125

<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/09/civility_religion_and_sports.html>

**Losing Trust in God and Government**

*We have entered what columnist Kathleen Parker calls "a political era of uninhibited belligerence," that is finding expression in sermons, at town hall meetings, on radio talk shows, even on the floor of Congress -- especially when we differ. Why are people so angry and belligerent, and so willing to express their anger publicly? Why has our civil discourse become so uncivil? What does this public anger say about our private faith? What should we do about it?*

When there's little water in the kettle, what there is boils quickly when the heat comes on. But why is the water so thin? A few clues:

1.....Anxiety about ominous changes "they" are to blame for. Not since the 1960s has America experienced such*anxious thinness*, unpreparedness in face of little-understood shifting in the ground underfoot. "Something is happening / But you don't understand what it is / Do you, Mister Jones?" That was the refrain in Bob Dylan's 1965 "Ballad of a Thin Man."

2....On the premise that some *"they"* caused this general unsettling, the project of many is to decide who "they" are and then yell at them. When America thought more biblically, the premise (when something went wrong) was that "I" or "we" were to blame, and the project was to decide what I was / we were to do about it. The current premise does indeed foster "self-righteousness, anger, resentment, and...'uninhibited belligerence'." And the former premise (which Bible-preacher Rick Warren bespoke at the Inauguration) fosters "clarity, responsibility, humility and civility."

3.....Something happened in 1963, and I*do* know what it was. The U.S. Supreme Court banned from our public schools the historic practice of beginning the school-day with a teacher-led ritual of quiet respect and reverence, including a short reading from the Bible. Results? A decline of the sense of reverence, of respect for authority, of the knowledge of the Bible; and the loss of the daily public-school reminder of the Bible's literary supremacy in American history. Tocqueville doubted that the American experiment of democracy could survive the separation of religion from public education, and the doubt has been deepening since 1963. / Anecdote: After 1963, a sister of mine - who for 30 years had been beginning her third-grade school-day with prayer and Bible-reading - found her children "uncontrollable" for the remaining three years of her third-grade teaching.

4.....The world-financial Collapse of '07-'08 removed from most Americans the ability to continue their *consumerist life-style*, a shocking loss resulting in fear, isolation, irritability, and desperate searching for solutions to the ensuing problems. Their trust in God and religion had been in decline for two generations, and the former thickness of trust in God had shrunk into the thinness of trust in "the system" sustaining their consumerist way of life. Human energies resist constriction by fear, and explode into anger. But anger needs a target even more than fear needs a known cause. / Anecdote: In 1941 Chicago (before "Pearl Harbor"), I addressed some 500 Nazis (American Bundists) and after the meeting was invited to the apartment of the leader, who became so angry at me that he kicked his dog so hard that the poor animal crashed into a wall. Anger has to kick something, preferably something that can't kick back.

5.....Since bad news is easier to commodify than good, the commercial (advertising) news media are*weighted toward the negative emotions*- fear, anger, hate, despair. Animals, including human beings, are necessarily more alert to threat than to promise. Talk radio specializes on hate speech, suspicion of the lowest motives, alleged conspiracies and lies; and Fox News inflates even minor mishaps into tragedies and missteps into crimes. Government is the biggest target, and "big government" is its bullseye. / What gets our attention gets us. Most Americans get their news not from thoughtful reading of newspapers but from commercial media sight-bites and sound-bites. The price we pay is horrendous. Nutritionists warn us that "We are what we eat." Junk food and junk news conspire to produce junk bodies and junk minds, a degenerate society.

6.....Until school-*sports* took Sunday morning away from Christians and Jews, who long had used it for the spiritual training of children, God was a given in the American mind and respect for persons, expressed in civility, an element in the American character: win/win cooperation was stronger than win/lose competition. The present incivility rumbles up from the fact that many of the losers of the '08 presidential election are bad sports. That game is over, but their mind is still determined to hate and defeat of Obama.

7.....Auschwitz-survivor psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's logotherapy teaches our God-given responsibility for choosing the "logos" (meaning) by which we live. We are capable both of building gas chambers to kill and of "entering those gas chambers upright, the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on our lips." As persons and societies, we can live under the sovereignty of God or as though we were god, persons striving against persons and societies against societies.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  SEPTEMBER 16, 2009; 12:19 AM ETSAVE & SHARE:                       
PREVIOUS:**[**SOCIETY'S BELLIGERENCE**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/matt_maher/2009/09/sociological_belligerence.html)**| NEXT:**[**FAITH'S RESPONSE TO INCIVILITY**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/kerry_robinson/2009/09/faiths_response_to_incivility.html)

**Comments**

**Please report offensive comments below.**

Willis,

Thanks for your thoughtful response. On a very recent thread the idea of offering religion as a course of study in secondary schools was presented for comment. I took this to mean an academic/comparative approach of course, without showcasing any particular faith.

