

# **God's Place in School**

By: Benjamin Aydelette

English 1200

Professor Randall Martoccia

2009 W. Keats Sparrow Writing Award

It has been said that children are a country's most valuable asset. They will remain when we are gone, shaping the future of nations and humanity. These future leaders will retain the values and ideas instilled in them during childhood. Considering this, the messages children learn take on a magnified importance, especially at school, where they spend roughly thirty to thirty-five hours a week. The issue of school prayer has become a popular debate with both sides claiming their way would be best for the children. To a degree, the mindset of a generation is hanging in the balance. So does talking to God belong in school? The answer is neither a simple yes nor no. The current U.S. policies on school prayer do an excellent job of balancing individual freedoms and government involvement and therefore should not be changed.

One problem that impedes the resolution and understanding of such debates are the common misconceptions people hold on the topic. Many who feel that prayer should be introduced into schools again are under the impression that children literally are not allowed to pray at school. This simply is not true. Children are allowed to pray in school, as long as it does not interrupt instructional time (United States). According to the U.S. government, children are free to say, "I love Jesus," to the same extent that they would be allowed to say a phrase such as, "I love nachos." This and other clarifications about school prayer were made by the U.S. Department of Education when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was released (United States). For instance, schools that observe a moment of silence must allow children to pray. Silent prayer could not be detected or punished. During lunch and recess children are free to pray as they like. They are also permitted to form religious groups and clubs that meet before school and after school. Children are allowed to express religious sentiments through their class work, which

must be graded objectively. Teachers may even pray, as long as students are actively leading the prayer. Students are given many opportunities to pray (United States).

Students must be given the freedom to express themselves, in terms of religion and speech, thanks to the First Amendment of the Constitution. The amendment states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (“U.S. Constitution: First Amendment”). However, restrictions are placed on school prayer. Teachers are not allowed to lead prayer because it is seen as sponsoring a religion. The establishment clause states that Congress cannot make “a law that respects an establishment of religion”, which would seem to mean that the government cannot officially sponsor a religion (“U.S. Constitution: 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment”). Public schools are a government institution, and therefore can not favor a certain religion. The act of teachers leading in prayer sends the message to children that a particular religion is more favorable than others. If teachers talk about religion, it must be in a comparative light with multiple religions presented (United States). The issue of school prayer ultimately boils down to separation of church and state. Since the government cannot pass laws which respect or favor a religion, anything which shows favor to a religion in a public, governmental space would be prohibited.

Those who wish to reinstate the policies about school prayer, which date back prior to the monumental Engel v. Vitale Supreme court case of 1962, usually have a different take on separation of church and state (Gash 62). Since a wall of separation is not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution, it is not constitutional. A strict

constructionist view of the Constitution, such as this one, can damage the effectiveness and functionality of the document (Holladay). The wording within is so vague that a strict view would amount to sparse, inflexible legislation. For example, the Constitution speaks of guarantees such as “life, liberty, and property” (Holladay). What exactly this entails is not completely clear. The vague wording presented throughout much of the Constitution is partially what makes it so effective. Since the Framers of the Constitution could not possibly foresee the myriad events and social issues which would arise over the next two hundred years, it is likely that the document was designed to fit multiple shifts in perspective, while remaining a guideline. Part of the beauty of this is that the Constitution is able to still retain its effectiveness many years after its writers have passed on due to its flexibility. Loose interpretations, such as the separation of church and state, are necessary for the Constitution to remain fluid and workable. The Constitution must be interpreted in a flexible and loose manner, or the document will lose all of its ability to be used as an effective guide on government. Of course, a loose interpretation could still be used to argue against separation of church and state. However, the first amendment does not appear to favor the idea of religion and government being intertwined particularly, even though a wall of separation is never explicitly mentioned. Through loose interpretation, the idea of separation of church and state still holds water.

Constitutional interpretations aside, there are plenty of other arguments for and against reinstating mandatory school prayer. One of the arguments for school prayer is its supposedly high level of tradition. Some claim that school prayer has been around since the birth of our nation, and therefore should not be removed (Boston 98). However, there is sparse evidence to support this. While Bibles have been used in schools for quite a

while, they were not necessarily used for only religious purposes, and religious activities were not carried out on a daily basis. Rob Boston, author of *Why the Religious Right is Wrong about Separation of Church and State* notes: “As public schools evolved in the post-Revolutionary War period, there was a general attitude of indifference toward religion among the American public. While the Bible was often used in schools as a reader and speller, formal daily prayers and devotional readings were held sporadically...” Changes in this trend didn’t start happening until around the Civil War, perhaps in relation to the Second Great Awakening which occurred during the 1830s and 1840s (Ravitch 5). Within a few decades, problems began. Debates over mandatory school prayer date back to at least the 1890s, when Catholics and Protestants clashed in the state of Wisconsin. Catholic students were made to read the King James Version of the Bible, and teachings were given an obvious Protestant slant. The Supreme Court of Wisconsin ruled that the readings were unconstitutional, setting a precedent for following trials of this nature. If anything, disagreements about school prayer have existed nearly as long as mandatory school prayer (“The Edgerton Bible Case”).

