

## *Protagonist Corner*

### *The Place of Prayer*

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Stephen Carter, author of *The Culture of Disbelief*, published an intriguing article in the *New Yorker* which was entitled “Let Us Pray” (5 December 1994). As a legal scholar, a citizen, and a Christian, he was interested in taking a look at the renewed controversy about prayer in public schools. In the face of polls which suggest that as many as seven of ten adults favor school prayer, a Court which has repeatedly and consistently declared that the constitution forbids it, and a Congress which is building momentum toward proposing a constitutional amendment to allow it—in the face of these, Carter’s voice brings welcome insight to the issue.

#### I

It is one of the most obvious truths of American history, that prayer has been practiced as a public ritual in our common life. Many of the great symbolic moments of that history have included occasions of prayer. And to this day, the Congress of the country is convened with prayer. Thus one perspective in the increasingly heated conversation about school prayer wants simply to extend (or in many cases, return) the same practice of public prayer into the schools.

But is it the same? Public schools are a very specific governmental institution. As such they are obliged to function in conformity to the Constitution of the United States, the First Amendment to which establishes both the right to the free exercise of religion and the guarantee that no religion will be granted privileged status over others—the so-called establishment clause. The specific wording runs like this: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Unlike general public occasions of a governmental or political sort, involvement in education is a compulsory enterprise in which all young people of certain ages are required by law to take part. Moreover, the public schools constitute perhaps the deepest incursion of government into our lives. Therefore, they have a special responsibility to make that incursion in a way which honors the freedoms and protections of the Constitution. As the religious diversity of our country has developed over the course of this century, the courts have rightly sensed that any conceivable school prayer amounts to the endorsement of a particular religious point of view. And it does so in the presence of impressionable young people who are required by the government to submit to it. Thus both parts of the guarantee of the First Amendment are thrown into question. Any school prayer tends to establish the form of religion the prayer expresses and simultaneously restricts the free exercise of religion by any family who may conscientiously seek to nurture a different understanding of religion.

Stephen Carter points out that this does not mean a couple of things that many have either alleged or assumed. He stresses that the “Justices have never said that prayer is bad for children or that all vestiges of religion must be banished from public schools” and that “the Justices have never put God ‘out of the classroom’ [—a metaphorical

phrase which is a metaphysical impossibility<sup>1</sup>—] and [they] have never prohibited students from praying themselves” (Ibid., 62). To be sure, neither court rulings nor school administrative policy have always kept this entirely clear. But opposition to school prayer does not entail demeaning religion in general nor prayer in particular. Thus, though there may be a place for formal, even official, prayer in public life, the public schools are not that place.

## II

But the frustration which underlies the call for a return to school prayer is not easily satisfied even by the clear logic of constitutional law. Stephen Carter points out that in the mayoral primary in Washington, D.C., in 1994 all three candidates “—liberal, African-Americans all—endorsed school prayer or a moment of silence as a way of conveying values to troubled young people” (Ibid., 60). There is a palpable sense of amoral turbulence, seemingly epidemic in our urban public schools, that has deepened the call for school prayer.

The assumption is that prayer in school “will help infuse much needed positive values into the educational enterprise, and hence into the students themselves” (Ibid., 62). Himself an African-American, Carter disputes the particular political conclusions to which many of his sisters and brothers are drawn, but he recognizes the reality of their distress. “[This appeal] represents the voice of a community crying out desperately for a stable set of values to pass on to the next generation, which is seriously at risk” (Ibid., 67).

But while there may be disagreement concerning whether it is the place of prayer to create value awareness in public schools, there may still be agreement that education rightly deals with questions of value. Carter cites evidence, for example, that broad consensus exists in our society for such fundamental values as: honesty, racial tolerance, belief in democracy, and the Golden Rule (Ibid., 73). It will not be easy to develop our public education in a way that fashions us for civic life, nurtured and affirmed by those virtues and values which make our common life possible. But it can be done.

And it can be done in a way which does not base the educational process on a particular religion, but still respects and honors the ways in which various traditions contribute to and affirm those core values. Thus it can be done without sacrificing the Constitution’s guarantee of the free exercise of religion and its protection from the establishment of any particular religion.

## III

While it is important to respond to the legitimate distress which seems to underlie some of the appeals for school prayer, we should be clear that there are theological as well as constitutional reasons for declining those appeals. A quick survey of the gospels reveals a practice of prayer which is not instrumental to external purposes, but rather is always a practice with its own integrity and meaning. This is seen when we pay attention to Matthew’s account of what Jesus says about the place of prayer in the most concrete sense: “...whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others” (6:5). Such public practices of prayer are distortions because they are practiced for some other purpose than communion with and intercession before God.

In this particular case, they are practiced for the purpose of public acclaim. But this is not very different than the practice of prayer for the instrumental purpose of infusing values in young people to whom we have failed to teach a core morality.

To make this point about the theological and spiritual “place” of prayer, Jesus speaks vividly of the proper “place” of prayer: “...whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (6:6). The spiritual “place” of prayer is indicated by its physical “place.” It is the centering of ourselves in God.

Sometimes, of course, we do this publicly in the company of other worshipers, but it is nonetheless an intensely personal act. We don’t do it for some other reason than to be centered both individually and corporately in God. We don’t do it to teach ourselves values or to inculcate virtues. Values and virtues arise from the relationship which prayer expresses. Perfunctory prayers in schools are as spiritually irrelevant as those prayed on street corners to be seen by others.

Political cartoonists have had fun with this issue. One cartoon that was theologically telling showed a group of public servants trying to mold the Lord’s Prayer into a form that government might find acceptable. In the cartoon one is busy amending the phrase: “Give us this day our daily bread,” insisting that people should not be given daily bread but instead should work for it. Another objects to the phrase, “forgive us our debts,” affirming the conviction instead that people should *pay* their debts. And so it goes. Authentic prayers can never be made politically acceptable, because that is not their purpose. For these theological reasons, as well as the constitutional ones, we simply must find another way to address the cries for help that the call for school prayer often expresses.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For this phrase, see Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 186.