

IF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL FAILS, THAT'S BAD.
IF IT SUCCEEDS, THAT'S WORSE.

2638 17 Sept 93

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

A glancing review of Stephen Carter's pessimistic realism in THE CULTURE OF DISBELIEF (Basic Books/93). "Glancing," because I make no use of it other than to mention it's contention that the dominant American mind has marginalized, privatized, trivialized religion.

The public school teaches most Americans.

The public school teaches almost all Americans to think, more or less.

The public school teaches Americans to think secularly,

without benefit of clergy or even deity.

Secularism (RHD²) "rejects all forms of religious faith and worship" & is "the view that public education and other matters of civil policy should be conducted without the introduction of a religious element."

Ergo, the public school is secularistic.

I am theistic, thus antiseccularistic.

Ergo, I am against the public school.

1 A regular-Thinksheet-reading rabbi writes that he appreciates my efforts but doesn't always agree with my "think." The above is a think, for me a painful think, painful because a counterthink. I think America must, in this multicultural period, turn up the heat on the melting pot, discover how to energize the coherence side of the unity/diversity of our life together. The public school is one of the two great unicultural influences in American life, the other being television, which is as secularistic as is the public school & may have become a superior force in the shaping of the American mind.

2 Up against rising Islamic fundamentalism, Arafat decided Rabin didn't look as bad as he'd thought. The old Arafat: "My brother & I will fight my cousin." The new Arafat: "My cousin & I will fight the stranger."

Up against television, how can I oppose the public school? Religion, in Fred. J. Streng's definition, is the human concern for "ultimate transformation." I am concerned about the proximate **transformation** of public education: it need not--need it?--continue to exclude nonsecularistic thinking?

3 In his infamous Harv.Div.School lecture, "An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College," Emerson modernizes Jesus to Emersonian confidence in man: Jesus "alone in all history estimated the greatness of man." Hinduistically preaching the soul against history, he exalts "spontaneous love" in the fatuous way that today "unconditional love" is being hyped. "The sublime,...where are the resources of astonishment and power," lies in "the moral nature of man." "The true Christianity--a faith like Christ's in the infinitude of man." We who've been alive during the 20th c. can laugh at his silly 19th c., anti-original-sin belief in man. But is that not the religion of our present public school with it's anthropocentric preachments such as "self-esteem"?

4 The cultural victory of Emersonianism shows in "The God Problem: What to do after kids," by Roy Rivenburg a few days ago in the L.A.TIMES. The article begins with the spiritual dilemma of an atheist couple on the birth of their first child: "How would they answer questions about life after death, good and evil, and the origins of the universe? How would they instill a moral and ethical code without a God to reinforce it? And how could they avoid a spiritual vacuum that might leave their daughter susceptible to some future David Koresh?" Another atheist couple says "We think [the idea of God] is silly....We believe in people." But Dennis Prager, a radio talk-show host, satirizes such naivete as pragmatic relativism: "What I believe is good is good for me, and what Hitler says is good is good for him"; "the decline of religion and the decline in values are directly related"; polls show children, given the choice of rescuing their drowning pet or a drowning human being unknown to them, would rescue their pet; "Atheists have tremendous faith in human nature; after Auschwitz and the Gulag, I don't."

Rivenburg defines "de facto atheists"--a far higher percentage of the

American populace than self-professed atheists--as those "for whom God and religion play no role in life." This condition is normal to public-school graduates who've not been significantly touched by religion. And as religion, despite televangelists and more culturally respectable efforts of religious forces, becomes more marginalized, more & more Americans will be in this sense "normal." (In the past few weeks, I've met three who, to remark any religious connection, had to refer back to their grandparental generation.)

5 In 19th-c. England, Jn. Donne warned a new ordinand against wasting energy bemoaning (as I'm doing in this Thinksheet!) the spiritual obtuseness of the times ("To Mr. Tilman After He Had Taken Orders"; no typos here: Sam. Johnson, Esq., hadn't yet settled Eng. orthography): "Alas poore joyes, but poorer men, whose trust / Seems richly placed in refined dust; / (For such are cloathes and beauty, which though gay, / Are, at the best, but of sublimed clay.) / Let then the world thy calling disrespect. / But goe thou on, and pittie their **neglect**." The word I've boldfaced is often thrown at religious forces in the community, accusing them of neglecting to supplement public-school education. But the problem is only secondarily one of community failure to supplement, to add religion. The primary problem is that the public school teaches a religion, viz humanism, which is essentially antagonist to the biblical, theocentric religions even though some of the public-school teachers are theistic. The word is supplant, not supplement.

6 Said Robt. Frost, "Education is hanging around until you've caught on," till (Plato) "we abhor what we should and relish what we should," till (Mt. Arnold) we've acquired "the best that has been said or thought," till (Tennyson) knowledge yields to wisdom, sensible to the best & worst humanity is capable of.

EXAMPLE: Iraqi oil belongs to (1) Saddam Hussein, (2) the Iraqis, (3) us, because we Americans discovered how to get it out of the ground, (4) all humanity, or (5) God (Ps.24.1 NRSV: "The earth is the LORD's and all this is in it, / the world, and those who live in it.").