A JEFFERSONIAN ALTERNATIVE TO THE SCHOOL PRAYER AMENDMENT

by

Walter H. Capps

Consideration of the Voluntary School Prayer Amendment, currently before the Senate Judiciary Committee, under Senator Jeremiah Denton's (R. Alabama) chairmanship, has focused at times on the safeguards of the First Amendment. But just as frequently the debate has been the instrument to voice concern about the deterioration of public education, the diminished vitality of our national life, and the fact that ideals espoused by the founding fathers are hardly known or shâred by the nation's young people.

Supporters fervently believe that the measure will help return the nation to a stronger religious and patriotic posture. They yearn for a rekindled awareness that America is indeed "one nation, under God," as we profess in the Pledge of Allegiance and corroborate by "In God We Trust" on our currency. They are eager to demonstrate that the founding fathers shared their attitude, and that much of what has happened in recent years, in their words, has taken the country significantly "off course."

The historical annals, however, present a more complicated picture. Certainly one finds strong evidence there of belief in a Supreme Being as well as a conviction that America carries a special destiny inviting the blessing of the Almighty. But it doesn't follow that the founding

fathers would have supported a voluntary school prayer initiative or have encouraged its patriotic strategems.

Thomas Jefferson, who has been called "the St. Paul of American democracy," would surely have dissented. In a letter dated January 23, 1805, to Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian minister, Jefferson referred to prayer (along with fasting) as "a religious exercise, the enjoining of which is an act of discipline," and declared that it is in the best interests of religion "not to invite the civil magistrate to direct its occurrence." He used the occasion to reiterate his conviction that "civil powers alone have been given to the President of the United States, but no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents." Speaking to the other side of the issue, on March 13, 1815, in a letter to P. H. Wendover, Jefferson offered that preachers should stick to "lessons in religion," and not presume to offer "discourse on the construction of government, or the character or conduct of those administering it."

But Jefferson also affirmed appropriate ways of addressing the subject of religion within the public domain, yes, even with public education. In setting forth guiding principles for the establishment of the University of Virginia he urged that there be no professor of divinity on the faculty, for this would confuse the issue. But he wanted a professor of ethics to teach about religion, using the methods of analysis and interpretation practiced within the university.

Why not follow Jefferson's counsel?

Instead of legislating symbolic gestures, involving complicated constitutional issues, forcing protracted religious controversy and

political debate, while raising enormous practical difficulties, why not take considered steps to include religion more solidly and regularly within the curriculum of public education? Why not have programs of study to examine religion's place in society, its influence upon cultures east and west, and, particularly, its contributions to living and cherished American values?

The same experiment has been undertaken, with confirmed intellectual quality and acknowledged success, within selected state universities. The time has come to create educational equivalents in the primary and secondary schools.

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