With Liberty and Justice for All

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In this heavily researched argumentative essay, Kati Robbins cites legal precedent, current events, and personal experience to condemn preferential treatment of Christianity in American public schools, while simultaneously urging that all students learn *about* Christianity and other religious traditions. This essay was written for Writing I with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

THE FIGHT TO KEEP RELIGION out of public schools should be a thing of the past, but it's all too prevalent in today's society. I'm not arguing by any means that religion as a whole should be excluded from the public school curriculum; however, there's a difference between teaching children religious doctrines and teaching children about different religions. Religion as a subject is just fine. In fact, religion has played a huge part in the development of the world's culture, history, art, and literature. It is the morning prayers, the obvious favoritism, and the subtle hints from teachers that aren't right. Public school is not the place to hold religious activities, especially not during the time when the child should be learning other, more important things.

Before we get too deep into religion's place in school, we should discuss religion itself. A factor underlying the inclusion of religious

practices in school activities is the idea that people, especially children, "need" religion. Some religious theists believe that religion is important because it provides structure and comfort for curious children, but the argument that being religious is always better than not is a faulty one. I acknowledge that religion can be good. I have personally been saved, I have been baptized, and I regularly attended a few different Southern Baptist churches for about six years. I learned that religion can inspire hope, peace, and love in the darkest of times. It brings together communities of likeminded people who aspire to serve others and serve their god(s). However, I also learned that religion can also be very toxic. There are radicals in all religions who take the teachings too far. From these groups, we get religious terrorist organizations, hate crimes, and, possibly worst of all, conservatives. Sure, telling your children that their deceased dog is now in a doghouse in the sky might be easier than explaining the whole "death" thing, and it might be easier to force your child to behave because a magical man in the sky is always watching them, but this isn't always better for your child. Reality may be harder to swallow, and it might take your child longer to learn the difference between what's morally right and wrong, but Austin Cline explains this dilemma perfectly: "This is vastly superior to basing morality on the alleged command of an alleged deity because if a child merely learns to obey orders, [s/he] won't learn enough about how to reason out moral dilemmas in new situations." To date, there is currently no surmountable evidence that religion is necessary to raise a good, morally straight kid.

Parents who decide not to introduce religion to their children deserve the same respect as parents who do. The majority of court cases that handle the separation of church and state involve a school that decided to introduce a religious practice, which resulted in parents becoming upset when they found out. Take the Supreme Court case *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), for example. The state of New York passed a law that required all public schools to start the day off with the Pledge of Allegiance and a "nondenominational prayer" that

went as follows: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our Country" ("Engel v. Vitale"). The law also stated that children reserved the right to exclude themselves if they weren't comfortable with the prayer. One aggravated parent came forth and sued the state on the grounds of violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which states that neither federal nor state governments are allowed to establish an official religion nor establish laws that favor one religion over another. The court found that this law did, in fact, violate the Establishment Clause; justices believed that the exception rule was not enough to make the law constitutional. The assumption that there is a singular prayer that will cover the remaining percentage is faulty and ignorant; not all religions believe in God as a singular, all-powerful entity. While about seventy percent of American citizens do identify as Christian, there are also a remaining thirty percent who deserve to be recognized as well ("Religion in America").

As a country, we have seen many cases responding to state laws that condone the practice of specific religious doctrines as long as children have the option to not participate, exclude themselves, or leave the room. However, at a young age, children learn to follow the majority: "On the playground, we first begin to notice the differences between ourselves and other children, and we start to mirror the behavior of a dominant group in order to be accepted by them" (Cannon). This behavior translates into the classroom as well. When they see other children participating in prayer, for example, children may mirror that behavior in order to belong, even if they weren't raised to pray. Exception to the rule or not, religious or not, chances are a child will choose to pray in order to feel a sense of belonging. Not to mention, this whole process happens on a subconscious level, so it's not as though children can necessarily stop if they try. Parents who send their children to public schools should be able to trust that no religious teachings, methods, or rituals will not be forced upon their children and that their children won't be alienated

from nor assimilated into social groups because of their religion or lack thereof.

FOR YEARS, COURT CASES FLOWED through the higher courts regarding school-sanctioned prayer. *Abington School District v. Schempp* brought about an important quote from Associate Justice Tom Clark: "[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of Civilization" (qtd. in "School District"). Religion as a subject, I concur, is beneficial to children. Religion played a very important role in the development of America. The United States, before its official founding, was a refuge from the religious persecution in Great Britain beginning in 1630 ("Religion and the Founding"). However, Clark brings up another important point earlier in his deliverance: "This is not to say, however, that religion has been so identified with our history and government that religious freedom is not likewise as strongly embedded in our public and private life" (qtd. in "School District"). Religion is very present in our history and is still ingrained into our government today. We see it most obviously in the Pledge of Allegiance, although it was fairly recently that President Dwight D. Eisenhower urged Congress to include the phrase "under God" as a spiritual combatant within the Cold War (in 1954, to be exact; see "Pledge"). Despite all of our deep religious roots, whether old or new, Justice Clark reminds us that these secular practices don't negate the idea of true religious freedom as guaranteed in the First Amendment, which includes the freedom to not practice religion at all. This statement should be very prevalent on school board members' minds as they plan curricula and/or make decisions to include religious practices in school functions. In fact, as I was in the process of writing this paper, the American Civil Liberties Union sued the Smith County School District in Tennessee for violating the Establishment Clause by incorporating prayer into school functions and attempting to convert non-Christians into believers of the Christian faith ("ACLU

Sues"). You would think that this century-old fight would be over, but it's still as prevalent today as it was back then.

As Americans, we reserve the right to raise our children in the manner we see fit, which includes the right to choose whether or not religion will play a role in your child's life. As a parent, if you are determined to give your child a religious upbringing, there are multiple ways to do so outside of the hours they spend in public school classrooms. For one, you could enroll your child in a religious private school. You could also dedicate some of your evenings at home to your chosen religion. A lot of churches host Wednesday night group meetings for a wide variety of ages. Also, the Equal Access Act of 1984 guarantees that every school must treat all student-led clubs equally, including religious ones, so the child could join a club on school grounds as well ("Student-Initiated"). All of these functions occur outside school's operating hours and still give your child the opportunity to freely study their religion.

Public school is a place where learning should blossom and where curiosity takes root along the winding riverbed of thought. Children are the future of our nation. They will be the next political leaders, doctors, philosophers, and teachers. Students need to feel safe in their own bodies as well as among their peers to truly learn and grow, yet the backlash some students receive—be it real or imagined—for opting out of religious activities diminishes the necessary sense of security. It's time that we realize the importance of keeping religious practices out of our public schools because those schools include children of many backgrounds. It's simply not fair to assume that one prayer, practice, or activity will be right for everyone. After all, our very own pledge preaches "liberty and justice for *all*." ►►

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