

# Retired Episcopal Bishop Reviews Court Decision on Prayers

(Editor's note - The U.S. Supreme Court soon will hand down a decision on the constitutionality of prayer and Bible reading in public schools. In the following dispatch, one of America's most respected church leaders discusses what the court is likely to rule and why, and he suggests ways in which the anticipated decision may be used as a lever to bring about general strengthening of religious education of America.)

The author is the Rt. Rev. Angus Dun, who retired last year after 18 years as Episcopal bishop of Washington.

Since retiring, he has conducted an extensive study of the religion-in-schools problem as chairman of a committee on church and state appointed by the National Capital Area Civil Liberties Council.

By The Rt. REV. ANGUS DUN  
Written for  
United Press International

The decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the New York regents' prayer case and the cases having to do with Bible readings and the use of the Lord's Prayer in public school, now awaiting decision, have focused attention on fundamental questions regarding the place of religion in American education.

Our society is committed by the Constitution to two principles of church-state relations. On the one hand there is the negative principle which provides that Congress and the authorities of states shall make no laws or binding decisions respecting an establishment of religion. This principle bars our federal government and state authorities from giving special privileges or support to any particular religion or religious institutions.

**Positive Principle**  
On the other hand there is the positive principle which provides that Congress and the states shall make no laws prohibiting the free exercise of religion. This principle is designed to guard the freedom of all individuals and groups to profess and witness to their religious faith or lack of it; to worship according to their convictions and allegiances; to provide for the religious education of their children and youth; and to carry on other activities and good works expressive of their faith.

We accept these principles as fundamental to the maintenance of justice and freedom. But it does not require much reflection to conclude that they cannot work themselves out without presenting difficult problems and real conflicts of interest.

**Religion Accepted**  
Education is our most deliberate undertaking as a society to pass on to our children what we consider most important in our cultural inheritance. From the standpoint of any serious faith, religion has a central place in the total educational process. There is an empty place in any scheme of education which fails to offer a faith to live by, a central devotion and an object of final trust.

For Christians and for believing Jews, God as apprehended by faith is the object of central devotion and the object of final trust. To leave God out of any total educational experience is to teach effectively that he does not count.

The family has a primary role in education, particularly in the areas of religion and morality. Humanly speaking, parents determine for good or ill the intimate exposures

and contagions shaping a child's life in the earlier years. In this sense, religion and morality are generally "home made."

**Parents Lack Skill**  
Although religious education begins in the family, it does not end there. Few parents have the knowledge and skill to provide for their children a religious education which will keep step with their schools.

If a child's religious and moral education is to be carried forward outside the family, the primary responsibility rests with the churches and synagogues. Churches and synagogues have sought to carry out their distinctive educational role by Sunday schools and in other ways, with markedly varying educational effectiveness.

Some 85 per cent of American children attend our public schools. We must acknowledge that as things are now, the time in the lives of children and youth which most churches and synagogues can command, and the educational skills and resources they muster, are heavily outweighed by our public educational system.

It is this situation which has led the Roman Catholic church in a massive way, and synagogues in a substantial way, to set up systems of parochial and synagogue schools, parallel to our public school system. These provide overall elementary and secondary education under religious auspices and pervaded with religious beliefs and influences.

**Into Focus**  
So we come to the particular issues brought into focus by recent and anticipated decisions of our Supreme Court.

Can or should we expect our public schools to take any part in the religious teaching and nurture of the children of religiously committed parents?

The question would not arise if it were not for the fact that some modest religious observances have been widely included in public school practice in the past.

The churches had a large part in the beginnings of American schooling. Despite the fact that our country has from the beginning been a land of many denominations, there were in the past many areas where evangelical Protestantism was heavily dominant. In that situation it was quite natural for Bible readings and Christian prayers to be an acceptable part of public school practice. By the middle of the last century, the number of Roman Catholics and Jews in our population had greatly increased. Questions began to be raised as to what translation of the Bible might be used in public schools. In the past 20 years, problems arising from religious practices in the public schools have been steadily mounting. Obviously, these problems do not arise in the courts. They arise out of the American community in which people of many religious beliefs and of none have been increasingly mingled.

**Beliefs Differ**  
It is surely understandable that faithful Jewish parents do not wish their children to be asked to listen to a religious reading of Christian scriptures or to take part in a religious or semi-religious observance of the birth of Christ. It is understandable that parents who are conscientious agnostics or atheists do not want their children to be asked to join in or even listen to a prayer to the God of Christian faith, or be put in the position of publicizing

their dissent. Once these questions have been raised, it is difficult to see what decisions the Supreme Court could make save the ones it has made or seems likely to make.

Those of us who are believing Christians have mixed feelings concerning the direction in which these court decisions have been moving. Many Christians have welcomed for their children in their public school experience even a small reference to God and to Christ. Some believe that even a relatively external act can in time come to

have inner meaning. But we know that faith cannot be enforced. It is free. We know that the Bible was written from faith to faith, and can only be read religiously in a setting of faith. We know that public prayer belongs in a community of faith. And a public school cannot provide that setting. The same can be said with equal force of the religious reading of Jewish scriptures and the offerings of Jewish prayers.

**Accept Removal**  
Most of us who have reflected on these issues, and

not simply reacted emotionally, conclude that in common justice and in conformity with the principles of our Constitution we must accept the elimination of religion from our public schools. We do this with some sense of loss but likewise with a sense of liberation.

If this be the outcome, it will be all the more important that our public schools, in their task of providing our children an understanding and appreciation of our American heritage, do full justice

to the large place of the Jewish and Christian tradition in that heritage. Our history and our political and social thought can not be dealt with faithfully without an objective interpretation of the part played by religious convictions, motives, movements, and institutions. Our literature and music and art and communal observances cannot be understood apart from the religious content and values found in them.

We hope that with the elimination of official religious observances from our public

schools there may be a generous and imaginative exploration of ways in which young people in our public schools, especially at the high school level, might be encouraged to express voluntary their religious interests and concerns, outside regular school hours.

Their school associations are a major part of their experience, and offer a natural framework for such activities. Such voluntary activities would help to offset the impression that this period in their lives is one from which religion is rigorously excluded.

The exclusion of religious observances from public schools will have the advantage of clearly placing responsibility for religious education where it belongs, on parents and on the churches and synagogues.

It is likely that this will stimulate further the establishment of church-controlled schools, to the possible detriment of the public schools and perhaps to the detriment of the quality of all education. We hope that continuing study and experimentation

may go forward in the direction of cooperative relations between the religious communities and the public schools.

For example, the type of arrangement commonly called "shared time" might free parochial schools from the heavy financial burden of teaching subjects of only remote religious significance, and at the same time enable the churches and the synagogues to provide a far more substantial religious and moral education for children whose parents desire this for them.

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**NIXON'S FUTURE HOME**-A New York real estate firm has confirmed that it sold a cooperative apartment on the fifth floor of this building on New York's Fifth Ave. to former vice president Richard Nixon. A spokesman said the Nixons plan to take possession of the 12-room, five bath, suite June 1, New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller has an apartment on the 12th floor of the same building and his former wife has a penthouse and 13th floor apartment there. (UPI)



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