Even if school prayer had an illustrious tradition, that wouldn’t automatically make it right. Slavery and prostitution are as old as mankind, but both are generally regarded as immoral. Both are illegal in most parts of the U.S. Having a long history does not make something constitutional or morally correct.

Prayer in school has also been pushed into the spotlight for another reason, an increase in problems at school. Violence has been on the rise in schools and American society in general. Pro-prayer groups contest that this can be directly attributed to a lack of enforced prayer in schools. It is true that the number of fights, shootings, sexually

transmitted diseases, and teen pregnancies have increased in public schools over the past forty-five years. A study done on school safety in the 1970's showed the school violence levels had already increased drastically in the previous fifteen years, and that was approximately three decades ago (Volokh). However, to say this is a direct cause of not having prayers is ludicrous. It would infer that the schools exist in a vacuum, away from all other possible causes of violence and promiscuity. Correlation does not mean causation. The two are related but not synonymous. For instance, there are more deaths from drowning in the summer than in any other season. More ice cream is also sold during the summer months. Therefore, if correlation meant causation, the ice cream is causing people to drown. This reasoning is preposterous. More people swim and ice cream sales increase because of a third variable, the season. While the ice cream and drowning deaths are correlated, one is not causative of the other. This flaw in logic can also be seen in arguments that schools losing religious backgrounds have caused an eruption of immorality. The violence rates in the whole of America have risen, not just in schools, and school prayer most definitely is not the explanation for that. Much has happened in the past forty some years so violence levels and the increases in sexually related problems could have alternate explanations.

Shortly after mandatory school prayer was banned, the sexual revolution of the 1960's occurred, awakening many Americans to more sexual possibilities. Sex, over time, became less of a stigma in society, and now there is increased exposure to sex in the media. Most children know more than their counterparts of yesteryear. Add all of these variables together, and couple it with many of the abstinence only sexual education courses being taught in America, and an ugly reality could easily emerge. The causes of

increased violence are no simpler. Multiple situations and conditions can come together to cause the problem. Recently, violence in the media causing real life violence has become a popular thesis (Kinder). Social tension and a poor economy could lead to more violence. In any case, there are many variables outside of school prayer to consider as responsible for increased violence levels among our nation's children.

It is likely that more prayer would not lead to a decrease of violence in schools anyway. Religion, the base of prayer, and morality don't always go hand in hand either. Many immoral and atrocious acts have been carried out in the name of religion, such as the Crusades. Some of the most violent places on Earth are highly religious, like the Middle East and Jerusalem, the holy city of three major religions. Religious tendencies do not seem to have much of an impact on the level of violence in a country. For instance, both England and the U.S. have very high crime rates (Madsen). Ninety-one percent of Americans polled claimed to believe in a higher power, whereas only 67% of Britons said the same ("UK Among Most Secular Nations"). Spirituality seems to do little to decrease the violence caused by humans.

Many support mandatory school prayer because they believe it will lead to a more wholesome environment for children. However, changing school prayer regulations could actually harm public schools. Forced school prayer could lead to the ostracizing of children. It makes a point of putting religious beliefs out on display, making the minority the odd one out. It is doubtful that young children would fully comprehend that another child need not answer to the same ideal of God that they do, especially if they aren't taught about religious tolerance. This could lead to bullying or teasing, with religion being such a sensitive thing (Ravitch 83). The harassment that arises could be a serious

detriment to the nurturing educational environment that public schools are supposed to provide to all (Ravitch 108). Violence levels in schools could even increase. Alienation has been a key component of school shootings. Eric Harris, one of the Columbine shooters, left the following note before the shootings occurred: “Your children, who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worthy of their time, are dead” (Pies). Peer rejection and social isolation were seen as major causes of this shooting (Verlinden). Introducing another element for students to use to ostracize their peers is not a good idea. School prayer is already allowed to an extent, so pushing it farther serves no real purpose other than highlighting differences between students.

Enforced school prayer could harm the educational environment in additional ways as well. Time set aside for prayer could be used for educational material. This may seem small, but a period of 10 minutes daily would add up to over 3 hours of academia in a month. Schools are designed to teach objective fact, or perhaps multiple subjective viewpoints on a topic. Religions are subjective in nature, and therefore are little more than an opinion on life. If a child receiving a spiritual education is so important, it seems that parents and churches could do an adequate job, and that facts would be left to be taught at school. In extreme cases, the prayers could even be counter-educational. For example, a strict interpretation of the Bible could result in a prayer like this: “Dear Lord, thank You for giving us today, this glorious day on this Earth you created 6000-10000 years ago, with completely static models of life and no evolution.” This prayer is completely contradictory to the theory of evolution, which is supported by a vast



background of scientific knowledge and research. While farfetched, if school prayer was mandatory, what would stop prayers like this from being said?

