Analysis of "School Prayer: When Constitutional Principles Clash" by Stuart Taylor Jr. as Reptd. in Current Issues and Enduring Questions, pp. 159-162

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Stuart Taylor, in his essay entitled “School Prayer: When Constitutional Principles Clash,” argues that to forbid prayer in school is equivalent to forbidding the Pledge of Allegiance. He feels that by objecting to prayer in public schools, a person takes away a fundamental freedom of speech and expression. Citing the Supreme Court’s 6-3 decision on June 19th to rule against a Texas high school’s policy of allowing a student leader to pray over the public address system at football games, Taylor writes that, in effect, the decision to prohibit prayer in public schools is one step away from banning it in public places.

Taylor opens his article by telling us, “It may now be unconstitutional for a public school to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in class.” Citing the Supreme Court’s decision on June 19th opposing prayer in public schools, Taylor asserts that such verdicts may lead to additional restrictions on free speech. After acknowledging that the school in question may “have crossed the line into unconstitutional sponsorship of religion” (160), Taylor emphasizes his belief that prayer does not divide a student body but rather unites it and cultivates in it a sense of brotherhood. Indeed, he interprets the Supreme Court decision as being sufficiently ambiguous to include the Pledge of Allegiance in its ban. He suggests that the word “under God” are religious enough to be put under examination. He writes that under the 1943 Supreme Court decision, the child of a Chinese diplomat would not be compelled to join in the Pledge of Allegiance on political grounds. Taylor finishes his article by citing another Supreme Court decision involving a Louisiana school policy on teaching evolution. He praises the policy and rejects the Court’s verdict that it was unconstitutional. He ends his article by quoting an Illinois woman, “How long will it be before they tell us we can’t pray in public places?” (162).

Stuart Taylor’s “School Prayer: When Constitutional Principles Clash” is a vivid and colorful piece of writing. It appeals to the emotions of the reader, as Taylor presents himself as an “average Joe” fighting against the restrictions of the “establishment.” Taylor slams us with quotations and facts, then proceeds to make broad generalizations based on faulty logic. He emphasizes his belief in the common man, or the majority and goes out of his way to establish the fact that he is on their side. Taylor’s essay might lead one to believe that the bulk of the American population has no problems with prayer in school, but he provides no statistics in his essay to support his beliefs. He begins his argument with the fraudulent assumption that all of his readers will agree that patriotic ceremonies aren’t coercive. This is simply not the case. That is not to deny that many people do tend to feel a natural affection for the land they call their home. Nevertheless, many citizens might object to participating in patriotic ceremonies on the grounds that they must desist in participating in such ceremonies when they feel the country is participating in an action that they condemn. Yet Taylor writes, “It seems most unlikely, of course, that the Justices would actually take the radical step of banishing the pledge from school ceremonies anytime soon-if only because it would be all too obvious that if the law that, then the law is an ass” (159-160).

Taylor uses blunt language to establish a connection with his audience. He ridicules the verbose language of the Court Justices, conveying the image that it is Us versus Them.

When describing the Supreme Court decision t ban prayer in school, Taylor uses such words as “struck down” (159) and quotes the dissenters as saying “the tone of the Court’s opinion…bristles with hostility to all things religious in public life” (160). He points out that these limitations on free speech
may lead to additional restrictions on what can be said and done in a free society. Free speech by
definition is not the tolerance of speech that invades the privacy of the unwilling listener. There is no way
for a member on a school’s football team, for example, to avoid listening to a prayer that calls upon a God
that he does not agree with. Taylor writes that by banning prayer in public schools, any prayer voted on
by the majority of students may be banned. He omits the fact that the Supreme Court makes no ruling
against private prayer. There is nothing wrong, constitutionally, with carrying out prayer in private
schools. The prayer is not being imposed on anybody because all of the members of the school have
chosen to be there. Similarly, there is nothing in the Constitution that suggests that prayer in public
places should be banned because passersby are not obligated to participate and can simply leave the area
if they are offended. Clearly, the Supreme Court case involving the Louisiana school board did not
present any serious breach of Constitutional rights. However, Taylor infers from that decision that all
Supreme Court rulings are pompous and heavy-handed. He writes, “Yes, there are really a lot of people
in the hinterland who still believe such stuff. Not any of them went to Ivy League schools, or hand out
with Supreme Court Justices” (162). He forgets that imposing one’s interpretation of God onto the
members of a public school is constitutionally wrong. To argue that the minority must agree with the
majority is grossly unfair. Minorities, after all, come and go, and what might be the minority today may
become the majority of tomorrow. If America were to allow Christian prayer in public schools on the
grounds that Christianity is the religion of the majority, what would there be to stop other countries from
imposing that same policy? What would it be like for Christians and other minorities in Muslim countries
who would be forced to begin their day in the name of Allah?

Taylor’s response to such an argument might be that no child is required to participate in any
prayer. However, is that really true? It would be hard to deny that there are numerous instances of
harassment in public schools today of any individuals who are perceived as different. To deny that there
is the potential for any great psychological and emotional pain for minorities and other individuals in
public schools is to deny the fact that human beings, by nature, are not perfect and are prone to ridiculing
those who are perceived as being at a disadvantage from themselves. In principle, in the secular concept
of running governments and legislation, everyone born in a country, regardless of religion or color or
creed acquire basic fundamental civic rights. Everyone has a fair and equal chance to make his say heard
at least by the opposition on matters of common principle. To tell someone that they must pray according
to the interpretation of God held by the majority is to trample directly upon these rights. In Brown vs.
Board of Education, the Supreme Court made it clear that “separate” is inherently unequal. Taylor
acknowledges that the aforementioned Texas high school may have been amiss in sponsoring a religion.
Still, he maintains that the minorities in the school would have no reason to feel a “sense of isolation and
affront” (160). He believes that prayer, instead of dividing a class, unites it into a feeling of brotherhood.
He does not seem to remember that in order for anything to flourish, there must be the right climate.
Therefore, if he wants to allow prayer in public schools, he must consider if there is the right climate of
tolerance and understanding. Even in one religion, there are many different interpretations of God. It is
as if different-colored eyeglasses are used by different sects to see the name God. It is not just a question
of the religion of the majority by of how each individual interprets that religion. It may be all very well
for Stuart Taylor to write that prayer unites a class into a feeling of brotherhood, but it only unites those
who participate and are comfortable. What must also be taken into consideration is the fact that the
participants of prayer will look at the outsiders and question their rejection of their religion. The outsiders
themselves may sense the need to assimilate in order to avoid the majority’s questioning of their faith. It
cannot be denied that by imposing one interpretation of God, the majority population of the school says
that their view is right. Instead of scoffing at the “establishment,” and making school prayer a debate of
Us versus Them, Taylor should look carefully at the wisdom of our forefathers when they declared that in
America, there would be no official religion. If he truly wants to protect our fundamental freedoms, he
should look carefully at all the consequences of any decision that includes the imposition of one
interpretation of God. We must think many, many times, before we even begin to consider whether
anywhere in the world, religion can be imposed as a legal tender.
Works Cited