

RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS*

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THE subject of religion and the public schools is not academic. All across the country religious and sectarian practices have been introduced into the public schools in a variety of ways. Despite the United States Supreme Court decision in the *Vashti-McCollum* case, released time classes for religious training are still being held in some places on school premises. Released time practices off school premises are even more widespread. The Gideons International continues with its campaign of distributing the King James version of the New Testament to public school students with the permission and involvement of the public schools. Religious holiday observances—in particular, Christmas programs—many of them deeply Christological, are held almost everywhere. In some places, church-related schools are incorporated as parts of the public school system and in some instances such parochial schools retain their religious symbols and the teachers continue to wear their religious garb. In other places school credits are being given to public school students for religious training. In still others, courses on Christianity are taught in the public schools.

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The major reasons for the noticeable increase in such sectarian intrusions upon the public schools are the state of world unrest as the aftermath of World War II and the continuing threat to the free world posed by the Communist drive for world domination. Living under the cloud of potential atom and hydrogen bomb warfare, we have turned back to religion for comfort and security. Evidence that the United States is now enjoying a great religious revival may be found in the great increase in synagogue and church enrollment and attendance; in the popularity of the cycle of moving pictures with religious and biblical themes—pictures such as "The Robe," "A Man Called Peter," to name just two; even in our popular songs, which reflect the religious tenor of our times—"I Believe," "The Bible Tells Me So," "The Lord Is a Busy Man," and similar melodies continue to reach the top of the Hit Parade.

Another factor contributing to the drive to bring religion into the public schools is the desire to combat juvenile delinquency and to counteract the unwarranted attacks against the public schools as "godless," "secularistic," and "atheistic." Finally, I would mention the failure of the church groups to reach the young people for purposes of re-

Journal of Jewish Communal Service

ligious education, and their resultant turning to the public schools to assist them in reaching their youth.

Not only is there abundant evidence of religious and sectarian practices in the public schools, but there is equally abundant evidence of attempts to expand such activities. In New York City, a former member of the Board of Education has suggested that the released time program be increased from one hour to one and a half hours per week. In Woonsocket, R. I., at the suggestion of the Roman Catholic group, the released time hour was moved forward to the first hour of the day. This was done over the objection of the Jews and the Protestants and despite the fact that the first hour is considered the best school hour. The net result in Woonsocket was that the Jews and Protestants have withdrawn from the program. In Delhi, Iowa, children are released for religious training twice a week instead of once a week and in Twin Falls, Idaho, it was proposed that students be released for religious training one hour *each day*. Reading from the Old Testament in the public schools is required by law in New Jersey. Recently, in Cliffside Park, New Jersey, the Board of Education accepted an offer made by the Roman Catholic Church to supply the Catholic Douay version of the Bible to all classrooms which until now had been using the King James or Protestant version only. The Board also ruled that if any other religious denominations wish similarly to donate a supply of bibles, such offers would be accepted and passages also would be read from them. I suppose the Board had in mind the Jewish group, which I am happy to say has no intention of availing itself of this dubious privilege. Christmas programs in the public schools have become more sectarian in character, and this is due in part to the drive started a few years

back to "put Christ back into Christmas." I might add, as evidence of the partial success of this campaign, that during the past Christmas period, the slogan was changed to "keep Christ in Christmas."

Organized Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church assert their support of the principle of separation of church and state. Both, by their actions in specific cases, however, appear to apply the principle selectively. Protestant denominations oppose federal aid to parochial schools; they are bringing court action for the removal of crucifixes which were erected on city property in two communities of Indiana, and they have expressed opposition to the guide on moral and spiritual values which was prepared by the New York City Board of School Superintendents. At the same time, by and large, and large, Protestantism and Catholicism agree that the public schools have a role in dealing with religion.

The Catholic group also has shown some inconsistency in reacting to specific situations. For example, while advocating Christmas commemorations in the public schools, the Catholic Church has called upon its members to absent themselves from Chanukah observances. I understand the objection to Catholic attendance at a Jewish religious observance, but cannot comprehend the insensitivity to the feelings of Jews regarding Christmas programs in the schools. Also, in a number of places, priests have objected to baccalaureate services on the ground that they are of a Protestant sectarian nature and violate the separation principle.

What of the position of Jewish organizations on the subject under consideration? The Jewish organizations are unanimous in support of a strict interpretation of the separation principle. We support the interpretation of the es-

tablishment of religion clause of the first amendment as it was explained by Justice Black in the 1947 *Everson Bus Case*, namely, that this clause of the constitution was intended to erect a wall of separation between church and state; that the language means "neither the state nor the federal government can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions or prefer one religion over another." Recalling the differences among Jewish organizations on many other issues affecting Jewish welfare, one is apt to wonder at the degree of unanimity which exists among them on the issue of religion and public education. However, it has been my experience that when an issue touches upon values as basic to Jews as are religion and democracy, differences vanish. The Jewish organizations support the principle of separation of church and state because of our deep concern and interest in the religious education of Jewish youth. We see in the dabbling by the public schools with religious education not only a poor, but a dangerous substitute for a thorough religious education for which the home and synagogue are solely responsible and for which we have built and maintain the remarkable chain of Jewish religious schools. Beyond this, our devotion to the separation principle is related closely to our devotion to the democratic ideal and our concomitant devotion to the American public school system as a keystone of American democracy. We believe that keeping religion and sectarianism out of the public schools has in large measure been responsible for maintaining the public schools as free and strong institutions.

