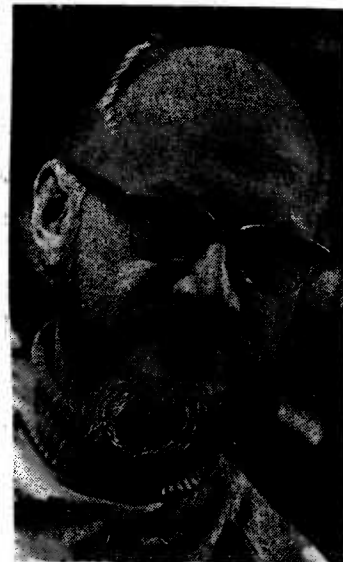


'Bumping the clergy from graduation helps make our children more stupid'

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WILLIS ELLIOTT

To the Editor:

I don't know whether, to use the title of an editorial of yours today, "the protest (against a public-school-graduation prayer in Jesus' name) was in order." I used to know. I knew no and then I knew yes. Now, the thing hits me as unsimple, and I don't know.

I thank God — yes, in Jesus' name! — for "the separation of church and state," America's most significant cultural contribution to human history. It's the heart of that broader cultural phenomenon, the separation of state and society, the doctrine that "we the people" stand over against, as well as on behalf of, the government.

How, now, does this broader separation appear in public school graduations if no representative of society-over-against-state has any formal part? Traditionally, the clergy-person has served this political function, in addition to representing the religious roots of our civilization, and doing so within his/her particular communion's rubrics and with integrity in relation to his/her particular religion. Let's break this down:

1. "Integrity," for Christian clergy, means, in the realm of prayer, to pray "in Jesus' name." Not just the "attitude," whatever that is; I mean the words. Occasionally some chicken or sentimentalist eliminates the phrase in the presence of Jews, but Jews do not respect this, and the practice is a root of antisemitism. You say that this made non-Christians at Copper Beach Middle School "feel like outsiders." So? No matter what happens in our pluralistic society, many will feel like outsiders. Jewish and Christian young people are taught that prayer is natural, obligatory, and joyful in all great events, private and public. Eliminate prayer and all who have the training our synagogues and churches want them to have should feel like outsiders!

Letters

2. A third separation has come upon us, viz. the separation of the vast majority of America's children from our religious heritage. When there is no prayer in connection with the most solemn occasion of their school-life, viz. their graduation, they learn the major lesson of omission taught in the USSR and all other secularistic societies, viz. that God is unimportant to life's great (and therefore also smaller) events. To say that the praying should be limited to private ceremonies, "each clergyman blessing his own flock in accordance with its own ritual," is an un-American innovation: there never has been a time in American history when prayer on public occasions was considered inappropriate. Even with all those deists in the Continental Congress, mixed in with all those New England Puritans, prayer was not only thought appropriate, but vigorously promoted by none other than Benjamin Franklin.

3. God has to translate our prayers, and we have to translate each others'. Clergy cannot

stand before their people and expect that they all can honestly pray all the clergy's words; each must transmute the formal public prayer into a prayer of one's own heart. So it is in a public ceremony. It is simply not true that "the Copper Beech graduation became a Christian ceremony, and the wall separating church from state was breached." The Christian formula, "in Jesus' name," does not mean that all present are expected to have prayed in that name, but only that that is the name, the only name, in which Christians, and so Christian clergy, and so this particular Christian clergy-person, are to pray.

4. "In Jesus' name" is not a "denominational" prayer, pace you and the NEW YORK TIMES. All "denominations" (a word used only of Christian churches, and then almost exclusively in the USA.) pray only "in Jesus' name." The adjective "denominational" refers only to a selection out from among the Christian churches, never to the Christian churches collectively. Ignorance of this, in this case, reminds me of a recent incident in the Chappaqua high school. A person from Britain made reference to the Ten Commandments, and was shocked that she had to explain to Horace Greeley students what she was referring to!

5. In the American civilization, clergy have served both private (their "own flock") and public functions. If our children never experience clergy serving public functions, their education is deficient, and the civilization is endangered. "Man must serve," said William Penn, "God or tyrants." It's

fudging to pronounce the obvious, that laity also can represent God in public; the question is of the double representative role of clergy, who are the central employees of the sacred institutions at the heart of "society" as over against "state," which tends to preempt the sacred (as in Nixon's Oval Room). Our children "finish" public high school appallingly innocent of this dynamic at the heart of "the American way of life." Bumping the clergy from graduation exercises helps make our children even more stupid.

No, it's not simple. But the brouhaha over "in Jesus' name" at the Copper Beech Middle School provides occasion for displaying the seriousness of the larger issue, viz. the spiritual ignorance of America's children, and their consequent vulnerability to impoverishing pseudoreligious and political nostrums. A civilization has not only the right, but the duty, to tradition its values. Our civilization, including the public schools, is failing to do so. It's not too late. Is it?

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If the public school wishes to inform Christian clergy that they must leave off "in Jesus' name" or not "have the prayer" at graduations, the only Christian clergy who could then participate would be those willing to violate both their baptism and their ordination. Of course the usual rejoinder is, "Well, that's one more reason for not having formal prayers at graduations!" But it's precisely that mindless, negative drift into public secularism that this letter is raising questions about. The fact that there are difficulties should cause us to look deeper, using the difficulties as occasions for progress rather than retrenchment.

Handwritten note: s.l.d. to ed.