

RELIGION IN THE SCHOOL: WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

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IN JUNE of 1963 the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Abington vs. Schempp* and *Murray vs. Curlett* that devotional exercises and the reading of the Bible in public schools for religious purposes were unconstitutional. Since such practices were common in many areas of the United States, the public outcries and controversies occasioned by the decision were not unexpected.

Although this decision was far-reaching in its implications, it was in a sense anticlimactic. Much of the emotional and intellectual energy of the American people had been spent in the prolonged and heated debates triggered by the 1962 Court decision outlawing the New York State Board of Regents prayer.

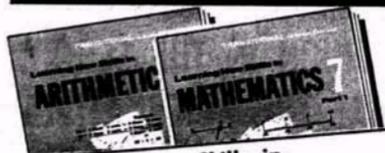
While both the 1962 and 1963 rulings have ultimately received the support of numerous religious and secular organizations, one still hears charges that the Supreme Court is undermining our religious faith, that the Court, far from being neutral, is in fact promoting irreligion. Scores of resolutions proposing to amend the Constitution so as to allow "non-sectarian" religious practices

in public schools have been brought before the Congress.

How have educators responded to these Court decisions? Understandably, school administrators and their boards of education have not been anxious to alter existing policies in a way that would further alienate an already aroused public. Beset by a multitude of problems, school people have been reluctant to examine the broad implications of the rulings. Rather, attention has been focused upon the specific "don'ts" of the decisions. In this regard some efforts have been made to bring school practices into line with the judicial dictates.

Yet the larger problem of the proper role of religion in public education remains unresolved. Perhaps, this question can never be entirely answered until the American people have determined the role of religion in American life. Unfortunately, educators cannot await this answer as decisions must be made *now*. School policies must be developed now and not in some distant future. The Supreme Court has indicated what cannot be done, but it has

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properly refrained from specifying what should be done.

Alternatives

What, then, are some of the alternatives facing public education?

Maintaining the status quo

One alternative is to disregard or circumvent the decisions. This has taken many forms, from the open defiance of a state governor to the naiveté of the classroom teacher who could see no conflict between the Court verdict and her devotional exercises. This position apparently rests upon an assumption that under the present circumstances of local support and control, a school cannot defy the wishes of the local community. If the majority of citizens in a community want religious practices continued, then it is unrealis-

tic, perhaps improper, for educational leadership to oppose such desires.

This is the kind of reasoning which defends released time on school property in scores of American communities despite court rulings prohibiting such practices. While there is always a danger of becoming too legalistic, we cannot accept a position which openly teaches the young to disobey the law, a position which reflects a bankruptcy of moral and educational leadership.

A religion of secularism

A second position, diametrically opposed to the first, would abolish all references to religion in the public schools. Some have gone so far as to argue that even moral and spiritual values should not be deliberately taught. So long as our religiously pluralistic society can reach no consensus concerning the role of religion in education, the prudent policy for educators is to do nothing about religion. Whatever is attempted in this area will be severely criticized by certain groups in the community.

Even teaching about religion will lead to controversy, and controversy in matters of religion is to be assiduously avoided. Whatever the public relations merits of this position, it must be rejected. Such a policy would have teachers compromise the integrity of the various subjects in the curriculum. It would for example discourage, if not prohibit, teaching about the Reformation and the medieval church. It would prevent the use of religious books in literature classes. Courses in comparative religion would not be possible.

Such a policy moreover violates the spirit of recent Court decisions. In the Abington Case the Supreme Court de-

clared that the state must be neutral in matters of religion. The state may not establish a "religion of secularism." The school cannot favor those "who believe in no religion over those who do believe." Finally, this alternative really pleases no one. Parents want our public schools to do something about religion. If the public schools fail to meet this demand, it will undoubtedly lead to a proliferation of parochial schools, both Protestant and Catholic, and a continuing dissatisfaction with public education.

