

# THE EDUCATION OF OUR CITIZENRY,

"WITH LIBERTY & JUSTICE FOR ALL": PRAYER IN THE PS ----- ELLIOTT #2011

What precedes the colon in the title contexts, for this thinksheet, "prayer" in public schools. The first clause properly assumes that every society has the right and duty to educate its citizenry at least in the interest of perpetuating the society (possible secondary motives being the expanding of one's society and developing the citizen's human potential and converting one's society into an instrument of sacred or secular mission). This primal anthropological goal of citizen-education divides into (1) perpetuating the society's original vision and being or (2) inferring and endeavoring to effectuate the original vision but without perpetuating the original being or (3) perpetuating the society's present being, supporting this effort with references, taken with a range of seriousness, to the society's original vision and being. (Nazi education was an instance of (3), as is much of the present apologia by Am. educationists for our present "pluralistic" culture.) The second clause, found in none of Am.'s founding documents but in the climactic position in our Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, is a dynamic (instead of merely logical) internal contradiction: in actual practice, societies sacrifice one to the other--eg, the USSR sacrifices liberty to "justice for all," and the USA sacrifices justice for all for laissez faire "liberty" (and, in their rhetoric, both claim to do neither!)....What follows the colon is the present code expression for the problematique of religion in public education in the USA today. "Prayer" is only one aspect of this problem area....The occasion of the thinksheet is (1) this here letter to the editor and (2) one of the responses thereto, a long letter by an eminent and competent clergyman, to whom this thinksheet is an OPEN LETTER.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As you disagree with me "on every point" vis-a-vis "school prayer," and are a person of insight and rhetorical power, I've chosen to open-letter my response to your letter, for which I am grateful.

No, I don't "have too much time on my hands": I often take a few minutes to dash off a Letter to the Editor; and, as almost all I send in gets printed, I'm motivated to continue. As you know, this department of the press (newspapers & mags) gets high readership: another motivator for me to use this means of getting out the good news, which you frequently consider (in my case) bad news.

1. Also frequently, the content of a newspaper letter of mine only indirectly signals the intent. Anything I write on the public school intends to stimulate thought about its viability: I consider it sclerotic and probably terminal, but I continue to hope for its transformation into an educational system that can "perpetuate the society" in a richer sense than "(3)," above--a system that listens to and learns from "(1)" and "(2)" and from other positions I'll not detail here. Much of present public discussion of the public school worries about a bunion on a gangrenous foot.

2. Every society teaches its young how to make sense of self, society, the world, the beyond, and assertions (language). In theistic societies, God is like the hook onto which the taffy-puller continually throws the taffy to stretch and thus finish it; the USA, as its founding documents

## Teachers deserve some freedom

Your lead editorial (Nov. 5), "The Role Models," rightly withstands legislative actions that would "get the government involved in an area where it doesn't belong," namely, the issue that goes by the name of "prayer in the public schools."

But you yourself support the government's interferences with the public-school teachers' freedom to begin their classes in accordance with their convictions. On this, you believe the government is involved in an area where it *does* belong, namely, denying the teachers' right to begin class or the school day with a Bible reading and/or prayer.

Why not follow your own logic and suggest a hands-off government policy? That's what we had before the government began messing "in an area where it doesn't belong."

In her 30 years of teaching third grade, a sister of mine won many

honors. She had always taken a few minutes to open the school day with Bible reading and prayer, and had never received even one parental complaint. But after the 30 years, the government stepped in and denied her her freedom. Her final three years of teaching were dismal, chaotic: her spirit, her style, her freedom had been crushed.

How about your honoring the refurbished Statue of Liberty by speaking out for freedom: the freedom of teachers, the freedom of those teachers whose hearts direct them to begin the school day or class session with a devotional? (The other teachers are already free, as they are in the U.S.S.R.: in the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., teachers who want to begin with a devotional are not free).

CCT 11Nov85 WILLIS ELLIOTT  
Craigville

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and its history evidence, is such a society--indeed, the most theistic of modern societies. In nontheistic societies (eg, Buddhist) and in anti-theistic societies (eg, Communist), the young are taught to sense-make without God-centering: the sense-making hook is something else.

3. The biblical God may or may not be the omni-Center of reality: that is a matter of faith. What is not a matter of faith, but a matter of knowledge, is that the biblical God as experienced in "the West" is central to the Am. heritage and hope and motivation, albeit (1) many in the 96% of Gallup's "believers in God" are mainly otherwise motivated and (2) some Americans are not theistic, a tiny minority. According to an insane current conclusion, supported by the educationists, the tiny minority should be permitted to tyrannize over the majority: if ANY parent objects to religion in public education, OUT WITH IT!

