

SHOULD TAX-SUPPORTED EDUCATION HAVE ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR
THE CITIZEN'S FORMAL TRAINING IN REVERENCE? ----- ELLIOTT #1837

Today (29Apr84) Pres. Reagan preached "faith and freedom" in an uncensored broadcast in China--vs. fear and tyranny in the USSR. While I haven't a high view of Reagan, I do have a high view of (biblical) faith and (economic-social-political) freedom (which is more than "capitalism," but which has fared better under capitalism than under most other actual--not ideal!--systems for adjudicating and adjusting the clashing forces within and among us humans)...Now, in presentday China, "faith"="faith in the Revolution," which is radically and persistently engendered by the teaching of REVERENCE--which brings us to this thinksheet's burden.

1. All viable societies engender reverence for the Numen, "the Genius of the Emperor," "the High King of Heaven," the Omphalos (birth-place/center of the people), "the spirits," the people's "God," "Nature," (the last two combined in Jefferson's) "Nature's God." What sacred, if any, is being engendered in the school system Americans are forced (by tax) to support?

2. My letter (hereon) replies to a printed letter of a man who's been brainwashed by the public-education establishment into imagining that tax-supported education has no responsibility for the citizen's formal training in reverence: it lodges elsewhere, viz., in home and church (and other voluntary institutions of religion). But notice "citizen": the home has formal responsibility for the "child's" formal training in reverence (a responsibility by-and-large abandoned by American families, the space taken over mainly by television, which massively trains in reverences alien to biblical religion), and the church has formal responsibility for the "parishioner's" formal training in reverence (with less than half the population now getting any such training). I do not argue that the schools should take up the slack created by laxity in home and church. Rather, I argue that the schools should take up the slack created by the schools themselves, the slack ideologically fostered by a misreading and overreading of "the separation of church and state" (a phrase--one can see in our primary documents and in our history--never intended to separate the citizen-pupil from formal training in reverence.

3. The present school copout on this issue pleads "pluralism" to justify its neglect of formal training in biblical reverence, the fundamental reverence in "the American way of life." Of course it can be weakly pleaded that (1) the reverence of reverent teachers affects the pupils, and (2) reverence is inherent in some curricular materials--"weakly," I say, for the issue is formal training in reverence (which means reverence action intending reverence formation, "spiritual formation" of emotion/thinking/living).

4. What happens when a government does not train its citizen-subjects in reverence for the people's sacred center? We know only a little of the results, since presentday America is the only society ever to have drifted into, then rationalized, this strange situation. Since human beings need reverence (which is the dynamic both of sense-making and of living) as their bodies need food, reverence gets taught. Here are some reverences now being taught mindlessly and randomly in our public schools: (1) body reverence, which relates to such fixations as exercise cults, nutritionism, and hypochondriacal healthism, as well as hyped-up genitility; (2) evolutionism (which, because it has dominated public schools for two generations, dominates the media, which therefore treat antievolutionists as Neanderthals); (3) Americanism--a religion whose devotees qualify for the rogues' gallery of Barbara Tuchman's MARCH OF

OVER

FOLLY (especially the last section, which is on the horrors we created for ourselves and others by our military adventurism in Vietnam). American chauvinism is particularly virulent for having absorbed "church" religion into itself--on which see Sidney Mead's A NATION WITH THE SOUL OF A CHURCH). And I must add these reverences (any reverence being a "religion" when it dominates a life): (4) individualism of the Ayn Rand type (making all alliances, esp. marriage, insubstantial and shaky: only 13% of the registered voters voted in our town's most recent polling); 4) technism, or machine-worship, esp. reverence for physical power (esp. motors under individual control, as stockcar racing); (5) nature worship in both the recreational and the philosophical-poetic senses (a reverence closely related to the biologism of reverence #1). All of the above qualify for describing our present reverence-situation thus: "reverence, the displaced action-emotion" (displaced, i.e., vis-a-vis America's primary root of reverence in both Puritan and Enlightenment forms).