Teaching about religion

Many who recognize the inadequacies of the preceding two positions have attempted to chart a kind of middle course. They have recognized that the public school has a responsibility in the realm of religion. At the same time they have sought to avoid the sectarian practices barred by the Court.

Their solution has been to have the school teach about religion whenever such teaching is consistent with the objectives of a particular subject field. Thus no social studies teacher could properly omit the role of religion in the development of the American culture. Under this approach the Bible and other religious materials could be studied so long as the purpose was not to indoctrinate or commit the student to a particular religious view.

Moral and spiritual values would be taught but in a secular rather than a supernatural context. These values would be taught as the values defining and undergirding the democratic way of life. Even courses in comparative religion would be consistent with this position. There is much to be said for

teaching about religion. It would do much to eliminate the religious illiteracy which plagues our people. It also recognizes the school's important responsibility in dealing directly and deliberately with moral and spiritual values. Those communities desiring sectarian teaching could combine this approach with a released time or shared time program.

Under present circumstances teaching about religion may be the only practicable way to treat religion in the public school. Yet like the other alternatives it fails to come to grips with the more vital significance of religion in the life of a people. Much of the public reaction to the Supreme Court decisions reveals how shallow and trivial our religious life has become.

Who would have supposed that the value of religion in education lay in the perfunctory reading of a Bible passage or in the mechanical recitation of a prayer? The Supreme Court has perhaps rendered a valuable service in challenging us to reconsider the function and purpose of religion in our national life. It has given educators an opportunity to develop a program which goes beyond a sacramental conception of religion.

Religion as a quest

We assume that all men by virtue of being human are concerned with the ultimate inscrutability of the universe, concerned with a universe forever shrouded in mystery. All men are concerned with the meaning of existence, with the problem of death, with the nature and sanctions of values, with conceptions of the good life, with the question of evil, and with a whole host

of similar concerns that relate to the efforts of man to find meaning in his life.

These ultimate concerns must not be viewed as the exclusive property of organized religion. On the contrary they are as much the business of the school as of the church. These concerns belong to all men, to all institutions, to all societies, to all periods of time. They represent the perennial quest of man for meaning, recognition, identity and happiness.

While it is incumbent upon teachers to deal with such matters, it is of course impossible and undesirable for the school to approach such questions in a spirit of dogmatic certainty. Whatever the merits of such an approach for organized religion, it cannot be the objective of public education. The school must emphasize the quest. It must focus upon the questions and give students opportunities and encouragement to make choices and to find answers.

It is, for example, the responsibility of secondary school teachers, especially literature and social studies teachers, to involve students in a consideration of the nature and sanctions of moral conduct. The aim would be to involve the student in moral choices so as to elicit personal responses.

The fact that organized religion is also concerned with moral conduct seems irrelevant, although the insights and points of view provided by religions are among the viable alternatives open to students.

Other vital experiences and concerns

of man should be treated in a similar fashion. Death, for example, haunts all men. The way man views death influences the quality of his existence, the manner in which he lives his life. Such an important event in the life of a man cannot be neglected in the education of man. An education which disregards that which is ultimately important runs the grave risk of elevating in importance that which is, in the final analysis, of less consequence.

Such an approach requires teachers who understand the nature, function and content of religion. More importantly it asks the teacher to see his responsibility as involving something more than transmitting knowledge. The teacher, it is suggested, should have the capacity to enter into a personal relationship with his students. He should have an understanding and concern for the crucial experiences which will define the lives of his students. Unfortunately, teacher education has been woefully negligent in its responsibilities in this area.

Our present graduates are not only religiously illiterate, but for the most part they have been denied the opportunities to think deeply about matters which are deemed of ultimate importance in the life of man. Most of them have mastered bodies of knowledge but have not reacted personally to this knowledge. The accumulated knowledge has not become part of a life style. In short the knowledge has not made a difference in the way life is approached and lived. 5

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