

## A Dialogue on Public and Private Prayer

David: The first words of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,

Paula: *or* prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

David: That's the tricky part, balancing those two.

Paula: Like public prayer, where does that fit?

David: Easy, don't do it. You want to pray, find a church or go to your room.

Paula: But that's not how most people think. It's really important to them. I mean, look at prayer in schools. That is always a problem for people.

David: You know, that wasn't a problem when I was growing up in New Mexico in the 1950s. The Catholics were dominant, and the Baptists were *convinced* that *they* were an oppressed minority; they *loved* separation of church and state. They were sure that if there was prayer in schools it would sound like this:

Voice A: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

David: What they should have been worried about was something like this:

Voice B: I see you Spirit. I see you through the eyes of my Spirit Hawk.  
I see you in the face as I stare into the eyes of the children in my village.  
I see you as I look into the stars in the canopy of night that covers my home.  
As the brush strokes of the landscape is painted in the desert colors that surround me, I see you Spirit in all things.

David: Anyone who ever saw even a part of a Hopi ceremony, or any of the Pueblo ceremonies, knew they were way cooler than anything you could get in a Baptist Church. What about you, what was it like when you were growing up?

Paula: Oh, we had prayer in schools. In fact, I was asked to pray in school when I was only six years old.

David: What was that like?

Paula: Well, we were standing in the line at lunch, and the teacher asked me to pray. I closed my eyes, and started with "Dear Jesus," and when I looked up two minutes later we were at the back of the line. I was never asked to pray again or out loud. I did a lot of

silent prayer throughout my school years. You know the old saying: there are no atheists at a geometry test.

David: When I went back to New Mexico in the last few years, things had changed. Everyone seems to want prayer in schools.

Paula: So many people are sure that getting kids to pray out loud will solve all their moral problems. I don't think they understand how much silent prayer already goes on in schools. And just *making* them say a few words isn't going to make any difference.

David: What *I* think they don't understand is what they are getting into as our cultures change. I mean, think about what it would take to get a prayer that would work in a New York City classroom *and* that a good New Mexico Southern Baptist or a good Southern Baptist from your home town in North Carolina would accept.

David: [Turns to people seated on the front row:] OK class, would someone like to lead us in prayer?

Pupil 1: [Raises hand] Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam. asher kid'shanu . . .<sup>1</sup> [Paula interrupts].

Paula: I don't think that is what *any* of our Baptists have in mind. A little too much of the Judeo part of Judeo-Christian.

David: I have to agree with you on that. OK, you. [Points to someone seated in the second row]

Pupil 2: Allaahu Akbar,  
Ashadu an la  
Ilaha Ill Allah.<sup>2</sup>  
[Paula interrupts again.]

Paula: No, I know it is monotheistic, *and* Islam reveres Christ as a prophet; but, that is not what the folks in the mountains of North Carolina are thinking about when they say "prayer in schools."

David: OK [He looks around for a few seconds and points to someone else seated on the front row]. You.

Pupil 3: Entrusting in the Primal Vow of Buddha, calling out the Buddha-name, I shall pass through the journey of life with strength and joy.

Paula: David, are you telling me that you can't find *anyone* to offer a prayer in a New York City public school who is a Christian?

David: OK. [Once again, looks around for a few seconds and then points to someone else seated on the front row.] You

Pupil 4: Stands, then bows head, remaining silent.

David: [After a brief pause, looks at Paula and says:] Quaker.  
[Paula gives a frustrated look]

David: And Biblical. Remember...

Voice A: "Matthew 6:6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen."

David: So, tell me, have we learned *anything*?

Paula: Well, we should have learned that there are a lot of devout children and adults out there offering prayers, besides Christian prayers. But none of that has anything to do with when Christians pray. And I don't think it has anything to do with how much prayer *really* goes on in schools. You know the old saying: when the going gets tough, the tough start praying.

David: Actually, I don't know that old saying, at all. What does it mean?

Paula: It means that life is tough these days for kids in school, and if they think prayer helps, you can't keep them from praying. And if they don't, then making them mouth a few words in the morning isn't going to make things any better.

David: You're right. But you know, *I* learned something.

Paula: What?

David: If I am ever in a situation where someone insists on a public prayer, I'm going to find a Quaker.

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<sup>1</sup> *Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kid-shanu*

This is the beginning of a blessing in Hebrew. It loosely translates as "Blessed are You, Adonai (Our God), Creator of the Universe."

Here is a pronunciation guide:

BAR-roo-K a-ta Eh-DOUGH-nigh E-loo-hane Me-lekh ha-o-LAMM:  
A-share KEY-shaun-oo:

<sup>2</sup> These are the first lines in an Islamic call to prayer called the "Adhan." It translates as this:

Allahu Akbar: "God is the greatest"

Ashadu an la ilaha ill Allah: "I bear witness that there are none worthy of worship except God."

Here is a pronunciation guide:

Allahu Akbar: All-Law-Who Awk-Bar

Ashadu an la ilaha ill Allah: A-sha-doo an-LA ee-la-ahaw eel All-lah

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