4. Parents who do not want their children educated in our tradition should certainly not be forced (1) to submit their children to it or (2) to pay taxes for its support. They should be completely free to provide their children with the kind of education they want their children to have, and to do so either by being excused from school taxes or by some voucher system of tax credits. Crazily, at present we have the reverse: The foster child (as it were) inhabits the public school, and the bio-child is forced into "Christian schools" outside the structure of public education. I'm horrified by what's taught in the thousands of fundamentalist "Christian schools," but they're our punishment for not engaging in a vigorous debate about public education and failing to come up with a solution that (1) honors our tradition and (2) provides freedom for dissidents from our tradition. Dismally, I see in our liberal churches, including the UCC and you, no hopeful exploration toward an intelligent solution of this dilemma. Instead, what I see is the blind arrogance you well, unwittingly, express in your last paragraph: "My dear, dear friend Willis, wake up on this. You are wrong, dead wrong on all accounts. I pray for you on this matter for I think you are damaging to what the Christian faith is all about and what the Constitution is all about and what our 'free' society is all about."

5. Um, "the Constitution." Whatthehell has the Constitution to do with the problem, except (from my viewpoint) positively, as its theocentric? Lincoln (1860-5) managed to coerce the states against legislating secession, but against nothing else: the states were then, and are now, free to legislate vis-a-vis religion (and, as you know, the Civil War was irrelevant to the issue: our state, MA, had a state religion, Congregationalism, till 1815, when public taxes stopped paying the salaries of us Congregational ministers: the Constitution had nothing to do with the states on matters of religion). The argument for LOCAL nontheistic public education on the basis of the CONSTITUTION is, clearly, spurious, seeming plausible only because of the "pluralistic" bill of goods sold many of the Am. people since WWII). At one further remove, it's sheer fantasy to "reason" from the Constitution that LOCALES (governments within the states, viz, county and town and city) are not free to determine, in their tax-supported schools, issues of religion and public education. A gigantic fraud is being perpetrated upon us in this area, and I'm distressed that you're blind to it.

6. You want taken away, as it now is, the teacher's freedom to open schoolday/class according to heart, his/her heart. In the name of what do you want to suppress this freedom (which is suppressed also in the USSR)? "Pluralism"? Fuzzy-headed, blasphemous betrayal of what Am. is all about! "Chaos"-avoidance? Murder avoids chaos; amnesia (teaching children to sense-make without God) avoids chaos; autism avoids chaos. On this matter, I see your perspective as pathological as well as antihistorical.

7. "The separation of church and state" was never intended to separate the child from her/his heritage and its God-center, as it's now doing. Jefferson, shaper of the phrase, would be horrified at its present over-  
reading. more

8. The present "Christian schools" are being set up to promote what the Am. PS system was set up to promote, viz, English-speaking (what you call "Anglo-Saxon") Protestantism--and of course most teachers of both types of school are (again, your word) "white," as we live in an overwhelmingly "white" country. Would you object if PS teachers in South Africa were overwhelmingly "black"? As for the original PS Protestant emphasis, it (1) was natural, as Am. was overwhelmingly Protestant in foundation and (2) the only other large grouping, the RCC, had its own (parochial) schools. But in the early 1930s, the RCC began to attack PS Protestantism, beginning with demands that pro-Protestant works (such as the Eng. classic, Bunyan's PILGRIM'S PROGRESS) be stricken from the curriculum. (I expected to study, in 1932, the book in question, which had been studied the year before by my sister in question; and I was disappointed: the RCC "got" it, knocking it out of our schools, of which at that time my father was president.) Next, the Jews attacked the PS as Christian, arguing that the PS should not be Christian even though the country was overwhelmingly Christian in foundation and in citizenry. Finally, the secularists (Madeline Murray O'Hare and many more sophisticated than she) attacked, complaining that the PS was theistic--in spite of the fact that the country was, in foundation and in citizenry, almost entirely theistic. The operational principle has been that the PS's coloration should be a neutral gray, its message least-common-denominator--in flat contradiction of the anthropological principle that the primary function of public education is to perpetuate the society--perpetuate, not remake: public education is inherently "conservative" (ie, conserving the society's heart and traditions), not "progressive" in the Deweyite-secular sense (though of course it should progress in the sense of accomodating and employing new learnings from the exfoliation of knowledge and skill)....What weight, sir, do you give to the emphasis our PS was founded to promote? Is white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant just one among many equal emphases in your "pluralism"? An explosion of subquestions would include (1) should all tests in tax-supported Am. schools be given only in English (as I think), this being linguistically an "Anglo-Saxon" country? (2) should children be permitted to graduate from tax-supported Am. schools without some grasp of the primarily Protestant foundations of the USA (eg, "the glory of God" in the Mayflower Compact and the Calvinist "nation with the soul of a church")? (3) as the country was founded, and operates, on "white" values and virtues, should these not be engendered in public education (or is this datum to be considered a dirty secret, a cause of shame and penitence--in spite of the fact that only those who master and live by the "white" values and virtues "make it" in our society?)? (CAUTION: I'm not saying "white" is better, but I am stating the obvious fact that America is "white" in its moral sense, its decision-making ("ethics"), its codices (civil and criminal legal structures), its style of government ("democracy" as shaped in Anglo-Saxon power processes, esp. since AD1215), its way of doing commercial business (Yankee negotiating), its manners of self-presentation/response ("acceptable" behavior in "polite" society), in most of its religious institutions, and even in much of its leisure (eg, team sports). Failure to conform to this "white"ness is more or less severely dealt with, as that Cal. Jap. woman who drowned her two chn. in conformity to a Jap. custom is now finding out in court. But I've little hope that those who confuse particularity (which I'm favoring here) with prejudice (which I hate and have resisted throughout my life) will be able to see-feel what I'm saying in this paragraph. You, eg.

