-more-than-surface grasp of Judaism. "What about Christmas?" I asked. He: "After we studied the Menorah, & learned to pronounce the Hebrew words, I raised my hand & asked 'What about Jesus & Christmas?'" The teacher's stern total response was what here is this Thinksheet's title.

1 In conversation this morning with a founder of PAW (People for the American Way), I told the above story to explain why I'm an enemy of what he's a vigorous supporter of, viz the present American public-school system. He--long the head of the Lutheran lobby in Wash., DC--admitted that that child's classroom religion-experience was warped against Christianity. My rejoinder: "I did not initiate the hostility; my enmity to the public schools is defensive."

2 TWO QUESTIONS:

(1) **Should** religion be taught in the public schools? Yes: Chn. uninformed about religion are as profoundly ignorant of the roots of culture/civilization/customs/laws as they would be of food if they weren't told how it got on their plate: religion is **soul**-food as comestibles are **body**-food.

(2) **Can** religion be taught in the public schools? Of course! But the educrats in school administrations & in the teachers' unions don't want it taught. Why not? Outer reason: too controversial. Inner reason: secularistic antagonism to religion as violating (Enlightenment) reason & (naturalistic) science (a victory against religion anticipated in Jn.Dewey's [1936] Humanist Manifesto, a program specifically designed to atheize America's public schools).

3 All this means two defeats for my POV (point of view):

(1) The **Protestant** taproot of our public schools has been cut. The religious base could have been broadened (to use another metaphor), & should have been.

(2) **Religion** itself was eliminated from the curriculum, a slash-&-burn operation impoverishing the chn. & so America today & tomorrow.

4 A rising factor in public education is antimajoritarianism, which travels under the euphemism "multicultualism." Christianity, the **center-religion** (in America's founding, in our basic institutions, & in population %) is out ("We don't mention Jesus in school"), **side-religions** are in--Judaism (in the story, above), "Native American" religion, wicca, & to a lesser extent both Indic & Sinic religions. The secular mind has a special hatred for the Christian mind, its chief competitor. As Christianity becomes more vigorous (esp. in its evangelical & pentecostal forms), I expect this hatred to become even more pronounced, increasing the alienation of the public schools from the public.

5 "Dr.Lutheran" (above) wanted to enlist my support against vouchers & was disappointed: I am enthusiastic for vouchers as (1) expressive of the public's alienation from the public schools, (2) erosive of the public schools' financial base, (3) a direct threat to the present educratic monopoly, & (4) currently the best hope of shocking the public-school establishment into enough humility to listen to the public, who are growingly concerned (a) that the curriculum is doughnut-shaped, with a hole in the middle where in viable cultures religion dwells & (b) that the "values" now being taught center in the autonomous self, the always-&-everywhere enemy of religion (eg, "self-fulfilment" countering Jesus' call to "self-denial").

6 Better that the public schools die than that they continue as they are, an educational monopoly with a secular ideology. Two ways to go: (1) Keep the monopoly (government support for only one school system expressive of the ideal that all American chn. should learn together), but break (by a true First Amendment multiculturalism) the present secularistic-ideological mind-lock; or (2) Press (by vouchers & other means) for laissez faire, competing school-systems. I prefer the former---but

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am not hopeful. One reason: All across America, for decades, groups of clergy (I in some) have pled with public-school administrators to lay off Sunday morning, the week's best time for Christians, Jews, & others to provide religious education for America's children. We have been given the silent treatment, or treated with verbal disdain.

7 I'm familiar with administrative-bureaucratic disdain in my own religious communion, the United Church of Christ, whose national offices operate under a rigid **egalitarianism** unrepresentative of the folks in the vast majority of our congregations. Publications (eg, THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL) are run through a bowdlerizing lexical screen to eliminate, eg, our religion's pronouns for God. Recently, the president mailed to all pastors (with request that it be read from the pulpit!) a radical "open & affirming" in-your-face pro-homosexual statement certain to irritate most of our pastors & enrage many laity whose pastors are foolish enough to do as the president suggests. Is this hubris unrelated to America's public-school crisis today? Of course not. The UCC national-offices' POV is the public-school mentality baptized (or at prayer). The official UCC mentality is what could have been expected after a few generations (1936-) of our ideology-tight public-school system.

8 Back to Dr.Lutheran this morning. "The chief divide," I said, "is between those (including me) who believe religion can be taught in our public schools in a manner to honor, within the First Amendment, our country's religious heritage, here-&-now, & horizon (hope)--& those who don't." He agreed, adding "All religions should be taught." I agreed, adding that in teaching Christianity the chn. should be told (parallel to the Chanuka story, above) that "Christians believe that at the first Christmas, God was born as a human being & put in a manger." He: "But we must avoid trying to persuade the chn. of the truth of any religion!" I agreed. But what impact on chn. would the Christmas story heard for the first time, this narrative of the God-Boy born in a barn, have? Laughter? Amazement? Curiosity? And what impact on chn. who'd heard the story & been told it's not true? Anger? And what consequences when at home the chn. repeat the story they'd heard in school? Dr.Lutheran, at this point in the conversation, said "A crucial question is this: At what grade should the chn. study religion? At the earlier grades, their thinking is not conceptual enough." True, said I. That's an important **subsequent question** (subsequent: after the decision is made to teach religion; currently, the subsequent questions are convenient blockages to the system's considering the primary questions [stated in §2, above]).

9 To all the above, the prior issues are these: (1) *Is it really possible, in teaching religion, to separate informing from persuading?* (2) *If it is possible pedagogically, is it wise religiously (does it damage, perhaps even destroy, religion)?* If the answer to either (or both) of these questions is no, then the public-school system must go, yielding to First Amendment even-handed governmental support for basic education through vouchers only. What we have now is government establishment, through the public schools, of a religion (in violation of the First Amendment), viz the Stoic religion of αὐταρκεια *autarkeia* (signaled by terms such as "self-esteem" & "self-fulfilment"). But my answer to both questions is yes: (1) We have excellent curricula (eg, the U. of Ind.'s), & (2) We have a number of continuing-education centers for training teachers in this important, delicate work....It's not just clergy who are pressing the issue. Secular columnist Debra J. Saunders (29.4.96) put it plainly: "The public education system has become America's Kremlin: coercise, secretive, undemocratic and intolerant of dissent....lockstep with official Edu-Think."

10 In my poetry reading today, I came upon this in "Phantasus" by Arno Holz (b.1863), about a garret-living poverty-stricken poet: "He was as poor and as forsaken, / As once that God from Nazareth....And when in lonely awe he wondered / The verse beneath his hand to see, / Forever more from him were sundered / The world in its banality." Life without transcendence, without religion, is banal, self-seeking, with only death on the horizon. Millions of America's religion-illiterate chn. are living this banality. The results for them are not pretty, & the far results for our society are frightful to contemplate. We know there is a better way.