

THE BYSTANDER —★—

Prayer in Private Schools

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Is there really a positive correlation between a moral society and prayer in schools, or is the effect only limited to public schools? After all, those are the only institutions affected by the 1962 Supreme Court case, *Engel v. Vitale*, which “banned” school prayer, and led to the prohibition of religious displays on public property. That has often been cited as the cause for a perceived increase of divorce, drugs, and crime in this country.

If prayer in schools truly was a benefit to social order, you might think it would extend to the adults in charge as well. There are still plenty of parochial schools that allow prayer, worship services and religious instruction. Many of them also have a history of sexual abuse dating back to the 1950's, protected by the Vatican City State in Rome.

Mandatory religion in an academic setting may improve discipline among students, but when one looks at the scope of sexual abuse in the nations' largest private school system--- revelations involving hundreds of priests associated with parish schools--it defies logic to make any connection between religion, moral behavior, and the schoolroom.

However, we could consider another factor that is evidence of our pre-existing lack of principles by looking at the response to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case that banned segregation in public schools, a decade before the ban on school prayer. The ensuing white exodus to the suburbs and to private (mostly Catholic) schools was dramatic. The same way that community swimming pools suddenly went dry, school systems throughout the country rebelled rather than desegregate. Some school boards exited the system rather than comply. In Virginia, the entire school system of Prince Edward County shut down from 1959 to 1964, using state Tuition Grants to fund private schools, or *Segregation Academies*, which admitted white students only. Nationwide, over a thousand parochial schools were quickly established in the guise of faith-based education, offering prayer alongside an all-white student body. It took another 12 years for the

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Supreme Court to rule that private schools were also prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, in the case of *Runyon v. McCrary*.

The middle-class was able to afford the white haven of private schools, and what was readily available often happened to be run by the Catholic Church. You would think that these institutions would exhibit the highest level of righteous behavior of any sector of education, both in administration and leadership. But no one would have imagined that so many of the men teaching children to be good Christians, and leading them in prayer, were pedophiles. They committed sexual abuse on a massive scale with an equally massive cover-up by a religious institution with no transparency or accountability, taking advantage of the public trust in order to avoid detection and punishment by our government.

Sixty years later, how much better it could have been for children to have attended prayer-free public schools where they might not have been subjected to sexual abuse by their instructors. And how much better it could have been for children to have attended integrated public schools where they might not have been subjected to the bigotry of their communities.

Government and religion have a lot in common: they both regulate behavior so that people can co-exist in society without destroying each other. Our Constitution says that they should be parallel, not intersecting; each offer something unique that the other cannot provide, and each have their flaws and limitations. But the idea that more religion in schools is the solution to our societal problems is a myth. Discipline, however, would be another subject.

How we safeguard our children, a “gift from God” according to Psalms, is a better measure of our morality than is church attendance or religious devotion. And if children do choose to say a prayer at school, perhaps it should be for protection from anyone who would traumatize them for life, by making them the victims of racism or sexual gratification of adults.