9. In 1929 I was in a truly pluralistic PS. Each teacher was free to self-present heart & mind, and both theists and atheists did. Today this true pluralism has been lost: only atheist (incl. nontheist and anti-theist) teachers have this freedom. THAT you are for, sir? Should not the child IN SCHOOL experience the pluralism s/he experiences and will ex-

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perience IN THE SOCIETY? One of my teachers in 1929 was radiantly theistic, bespeaking DIVINE generation and DIVINE selection; another was atheist, pushing "spontaneous" generation and "natural" selection and palming off those two adjectives as though they were science instead of metaphysics. I was 11, and I loved it! Why should my teachers agree with each other? Their disagreements stimulated my thinking, and made for wonderful debates in our Jr. Hi. Science Club! But look what we have now in the PS: an atheist monopoly of sense-making. I'm thinking of an NYC highschool with a radiant theist whose mouth is legally closed and an aggressive atheist "science" teacher who pushes atheism so successfully that the clergy of that suburb say they get almost none of the bright students in confirmation class. THAT you want, viz, governmental promotion of IRreligion? How different would be that highschool and that suburb's churches & synagogues if that theist were as free as that atheist!

10. Now extend the picture down the years. Those bright children, without benefit of religious education, now dominate the media, only 5% of whose moguls practice either Judaism or Christianity. How will religion be treated in the soaps & the more serious dramas? Negatively, if at all. Since religion is not a factor in the moguls' sense-making, it's almost never a factor in the way actors and actresses make their decisions. Religion, if it doesn't cripple, doesn't count either; and you'll not be missing anything important in life if you just skip it. That, overwhelmingly, is the message of the media vis-a-vis religion, in diametrical contrast to the message of our Am. heritage, which is that it's crippling to neglect religion, for it's the most important thing in life NOT to miss. What formed the mind of the media and the mind of the masses? More the PS than any other institution, and the PS has been atheist (in the sense of "not" using "God" as sense-making center) for a half century. It's only dangerous nostalgia to prate about "parental responsibility": parent/child time together is in steep decline, only 40% of Am. chn. have parents (plural), bastardy is on a steep rise, only 20% of couples with chn. are one-employee, and the peer-group (formed mainly in PS) has replaced parents as dominant sanctioner of attitudes and conduct. Religious congregations regularly touch less than 25% of our youth, whose religion is more apt to come from media priests such as Carl Sagan, whose COSMOS (film & book, which is blatantly atheist) promotes cosmic mysticism as the best religion.

11. You say, "to have a state or Fed. gov't. tell a teacher to engage in prayer and Bible reading is an establishment." Of course it is, and it's as monstrous an idea as to tell a teacher NOT to (which you favor)! I have consistently denounced both courses of action, being (as my letter says) against gov't.'s "messing 'in an area where it doesn't belong.'" And you say, "why should the church resort to having a public school teacher read the Bible and pray with children in a public setting?" Again, vis-a-vis me, you're attacking a straw man: it's monstrous to have the church messing with the PS in any way! Again, you say "why must we ask the schools to do that which church and home should be doing?" "Should" indeed! Are you for sex ed in the schools, as the kids aren't getting it at home or in church? Are we to tell the 75% of our citizenry that's religiously ignorant "Sorry, we had to let you fall between the cracks"? Again, you seem out of it in wondering why teachers and students don't begin the day with a religious exercise at home: do you know three families that do that?

