

## CAN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACH MORALITY?

I commend your present series of letters on the voucher issue and want to get my oar in. Here's the dilemma as I see it:

The present coercive, tax-monopoly public school system is good for American cultural unity overarching sub-cultural diversity (the situation we're now calling "pluralism"), but bad in that the religious roots of morality and culture are deliberately left out. The proposed voucher system would be good for making it financially easier for parents to choose, for their children, schools that do not neglect the depth dimension of morality and culture, but bad for American unity in that this structure would promote not a culture plus subcultures but cultural fragmentation, a jumble of competing cultures well described by the term "enclavism."

Do we have any other options? At least these two, both of them assuming the present tax-monopoly single public school system:

1. We might explore toward a common moral code based on "natural reasoning," a phrase used in a letter in today's TIMES promoting this solution. Naively, I think, the letter imagines we could agree, come to a "collective moral conviction," FOR social responsibility and our Constitutional heritage and AGAINST murder, thievery, bearing false witness, and disrespect.

Two implicit assumptions here are arguable: (1) Morality has two bases, namely "nature" and nurture; and (2) The two bases are separable, so the state may foster the former and the church may, for its members, add the latter.

But both assumptions are illusory. As to the first, "nature" is not an objective reality but a dialectical term existing only in relation to "supernature," though the Western history of "natural" science has created the illusion that "nature" is an objective reality. Every effort to shape a naturalistic ethic has foundered on this rocky fact. As to the second, what weight would a "supernatural," nurture-based morality have in a culture using tax dollars to promote a "natural" morality and using law to force exposure of almost all the children to this "natural" morality? Every moral code expands its claims to fill the whole field of moral vision: the public school would not teach that its "natural" morality is inadequate, needing reason to be supplemented by revelation. The children would come to conclude, as indeed many already have, that the religion-based moral teachings of synagogue and church are only unnecessary extras.

2. We might use our creative imagination to share, within the stricture of separation of church and state, our Founding Fathers' common moral vision, the vision behind and within our founding documents. Surely that is what ought to be expected from the public school system of any nation, the promotion and continuation of the national ethos. Yes, our Founding Fathers were of various persuasions on "church"; but there were no differences among them on moral vision. They were theists, God being the root of virtues and values and the primary sanction for both. They were Anglo, so they founded a nation based on English language and law (moral sense and jurisprudential process). They believed that the separation of powers, of church and state, would be good for both, given a common moral vision (such as existed) in both. As Thornton Wilder put it in "Our Town," "Grover's Corners...and the mind of God." But many now reject the common moral vision at the base of the American way of life, so the public school is probably doomed.