

Freedom to believe

From the restaurant table, the nearby conversation was clearly audible. "...and now some of these schools in the southern Bible Belt, I understand, are winning court battles to teach children in science classes that God created the world in seven days!"

The woman's voice trembled with indignation. Her five companions, also women, were seating themselves at a large corner table. One of them responded, "What difference does it make?"

The indignant one opened her mouth to retort, paused in mid-sentence and thought better of what she was saying, then answered in a mild tone, "An interesting question...and perhaps you're right. Perhaps it doesn't make any difference. And besides, who decides, ultimately, what is Truth?"

A potentially explosive subject had been defused. Table talk was non-controversial as the women ate their lunches. The two who had come close to argument exchanged smiles, each silently assuring the other no offense had been intended; none taken.

In today's world, religions must be considered as factors of political and social climate. We live in an era when religious beliefs are exerting enormous influence upon people of all nations. We in America are feeling the effects of diverse faiths in the Middle East where Judaism, Islam, Druze, together with less familiar sects, flourish side-by-side with Christianity.

From earliest times, men have fought to defend their beliefs. Wars have been waged to enforce faiths, and wars have been waged to ensure religious freedoms. The zeal of believers has pushed wave after wave of humanity to certain death and continues to do so today. Modern weaponry turns concrete and stone, brick and plaster, to nothing but rubble. Horrors of war visited upon helpless civilians makes fervent believers of survivors.

First hand experience is but one way believers are created; another way is by threat. Threat of nuclear attack. Threat of Communist infiltration. Threat of invasion by teeming hordes. Threats translate to fears and fears may be assuaged by faith. Faith assures personal righteousness. Faith reinforces purpose in a particular cause. Faith promises that an omnipotent intelligence cares for and protects true believers.

Such a caring and protecting force is worth living... or dying for.

In the United States of America, freedom to worship according to one's individual choice (or not to worship if one so chooses) is constitutionally guaranteed. Now comes, once more, the question of prayers in school, the question of whether to amend the constitution to allow teachers to lead children in prayer. While nothing might appear more innocuous, nothing is likely to arouse more dissent.

Can we amend our constitution to permit prayer in schools without subjecting a single child raised in a particular faith to the beliefs of some other faith? If school prayer is permitted at all, what teacher while leading a class in prayer can do so without exposing the children to the teacher's own tenets? Is non-ecclesiastical prayer possible?

And, is prayer in schools necessary? Is it not the responsibility of the child's family to guide his religious instruction? If a family's choice is to neglect that responsibility, is it not that family's prerogative so to do? Vocal prayer may be practiced outside the schools any time and any place; no law of this land prohibits prayer anywhere except in schools. And there is a reason for that prohibition.

Because every state of the union has laws requiring that children be sent to school, classes are composed of heterogeneous populations, religiously speaking; and, recognizing this, the Supreme Court has declared prayers in schools unconstitutional.

Inasmuch as religious beliefs are deeply personal, and inasmuch as the inculcation of a child's faith is a familial privilege and duty ... and specifically not that of the school ... or the state ... or any branch of the government ... might we be wise to let our constitution stand unamended in this instance?

Freedom to practice a minor religion may be threatened today. Freedom to practice YOUR personal faith may be eroded tomorrow. The public school is no substitute for, and should not be asked to substitute for, family guidance or religious education. Homes and churches have those responsibilities. Schools are responsible for children's secular education; no more and no less.