Of all the illustrious panel members here On Faith, I believe Daniel Dennett has developed this idea most thoroughly.

I really see this as being part of a comprehensive education, and personally support the idea of offering an objective, historical perspective on the world's religions prior to the university level, via the public education system.

However, most of us doubt this topic will be offered as an integral part of high school curriculums any time soon, for a host of reasons - not the least being both political and religious resistence to presenting religion in such an eclectic and comparative fashion.

This scholastic approach, employed with hopefully attentive young and fertile minds, actually implies that all religions are somehow equal under the sun....and lots of folks wouldn't like that idea one little bit :^) And coming from U of C religion department, no one knows this concept and style of presentation better than yourself!

Regarding the following Dylan work:

"Something is happening / But you don't understand what it is / Do you, Mister Jones?" That was the refrain in Bob Dylan's 1965 "Ballad of a Thin Man."

You'll see in my link that the true origins and meaning of this song remain as mysterious as Dylan himself - although indeed created astride the emerging counter culture of the 1960's......

One interpretation not presented, is the possible critique of the prevelant and often fatal use of heroin in those Greenwich Village days - since having a 'jones' had long indicated an addiction to heroin (probably since the Bebop era).

I recall how much we counter-culturists actually inherited from the real Beats of the 1950's, and heroin use had been rampant even then - since the Swing Era several decades prior. Music and drugs - an everpresent combo, even in primitive cultures. Now take those two pasttimes, and throw in religion - a triad that really does go back to the dawn of early Man!

best regards, Persiflage

[**http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballad\_of\_a\_Thin\_Man**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballad_of_a_Thin_Man)

**POSTED BY: PERSIFLAGE | SEPTEMBER 20, 2009 7:18 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO PERSIFLAGE
1
Public education is "forced" on a particular society's children to shape them up into being responsible contributors to the society, supporting its values. A society is a social womb, shaping heart & mind as the physical womb shapes the body. A society needs to decide what its values are & how to force/impose/communicate/engender (choose your own verb) those values generation after generation. Math & science are not being well communicated, & religion (though a high value in American history & society) is banned. Communicating some values is difficult, but that does not justify depriving our children of them.
2
You ask "how did the Bible engender order (particularly moral order) in our society?" I do not exaggerate: hundreds of books deal with this question, but our public-school children are exposed to none of them. If this banning were not so, you would not be asking the question.
The great historians of America agree that the American mind was & is a dynamic interaction of Biblical & Enlightenment values. This mind is particular & is open to multicultural values and concerns, but this mind itself is not multicultural.

TO BOOKOFDOUG
In saying "religion is purely for control," you've said little about religion but much about yourself. I don't know whether you qualify for the category of control-freak, but you do believe in the sovereignty of the self rather than the sovereignty of God (to save nothing of the sovereignty of the state).
2
My experience of religion has been the reverse of yours. You see religion as coming at you to deprive you of liberty. I've experienced it as coming to me to offer me freedom from my greatest oppressor, namely, myself. In telling me to love God, my neighbor (whoever, wherever), & myself, the Bible invites me to walk out of the infantile prison of me-me-me into the dignity,joy,& peace of
loving myself in service to & communion with the Source of life & with my fellow-creatures.
3
But there's some truth in your "religion is purely for control": it's too complex to be described as "purely" about anything, but it certainly includes SELF-control.

AUSSIEBARRY
1
You are correct that "daily prayer" does not neatly correlate with civility. Many factors are involved in "civility," depending on how it is defined and on context. Social uprisings are inherently uncivil, & incivility is a virtue when social uprising leads to social progress.
2
This week's OnFaith question is about the current radical political polarization as it appears in ugly ("uncivil") speech. This behavior is left & right, & cannot be neatly correlated with any one point of view.
3
As for "daily [school-led] prayer," we've had none in our public schools since l963.
I believe that this negative fact has some correlation with our society's decline in the values of reverance in life & of respect for persons.

**POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | SEPTEMBER 20, 2009 5:11 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Willis Elliot actually said the following:

'.....Something happened in 1963, and I do know what it was. The U.S. Supreme Court banned from our public schools the historic practice of beginning the school-day with a teacher-led ritual of quiet respect and reverence, including a short reading from the Bible. Results? A decline of the sense of reverence, of respect for authority, of the knowledge of the Bible; and the loss of the daily public-school reminder of the Bible's literary supremacy in American history.'

I'm kind of stunned by that last part....
'........reminder of the Bible's literary supremacy in American history.'

First off, the law was a simple nod to the concept of the separation of church and state, and it might even have been a very early semi-conscious recognition of the emerging multiculturalism that is today an inescapable and full-blown fact of life. Different strokes for different folks, and all of that nonsense.......

Hopefully we won't have to start quoting Thomas Paine and the other Tom guy ... to demonstrate how forced religion is contrary to the philosophy of the Founders - and altogether different from freedom of religion and the other half of the equation, the freedom from religion.

Is Willis saying that children learned to read and write by candlelight, while mom and dad read the Bible - or what? And exactly how did the Bible engender order (particularly moral order) in our society? Many unanswered mysteries are contained in just this simple statement.

This is very easy - religion belongs in places of common worhip, where believers can engage in any kind of religious rituals whatsoever, as long as they don't break the law.

I guess that means that followers of Santeria can engage in the sacrifice of live goats, but I do hope that law has been changed ... poor creatures.

And are we really certain that humans are born with a religious impulse, or is religion a deeply reinforced and learned response and belief complex that generally can't be unstuck - although this religious unsticking happens with increasing frequency these days.

My suggestion for prayer in public schools? A Zen prayer can be said at various times throughout the day as desired - a dedicated moment of silence.

Otherwise, there are always parochial/private religious schools - but are a bit pricey these days.

**POSTED BY: PERSIFLAGE | SEPTEMBER 20, 2009 12:36 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Your right, we are what we eat, but where also what we think. Your junk food and news is right but you forgot junk religions, there all junk. You mention negative emotions,like fear,anger,hate,and despair. These are the emotions put forth by your religion in the name of God, thats pure junk. Religions are purely for control and you don't want to lose yours.

**POSTED BY: BOOKOFDOUG | SEPTEMBER 20, 2009 2:13 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Following this hypothesis ,people who have had daily prayer and have been steeped in religion, should be more civil than others who have had a more secular upbringing.To an outside observer, this is patently incorrect.

**POSTED BY: AUSSIEBARRY | SEPTEMBER 19, 2009 1:02 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

COMMENTS TO COMMENTERS
1
At least some of you seem aware of the difficulty of OnFaith columns as between the rock of difficult-complex issues and the hard place of necessary compaction, saying "multum in parvo" (much in small space and in language as simple as manageable). I read your comments in light of this literary-genre factor, and thank you for your contributions.
2
"School prayer" is both an educational and a culture-war issue.
2.1
It's an EDUCATIONAL issue because:
2.1.1
Children's education is lop-sided, distorted if public education leaves out one of human life's primary dimensions. Religion and science are two ways of experiencing and exploring life's mysteries, absurdities, and clarities. Islamist madrasas eliminate the second, and America's public schools the first.
2.1.2
Society is misshapen and impoverished by what happens when public education elides either science or religion: the society slides toward absorbing the neglected dimension into the emphasized dimension.
Religion absorbed into science bloats science into scientism, the materialist philosophy confining what is "real" to the verifiable/falsifiable.
2.2
The emergence of scientism from science has made this a CULTURE-WAR issue. In America, scientism correlates with an agressive secularism determined to drive religion out of all public life and indeed out of existence.
2.2.1
American children should have an American education, including knowledge of American history's dynamic-creative interaction of "church" (religion) and "state" (general government) in "society" (people's lives).
2.2.1
Communism was a previous effort of secularism to eliminate religion and control society. What we learn from its history and collapse should discourage us from having another try at secularism.
3
The difficulties of incorporating religion into public education constitute the second question. The first question is whether it is essential to a balanced education of our children. On the second question, many ways to go have been developed; but all have been blocked to date by the assumption - hard-driven by the secularists - that the answer to the first question is no.
4
Human beings have self-driven potentials. We can make sense, so we have a drive to make sense, finding meaning and purpose in life. If a school system teaches children to think, make sense, find meaning and purpose without religion, religion itself will not make sense: the absence of religion in public education AUTOMATICALLY teaches secularism, with scientism as its religion. (In logic, it's called the law of parsimony, minimum hypothesis: if life can be fully lived without God, why bother with religion?)
5
Since we've had two generations of religionless public education in America, and since religion is a characteristic of our species (which secularism denies), the basic culture-war will probably intensify until some general humiliation moves all points of view to the common table.

**POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | SEPTEMBER 18, 2009 4:41 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

considering the density of christianity (christians/person) of the angriest crowds today, I have to wonder why you aren't yelling at them to behave themselves in the so-called christian manner, rather than bemoaning the removal of prayers from government-run public schools.

Do you think today's screamers and haters are any less christian than you? Do you think they pray any less than you?

Primarily southern, white, protestant (baptist or whatever), and far more religious than their opponents in this screamfest ... why aren't you picking on them? They're the ones doing it.

Correlation is not causation, whether you want to blame their christianity for their hatred (as I do), or whether you want to blame the removal of government sponsored christianity in the public schools - as you do.

**POSTED BY: KATAVO | SEPTEMBER 18, 2009 3:37 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Sorry, I grew up in that uncivil, post-prayer-in-schools era of the 1970's and '80's. I was assuming that schools with predominantly Jewish kids would do Jewish prayers. Silly me.
--------------------
I don't know that it's "silly," not at all. On the other hand, hegemony is hegemony. In New York, the Lord's prayer, "Come, Thou Almighty King," and other Christian hymns appear to have been standard, regardless of where a school may have been located.

From what I have learned, this was also the case among some schools in which the prevailing religion was Buddhism. Not silly to think it wasn't that way. Silly that it was.

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ1MANSOURI1 | SEPTEMBER 17, 2009 7:02 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Sorry, I grew up in that uncivil, post-prayer-in-schools era of the 1970's and '80's. I was assuming that schools with predominantly Jewish kids would do Jewish prayers. Silly me.

I think that things were pretty laid back back in the early 1980's, as compared to now. We had a "moment of silence" in my public school district right after the Pledge. If you wanted to pray, good for you. If you wanted to zone out for 30 seconds, who cares? As long as you were quiet about it. When I was in choir, we sang a variety of music - secular and sacred. Not because the choir director was pushing his religion on people, but because most of the good choral music is sacred. We did "Godspell" for our school musical one year. Nobody complained about that, either. Of course, this was in the early 1980's, before religion became a wedge issue. We had a small group of Jewish and Orthodox kids in our school, but we were mostly Catholics and various flavors of Protestant.

**POSTED BY: ATHENA4 | SEPTEMBER 17, 2009 4:25 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

The sway of Charles Finney on evangelical thought and the resultant self-congradulatory effect portrayed in the lives of Christians within their community. There is a lot of strength in that lie.

**POSTED BY: MAMMYYEL | SEPTEMBER 17, 2009 1:08 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Hate to tell you, Athena, but from what I hear, school prayers back in the day had nothing to do with Jews. We don't recite the Lord's Prayer (most Jews don't know it), nor do we sing "Come Thou, Almighty King" both quite commonly "offered up" in NYC back in them good old prayerful Christian days. Prayer in Judaism is structured, takes place three times a day, etc.

You would have been more accurate had you asked the reverend if he knew that not all American children have ever been Christians.
I'm including the Native Americans here, who, when education opened to them, were subject to Christianization. As in the case of us Js, there were those among them upon whom the process did not work.

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ1MANSOURI1 | SEPTEMBER 17, 2009 1:24 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Toldya so, Reverend.

The, err, 'incivility' is what turned this place into... Part of the problem.

I look forward to seeing your solutions.

Now that I'm not being a 'party pooper,' that is.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 16, 2009 9:27 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I tend to agree with you on most of these, except for the "taking prayer out of public schools" bit. Sir, you DO realize that not every child in America is a Christian or Jew, right? Should we accomodate the religion of every child in the school, or just the majority of them? In my local area, I can see little Abdul leading kids in the Moslem morning prayers, Lakshmi leading yoga, Than leading a Buddhist chant, and Amber leading a Wiccan circle. I can't wait for voodoo day!

There is a difference between manners and religion. One can be taught proper social behavior (saying "please", "thank you", "Sir, "Ma'am", not interrupting, etc.) without praying to Jesus or anyone else.

**POSTED BY: ATHENA4 | SEPTEMBER 16, 2009 5:33 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

The comments to this entry are closed.