In 1947, the organizations comprising the Synagogue Council of America and the NCRAC adopted a joint position opposing released time practices. In the same resolution, the two coordinating bodies established a Joint Advisory

Committee on Religion and the Public Schools which is still in active operation. In the intervening years, statements of policy have been adopted on every issue which we know about in this problem area. Moreover, we have taken action by legal proceedings and otherwise on various issues and the services of the Joint Advisory Committee are available to communities which are faced with specific situations. Our policy declarations and statements of position are contained in a single pamphlet, which is available. Therefore, I shall only enumerate the topical headings. The national and local religious and community relations agencies which make up the Synagogue Council of America and the NCRAC are opposed to released time practices, to Bible reading and the distribution of Bibles in the schools, to school credits for religious instruction, to the incorporation of parochial schools as part of public school systems and the wearing of religious garb by teachers.

The subject of religious and joint-religious holiday observances deserves special comment. We believe that neither Christmas nor Chanukah should be commemorated in the public schools. At the same time, we recognize that Christmas observances are an American tradition and we are cognizant of the unfavorable repercussions which followed badly timed and poorly handled efforts to eliminate the singing of Christmas carols and Christmas observances in the schools. We are aware also that the form of the observances vary in communities, in school systems and in classrooms. No two situations are quite alike. Therefore, every case should be handled in light of the particular circumstances. Some general rules are, however, applicable. For example, it is necessary first of all to have the backing of the Jewish community when community leaders wish to do something about the matter.

This means a preliminary educational process within the Jewish community. In approaching school authorities, timing becomes particularly important. We believe there is a better chance of success if approaches are made before Christmas programs have been arranged and in advance of the holiday season, as against a last minute protest when the entire atmosphere is charged with the religious overtones of the Christmas period. Experience has proved that with proper timing and sensible negotiations, the Christological aspects of Christmas programs can be toned down, if they cannot be entirely eliminated.

As regards Chanukah observances—here we can forthrightly and in dignity take a position with school people that we do not want Chanukah commemorated in the school auditorium or classroom because we believe that religion has no place in the public schools. Whether or not we wish to do anything about the Christmas program, we can make it clear that we will not make Chanukah materials available because of our adherence to the principle of separation of church and state.

Overriding all of the other issues which have been mentioned is the problem presented by efforts across the country to have the public schools deal with religion on a systematic basis. The approach most widely advocated by those who believe that the public schools have a role to play in fostering religion is that of having the schools teach moral and spiritual values. Two less popular approaches are the suggestions that the schools teach a common core of the major religions or to teach *about* religion. The last named approach is also known as the factual study of religion.

The Jewish organizations comprising the Synagogue Council of America and the NCRAC are not opposed to the public schools teaching moral and spiritual values if the term is intended to mean

values such as decency, goodness, honesty, sportsmanship and fair play, without a reference to their religious roots. In fact, we contend that the public schools have through the years done an excellent job in teaching such values. We believe, however, that the public schools should not teach such values if they include the religious sanctions which undergird them. We are opposed to the teaching of a common core of various religions and suggest that the religious of other faiths similarly would find such teaching objectionable. Religion to be meaningful must be a deep personal and emotional experience. Watering down of the various faiths to the lowest common denominator does justice neither to religion nor our schools.

It may not be unconstitutional for the public schools to teach about religion, but we believe it is impossible to teach objectively about religion in the public schools; sectarianism cannot be kept out of such teaching and for the schools to engage in such teaching is to run the risk that they will be subjected to sectarian and denominational pressures.

Church-state issues in general and problems in the area of religion and the public schools are always sensitive. Frequently they are explosive. They have civil liberties and interreligious connotations of the greatest import. Let me only recall to you that last year the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights cancelled public hearings on the freedom of religion clause of the first amendment because it was felt that such hearings would exacerbate interreligious friction. The issue of federal aid for parochial schools has played an important role in the blocking of federal legislation in aid of public education. In this connection, I am also reminded of the bitter controversy between Cardinal Spellman of New York and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and the bitter religious con-

flict a few years ago between the Protestant and the Catholic communions over the issue of the appointment of an Ambassador from the United States to the Vatican.

I would conclude with some general observations on how to cope with the issues we are discussing:

(1) A well informed Jewish community on this complex and sensitive subject is the first requisite. We know there are parents who derive satisfaction from seeing the Chanukah lights at the side of the Christmas tree in the public school celebration. But Jews must be made to understand that these temporary gratifications have little value when viewed in the context of the threat to religious liberty which such sectarian practices in the public schools represent. Central Jewish community organizations cannot deal with these matters effectively without the full support of the Jewish community. This means an educational campaign within the Jewish community before approaches are made to school authorities on specific problems.

(2) The issues under consideration, like all other issues in the community relations field, are the concern of the

entire Jewish community. Therefore, specific problems should not be handled unilaterally either by individuals or by individual organizations. What is called for is inter-consultation among Jewish organizations within communities for purposes of arriving at a policy position and determining how the agreed upon point of view can best be presented to school people.

(3) Public statements should be made circumspectly; only when they can serve a useful purpose and only after a decision to this effect is taken by the Jewish community as a whole.

(4) Actions should be taken only after careful planning and they should be timed appropriately.

(5) Community organizations and leaders should make full use of the free services which are available by consulting with the Joint Advisory Committee of the Synagogue Council of America and the NCRAC in particular situations.

(6) We must continue to provide Jewish children with adequate facilities for a thorough religious training by continuing to build and maintain our religious schools and we should make sure that our homes reflect a meaningful Jewish atmosphere.