

Reverence vs. Fear

To the editor:

I find that I must take strong issue with my learned friend, Dr. Willis Elliott in his response to Jim Frankel's column regarding school prayer.

First of all, he confuses the prayer issue by talking about reverence. Certainly reverence is a part of prayer but reverence in and for public schools can be developed through many educational methods other than imposing prayer. Dr. Elliott by his suggestion makes prayer utilitarian, i.e. having prayer will make everybody be good. That, as Dr. Elliott should know is not the "Christian" understanding of prayer.

Second, he says that there is order in the schools of Iron Curtain countries because reverence is taught. Change that word "reverence," to fear! Dr. Elliott, like so many people confuses fear with reverence. The Bible talks about the "fear of God," which in Biblical language means awe, mystery, reverence. What the USSR and other like countries teach is fear, defined as anticipation of danger or peril. There were some teachers in my school days that I "feared" because they were authoritarian and in some cases mean and cruel. I certainly didn't revere them. Just the opposite. Reverence in the sense Dr. Elliott is talking about is not related to prayer. Proper discipline, decorum, respect for life, the world etc. is taught in other ways.

Third, like so many, Dr. Elliott also does not understand the Supreme Court rulings and the First Amendment regarding prayer in school. The ruling and the amendment

ELLIOTT #1839:

IS A PUBLIC LANGUAGE ON RELIGION POSSIBLE?

This letter in the 2May84 CAPE COD NEWS attacks my use of "fear" and "reverence" in my 25Apr84 letter in CCN-- reproduced in #1837. Mine was a response to an 11Apr84 Jim Frankel column, which used the first of the three languages

these three items used! (#1838 attacks another aspect of the Frankel column.)

#1840 is my 2nd CCN letter (2 May84, today written), + #1841 (Addenda to my friend and fellow-minister, who wrote the letter included in this thinksheet).

Of course the differences around this triangle are not only semantic. But this thinksheet is concerned about the semantic aspect of the religion aspect of public-school embattlements today. I believe that progress, here, is possible--if democratic engagement (instead of only the lobbing of missiles) occurs. May it!

allow religion in an objective sense to be taught in the schools. The Bible can be dealt with objectively as literature in the schools. At any time, in any place, a child, a youth, adult teacher, administrator can pray silently to God in the public schools. A group of kids at a table in the cafeteria can, if they have courage to do so, pray together. Discussion of religion has always taken place. Recently I attended, as I have in other school systems in Ohio and Massachusetts, a psychology class. I talked about a Christian-Protestant view of death and funeral practices. All of this is what is meant by "free exercise." We live in a country where we can go to our church or synagogue any time. We live in a country where we can express our views, religious and otherwise freely, without fear of reprisal. We can share our Christian or religious understandings openly. We can pray at home, at church, on the street corner, in the subway, in the schools, wherever. That is free exercise! Establishment means that the state, the government, the local school board, the administration, the teacher, tells me what to think about religion; tells me when, what and how to pray; tells me what to believe. Dr. Elliott is right when he says, "the separation of church and state does not imply the separation of religion from education." In point of fact that is the situation now, they are not separated! But to implement the various proposals before Congress, some of which have already been wisely defeated would be to establish religion.

Finally, Dr. Elliott mentioned Poland. Poland is over 90 percent Roman Catholic! Perhaps if America was 90 percent Roman Catholic we would have crucifixes on our public school walls, and no need for private schools. But in fact we are not, and the diversity of religions and non-religious expressions is a fairly recent historical change. We have Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, representatives of hundreds of different Protestant denominations, Moslems, Buddhists, etc. as well as non-religious people, all living throughout this great, free and diverse land.

Prayer is special to many of these people. It has no meaning or little meaning to others. For me as a Christian, prayer has a very special meaning, and is not to be used for a utilitarian purpose, no matter how good that purpose. Otherwise prayer will simply get thrown in with Santa Claus, Easter bunnies and all the other secular elements of our society like the Christmas display in Providence, R.I., which I believe the Supreme Court has made a poor decision on, because of my reverence for the Nativity scene! I pray to God differently, different than a Jew or a Moslem might. We need to respect these differences. We need to respect the wisdom of the writers of the First Amendment and the Supreme Court decisions. We need to respect in fact, "have reverence for" the differences in religious and Christian understandings. We can't do so by state, government or school mandated prayers or times for prayer.

[Rev.] John H. Williams
Hyannis

A close reader of the materials of this dialog will notice that the ramifications of this problem are many and deep. E.g., Reagan, who's a product of our public-school system, has a foreign policy remote from reality--why? And Frankel is a religion illiterate--why?

OVER

And here is my reply to "Reverence vs. fear":

Letters

23 May 84
CAPE COD NEWS

Confusion about prayer

To the editor:

Your May 9 edition carries a reply to my April 25, '84 letter disagreeing with Jim Frankel on "school prayer."

1. Nowhere in his critique of my letter has the Rev. John Williams of Federated Church, Hyannis, addressed the fundamental issue in my letter, namely, reverence in the American tradition. Instead he takes off on his own notion of reverence, as though this were a discussion of a word rather than of an issue.

2. As do most liberal Jews and Christians, the Rev. Mr. Williams eliminates "fear" from "reverence." For doing this, there is no scholarly support from history of religions, psychology of religion, or any other discipline in religion studies. The sole support is from the American version of Enlightenment philosophy, to which virtually all liberal Christian and Jewish religious leaders subscribe. The matter is not peripheral: it's at the heart of the liberal clergy's opposition to "school prayer."

3. Why do I put "school prayer" in quotes? Because the phrase points only lamely to the fundamental issue so many Americans are concerned about, namely, the engendering of our historic American sacrality, our American Way of Being Religious. To say there is no such thing (1) is ignorant and (2) shuts off discussion as to the new situation vis-a-vis religion and public education.

4. The new situation has two components, not just the one Mr. Williams mentioned: (1) The public schools have abandoned the engendering of traditional American reverence, and (2) The country has become more pluralistic with the growth of (a) secularistic humanism and (b) old and new religions alien to the traditional American reverence (which is biblical as modified by Puritanism and the Enlightenment). Proposed Constitutional amendments are too unsophisticated (in the sense of not taking our new situation into account): clergy and laity need to get their act together before intelligent legislative proposals can be framed. You can bet that my friend Mr. Williams and I will! The public deserved a more mature action than the current simplistic yes/no heard from "America's religious forces" on "school prayer."

5. Note Mr. Williams' indirect definition of reverence: "Reverence in the sense Dr. Elliott is talking about is not related to prayer. Proper discipline, decorum, respect for life, the world etc. is taught in other ways." Do I indeed "confuse the prayer issue by talking about reverence?" Only sentimentality, and historical amnesia, could (1) eliminate fear from reverence and (2) separate prayer from reverence. Much of our present confusion on "religion in public education" derives from the liberal idiosyncratic use of the relevant terms without visible means of support in history and the dictionaries.

Willis Elliott
Craigville