5. Tidal waves of fear sweep over persons and peoples who have come to imagine themselves fearless--e.g., McCarthyism, now nuclearism. "Godly fear" isn't being engendered in citizens (by institutions using tax money, which are by definition the only institutions addressing "citizens"): Wm. Penn was right that "Men will fear God or" Fear is only one component in reverence, but it is one! Fear of the paddle virtually eliminated tongue-disciplining in the public schools I attended, and the paddle was seldom used because it had been introjected into the pupil's psyche. Reverence for authority need not be tyranny.

6. "It can't be done" should step aside for "Can it be done--and if so, how?" We are living with the baneful alternatives to trying to find a way, an American way.

Disagrees with school prayer column

CAPE COD NEWS

25 Apr 84

To the editor:

Jim Frankel (Cape Cod News April 11, 1984) probably didn't give the title--"Our schools need more than prayers"--to his column. (Herewith, OVER.)

I agree with much he recommends that our schools need "more than prayer." But the slant of his piece is, rather, "other than prayer" in the sense of "not prayer." On that I must demur. For the teaching and practice of reverence (the basic attitude of "prayer," no matter the how) belongs in public education in every nation, whatever the nation's religion or philosophy or ideology.

One reason there's order in the public schools of the USSR, China, other "Iron Curtain" countries, and the Third World is that reverence is taught. One reason for the chaos and anarchy of our public schools is that--against all reason and human history--the teaching and practice of reverence has been eliminated, bracketed out by an overreading and misreading of the First Amendment.

This irreverence is what most Americans are concerned about, and the phrase "prayer in the schools" is little more than a code expression for this concern. The Quakers' best-known American philosopher, Elton Trueblood, put it this way (AP, 31Mar84): "The lost experience of reverence" in the public schools is "a very recent development and stands at variance with our major heritage." The "segregation" of religion, excluding it from public education (and confining it to home and church, as if religion were only "private"), is a falsification of the American way of life. Indeed, the "strange new situation" denies the Constitutional guarantee of "free exercise" of religion in the schools--an exclusion by a "de facto establishment" that effects "the establishment of practical atheism." This is the voice not of an obscurantistic fundamentalist but of an eminent philosopher and educator.

Finally, a few specifics in Jim Frankel's column:

1. "The first amendment ain't broke, so why try to fix it?" It is broke, and by the likes of Jim Frankel.

2. Both "church" and "state" are ambiguous terms when applied to public education. Nobody's proposing that any church have preferential influence in the state or in the public schools: "religion" and "church" are not synonyms. And the public schools are creatures not of the "state," i.e., the Federal government, but of local communities, which have their rights over against Washington. Further, "the separation of church and state" does not imply the separation of religion from education. The very notion is anti-American, though quite acceptable by the Polish Communists, who tried (unsuccessfully) to get the crucifixes out of the public-school classrooms. (Frankel makes a curious, and self-canceling, use of this "provocative story.")

3. The religion/morality connection is not, as Frankel thinks, "a characteristic of the Judaic-Christian-Moslem theology" alone. The connection is just as tight elsewhere. He's simply ignorant in saying "I do not believe it is a significant factor in oriental or African tribal theologies."

4. Frankel suggests forgetting prayer and concentrating on "the real problems that beset public schools." How wayward he is from reality!

Willis E. Elliott

Professor at Large,
N.Y. Theological Seminary,
Craigville

OVER

Jim Frankel

Our schools need more than prayers

Shortly after being appointed superintendent of the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District, Michael McCaffrey responded to a reporter's question regarding his view on prayer in school.

He replied that the United States Supreme Court spoke to that issue in 1962, ruling that officially sponsored school prayer violates the Constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

"I value the separation of church and state," he said. America is the envy of the world, and I think one reason why is the separation. . . . I have heard the President say that we have taken God out of the classroom. I don't think people can push God around."

Other Cape school superintendents have also indicated their opposition to a Constitutional amendment permitting spoken prayer in public schools.