12. Yes, Jesus condemned conspicuous-consumption praying in public. But he modeled the freedom to self-present one's heart and mind, and even the duty to do so. Can you believe he'd favor the repression of this in education, no matter the auspices?

13. "The Religious Factor in Sense-Making and Values-Education" is a course I'd like to teach (for credit, if they wish) Cape Cod PS teachers. There are positive ways to get at the problems we're agonizing over here.



"The Friendly Church"

# the FEDERATED CHURCH of HYANNIS

(A Fellowship of Christians welcoming all Denominations and Traditions)

Box 543

Hyannis, Massachusetts 02601

Tel. 775-0298

Rev. John H. Williams  
Minister

Rev. Betty Ann Lehmann  
Minister

November 12, 1985

USSR & USA:

S-M without benefit of  
clergy or deity

My dear Willis,

I'm beginning to wonder if you have too much time on your hands. You certainly have a penchant for writing letters to the editor. Many of them I want to respond to, because they usually demand a response, but I find myself resisting the temptation and I find little time to write a deserving response. Your latest (Nov. 11, 1985) however commanded my attention and rather than responding in the paper I am writing to you personally.

I admire your thinking in many areas of Christian concern, although your ideas are sometimes difficult to understand. Your views about school prayer are quite clear however, yet I still find myself disagreeing with you on every point.

The reason the government got "involved", as with most concerns of recent vintage, civil rights etc., is because school prayer and Bible reading became a concern for many parents, and students who happened to believe differently than what was being said and the way it was being done in the public schools. These were parents and children from a variety of religious backgrounds or no religion. They did not want a particular teacher, usually white, anglo-saxon, Protestant, as was probably true with your sister, to be "teaching" religion to their children. Many communities, where prayer and Bible readings were accepted practices were usually homogeneous communities.

It makes sense to me from a practical standpoint that no teacher should engage in a specific religious practice such as Bible reading and a "Christian" prayer when you have a pluralistic setting of children and youth in a PUBLIC school classroom. The freedom of the student is also involved! The freedom of the parent(s) is involved here as well!

As a Christian, I do not want a PUBLIC school teacher teaching Christianity. Nor do I want them teaching a civil religion. The waters are already muddied enough between civil religion and Christianity.

The Constitution speaks against the establishment of religion. To have a state or Federal government tell a teacher to engage in prayer and Bible reading is an establishment. The Constitution also says that there should be the free exercise of religion. Any child, youth or teacher can pray in the public schools at any time! They just can't coerce others into praying with them. They can pray quietly, silently, meditatively at any time. They can read their Bible, if they carry one with them. Why should the church resort to having a public school teacher read the Bible and pray with children in a public setting. I don't want

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the school doing that. It is the church's responsibility and the home -parents responsibility. Why must we ask the schools to do that which church and home should be doing?

By the way, didn't Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount say something about not praying in public but in secret?

Maybe your coming from a very conservative viewpoint and believe that there is only "one way" and that a Christian teacher must preach and teach wherever they are and try to convert children and youth to the Christian way. I can accept that, even though I personally don't believe it - but you can't do it in the Public Schools. It is against constitutional law!

Are you saying under the guise of freedom that a teacher can teach, instruct, mold, convince, indoctrinate his or her students in whatever they believe? Would we not have chaos in the schools if this were the case. I certainly wouldn't want a teacher of math, saying to my child that scientology was what they should believe. Or a teacher who "believes" in Satan, to tell my child to pray to the devil. I can accept, which the constitution and its present interpretations suggest, that a teacher of sociology or a teacher of history or even of English could engaged his or her students in a study of a variety of religious understandings, and viewpoints; in a variety of the literature of these religions; in a variety of the various religious practices; I have attended public school classes as a minister talking about death in psychology classes, about sex in sociology classes and about Christian values. But the Rabbi was also present and the Roman Catholic priest and usually another viewpoint.

I do happen to believe that a moment of silence at the beginning of the day is appropriate in the school classroom. It can be offered with no sense of establishment of a religion and allows the free exercise of one who might want to pray or to read his or her Bible. I'm not sure however that it is really necessary since one begins the day at home. Why is that not the proper place to begin the day with prayer and Bible reading, for the teacher as well as the student? As soon as you imply that it is to help a teacher not face dismal, chaotic crushed feelings, then you imply some sense of establishment.

My dear, dear friend Willis, wake up on this. You are wrong, dead wrong, on all accounts. I pray for you on this matter for I think you are damaging to what the Christian faith is all about and what the Constitution is all about and what our "free" society is all about.

Blessings and peace.

Most sincerely,

(Rev.) John H. Williams

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Free  
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Dante says  
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The Rel. Faith  
in His Values

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