Perhaps the biggest problem with bringing school prayer back in this manner is the actual prayers that would be said. What can and cannot be said? Is it purely at the teacher's discretion to teach what religious ideas they prefer? Should the government have a say, considering public schools are run by the government? If discretion were left to teachers, then teachers could teach anything they wanted in regard to religion. The church of the flying spaghetti monster could be in a child's daily routine. This would likely be rejected by parents. Perhaps teachers of only one religion could be hired, but this is a horrible solution, because there is no way to choose which religion to hire and the process would be highly discriminatory. This leaves one rule, government approved prayers which would please everyone. A prayer of such manner would be very watered down, and would be unlikely to appease most. A prayer at all could bother some, such as atheists. The simple act of prayer is instilling the idea that there is a higher power, which is only a religious opinion (Bezanson 108). It would require quite a bit of effort and time to find an agreeable prayer for all.

The high regulation of prayer would certainly take away from the spontaneity of prayer and it would also largely destroy what prayer is about. All of the time spent finding an acceptable prayer would essentially be a waste of time. Prayer is a highly personal thing. Each person takes something different away from prayer, so it seems unlikely that one prayer could fit everyone, even if all children had the same religious background. Neither genuine nor heartfelt, a daily recital would have little value. It would just become part of the hum-drum daily routine. Part of the magic of prayer is its open

and spontaneous feel, which would be just as restricted with new school prayer policies as old. Mandatory school prayer would make prayer highly unfulfilling and disconnected.

As all of the perspectives and arguments on school prayer collide, a larger scale battle is taking place. The battle is for rights, the rights of school aged children. These rights should not be taken lightly. One day, today's children will be adults, those in power. Hopefully, all U.S. citizens can agree that all people should be free to speak as they desire and to think as they desire. The current school prayer guidelines allow both adequately, giving students the option to voice their religious opinions, while preventing them from being taught to think in terms of any one religion. A balance point has been reached, one that should be kept. Our children will thank us, and will remember: "I am free to have faith, I am free to believe, but I do not have to tolerate being told how to think by my government."

#### Works Cited

- Bezanson, Randall P. How Free Can Religion Be? Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois P. 2006.
- Boston, Rob. Why the Religious Right Is Wrong About Separation of Church and State. Amherst: Prometheus, 1993.
- "The Edgerton Bible Case." Wisconsin Free Speech Legacy. Ed. Tim Shiell. 2005. UW Stout. 2 Feb. 2009 <<http://faculty.uwstout.edu/shiellt/freespeech1/edgerton/>

- index.html>.
- Gash, Alison. "School Prayer." Public Opinion and Constitutional Controversy. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 62-79.
- Holladay, Don. "Constitution Defies Strict Interpretation." The Norman Transcript. 13 May 2008. 3 Feb. 2009 <[http://www.normantranscript.com/opinion/local\\_story\\_134125254](http://www.normantranscript.com/opinion/local_story_134125254)>.
- Kinder, Carolyn N. "The Roots of Violence in Society." Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. 2002. Yale. 2 Feb.2009 <<http://yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2002/6/02.06.02.x.html>>.
- Madsen, Cathie. "Crime Rates Around The World." Nationmaster. Dec. 2006. 3 Feb. 2009. <<http://nationmaster.com/article/Crime-Rates-Around-the-World>>.
- Pies, Ronald. "School Shootings and What Psychiatrists Can Do to Prevent Them." Psychiatric Times 1 Jan. 2007: 1-2 Psychiatric Times. 3 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/display/article/10168/46661>>.
- Ravitch, Frank S. School Prayer and Discrimination. York: The Maple P Company, 1999.
- "UK Among Most Secular Nations." BBC News. 26 Feb.2004. BBC. 3 Feb. 2009 <<http://News.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/wtwtgod/3518375.stm>>.
- United States. U.S. Department of Education. Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools. 15 Sept. 2003. U.S. Department of Education. 3 Feb. 2009 <[http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/Religionandschools/prayer\\_guidance.html](http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/Religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html)>.
- "U.S. Constitution: First Amendment." Findlaw. 5 Feb. 2009 <<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data/constitution/amendment01/>>.

Verlinden Stephanie, Jay Thomas, and Michel Hersen. "Risk Factors in School Shootings." 17 Jan. 2000. ScienceDirect. 4 Feb. 2009 <[http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?\\_](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_)>.

Volokh, Alexander. "Strategies to Keep Schools Safe." Reason.org. Jan. 1998. 9 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.reason.org/ps234.html>>.