Yet the school prayer issue doggedly hangs on despite compelling arguments that American society is better served by the first amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . ."

The first amendment ain't broke, so why try to fix it? Dr. McCaffrey and other school officials have history and a strong intellectual argument on their side. I agree that we are indeed better off. Even as the issue was debated in the Senate, there were provocative stories reminding us that while cerebrally one can separate church from state, emotionally I doubt if it can be done.

In Poland, a new fight erupted between the Roman Catholic Church and the Communist state when officials ordered crucifixes removed from public school classrooms. In Israel, the mayor of Petah Tikvah was threatened with death over that town's decision to permit movie theaters and coffee houses to open on the Sabbath.

And in America, our own Supreme Court decided by a close score of five to four, that the city of Pawtucket, R.I., could sponsor a Nativity scene. This is not quite the same Supreme Court that decided the prayer issue 22 years ago.

The religious impulse in a human being cannot be separated neatly from other forces and drives by Constitutional amendment. It governs our behavior in ways which we do not always understand and even acknowledge. I think it has been a powerful force ever since man evolved from ape--or since God made man in the Book of Genesis. (Another religious dispute that hasn't gone away).

The American experience of church-state separation is relatively fresh, historically. It came after centuries of devastating religious warfare and church-state integration which started to shatter in Europe in the 18th century, culminating in the French and American revolutions.

Thus in other lands and cultures church and state are potentially one, and America is not the envy of the Iran of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the fountainhead of Islamic fundamentalism.

I remember doing an informal survey for Hughes Newspapers on the school prayer issue, and five of the six people I questioned all were enthusiastically in favor of prayer in the schoolhouse. They were disturbed by what they perceived as a growing deterioration of American morality, and looked upon school prayers as at least one

small step back from an increasingly amoral society.

So it was with the recent attempt to introduce a Constitutional amendment in behalf of spoken prayer in the classroom. The fundamentalist religious sector saw it as a crusade against what I believe has become an evolution of morality in this country: The rise of sexual permissiveness or liberation, depending on your viewpoint. The reasons for this sexual evolution constitute at least another essay, if not book; it is enough to say that many Americans are troubled by it; I would guess that many of them are older folk.

What we saw with the prayer amendment campaign was another historical attempt to employ religion in the cause of morality. This is a religious concept characteristic of the Judaic-Christian-Moslem theology. I do not believe it is a significant factor in oriental or African tribal theologies.

But the moral-religious alliance is alive and powerful in America, and school prayer partisans are preparing to fight another day. But for now, I think Bishop Bernard F. Law, the new archbishop of Boston, summed up the issue succinctly: "Public school prayer is not one of my burning issues."

However, as long as the school prayer people have brought up inside the classroom for inspection and introspection, I would hope that we linger there long enough to remind ourselves that there still are a lot of serious problems inside the schoolhouse, and would that we give them the same concentration as we have prayer recitation.

On March 20--the very day the Senate rejected the school prayer amendment--Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, warned in the New York Times that American public education is in "mortal danger."

"He senses a political climate that may lead to tuition tax credits for parents who send their children to private schools," reported Fred Hechinger. "If this happens, he fears, many parents, perhaps 30 percent or more, may take their children out of the public schools."

The political climate that does not agree with Mr. Shanker is part of the social climate that produced the school prayer campaign.

The public schools are beset with a lot more serious problems as recent national reports have indicated. In Massachusetts the public schools are in competition with towns for their share of public funds limited under Proposition 2½. While the Senate debated prayer, the Dennis-Yarmouth school committee and the Dennis Finance Committee were intensively negotiating a budget conflict which mercifully ended in compromise. Memories of the exhaustive battle between the two in 1982 were fresh enough to avoid another damaging struggle.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Senate has turned away from school prayers to other business, and the schools and communities across the land continue their struggle with daily difficulties. There was such a fuss made over the school prayer issue. Now that it has subsided, perhaps the people who have been so concerned over it could devote their anxious energies to help solve the real problems that beset public schools.