

Letter From Inner Israel

by Jacob Neusner

State-Sponsored Prayer

For practicing Christians, Judaists, and Muslims, what is at stake in state-sponsored prayer in public schools is whether the particularities that make us what we are make a difference. Constitutional issues aside, there are strong theological arguments against legislating prayer for young people. Specifically, nonsectarian prayer speaks for no one in particular and addresses Whom it may concern. But Christianity, Judaism, and Islam speak of one, unique God, to whom, as Christians, Judaists, or Muslims, we are called by specific, and each of us thinks a unique, revelation. While individually and privately we may pray as undifferentiated humanity, in public we pray as the Body of Christ, the Church, or as Holy Israel, God's first love, or as the Nation of Islam. We cannot say other people's prayers and do not expect them to say ours, even while we affirm that all three of the great monotheist religions address one and the same God, the only God, who made heaven and earth.

State-sponsored, nonsectarian prayer in school violates those theological norms. For just as there is no such thing as religion in general, but only specific and concrete religions, that is, communities of the faithful, so there can be no such thing as prayer *from* no one in particular to no one in particular. That kind of prayer contradicts the convictions of religious communities that deem themselves distinctive, holy, and called forth by God.

True, when Jews and Christians gather for shared worship, Christians ordinarily forgo the name of Jesus Christ, and Jews will compose for the occasion noncanonical prayers or simply read a Psalm. But both participants understand that such prayers are merely occasional gestures of good will, that they hardly express the faith of the faithful standing before

the God whom they know and love. Throughout history, Jews have recognized that Christianity and Islam affirm that same one God whom we know through the Torah, but simply because each of us concurs with the other's conception of the One to whom we pray, this does not at all yield the possibility of common prayer. We speak each in our own, unique way; we honor the piety and prayer of others; but we do not participate and *cannot* participate in these prayers, unless we apostatize.

This is not to say that I do not share the concerns of those who advocate state-sponsored prayer in the public school. I share those aspirations, and I object to the rigid and ideologically radical secularism that has led us to the present impasse. It is one thing to say that the state will not sponsor public prayer through the schools. It is another thing to say, as has been said, the state will forbid evidences of personal piety and prayer; will provide no access to religious activities on its property; will discriminate against religious activities of a voluntary character on the part of students; will discourage Christian students from expressing their convictions concerning Jesus Christ and Jewish students from observing the commandments of their faith, all in the name of the separation of church and state. In one decision after another, the courts have systematically denied religious Americans the right to express their religious convictions on public occasions (school graduations, for instance). In the case of Islam and Judaism, the University of Virginia has declared that it will not support Christian student activities, since Christianity is a religion, but it will support Judaic and Islamic student activities, since these are ethnic cultures. I am sure Muslims will share the indignation of Jews in being dismissed as a nonreligion.

It is in the schools that the diverse families of America—diverse in region and race and religion—come together. It is in schools where youngsters most often discover not only who they are, but also what they are not. When it comes to prayer, pretending that we all can and should address God in one and the same way teaches two bad lessons. First, it denigrates important particularities: our way to God, known in a particular

church or synagogue or mosque, now gives way to another path to God, which we too must walk. Second, it fabricates a common faith where there is none, and so places our common Americanness in conflict with our significant points of difference.



When I was in third grade, I discovered that not one of our Founding Fathers was Jewish. This harsh reality dawned in early November, when we as young Connecticut Yankees were studying Thanksgiving. Specifically, we were assigned the project of drawing pictures of the Puritan fathers going to synagogue—well, that is how I understood the assignment. So I asked the teacher, Miss Melcher, “How do you spell synagogue?” “Why do you need to know?” she asked. “To write under my picture, ‘The Puritan fathers going to synagogue on Friday night.’” For, belonging to the Reform Temple in West Hartford, that is what my family would do. “They weren’t Jews!” she said scornfully. “They were Christians!” I was shocked and never believed anything Miss Melcher told us again, unless I could confirm it on my own.

As I grew older, I came to dread the occasion for international hypocrisy that classroom praying in the Protestant manner and hymn singing precipitated (“Faith of our fathers” did not refer to the Torah, I found out). And when the Catholics stopped the Lord’s Prayer before the words, “for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen,” but loudly, ostentatiously said, “Amen,” a half-dozen words earlier, I was sure that prayer must confuse God. And maybe even offend Her.

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JOURNALISM

The Rise and Fall of a Paleoconservative at the *Washington Times* (Part I)

by Samuel Francis

After nearly a decade of working for the *Washington Times*, I was fired last September. Technically, I “resigned,” but Wes Pruden, the *Times*’ editor-in-chief, asked me for a letter of resignation, and I had no real choice but to agree. Nor, by that time, had I any real desire to remain on the staff. The reasons for my defenestration from a paper whose editor styles it “the official voice of the conservative movement” are complicated and—at least to me and many who express support for me—somewhat mysterious, though in certain quarters my firing and the disappearance of my column from the Washington market are reasons for satisfaction, if not outright glee. Not only did Pruden demand my resignation, but he also immediately forbade the publication of my syndicated column in the *Times*.

But the circumstances of my decline and fall at the *Washington Times* point to a story more important than what happened (or happens) to me and my column. The story has to do with larger matters: the direction of American conservatism, the boundaries of what is called the “public discourse” and who decides where those boundaries lie, and the real meaning of free expression in a nation that loves to boast of its commitment to “openness.” If I dwell on myself and the circumstances of my firing even at the risk of sounding self-serving, it is because these issues are best understood in the context of my relationships with the one newspaper I have worked for.

From 1986 to 1995, I served the *Times* as an editorial writer, deputy editorial page editor, acting editorial page

editor, and nationally syndicated staff columnist. When, six months after arriving at the paper, the editorial page editor who hired me and four of his senior writers resigned in anger over an editorial dispute, I declined to walk out with them and stayed on, helping the paper save face in one of the most embarrassing episodes in its history. In 1989 and 1990, I won the most prestigious professional journalism awards the *Washington Times* has ever won, the Distinguished Writing Awards of the American Society of Newspaper Editors for editorial writing. My twice-weekly column was a popular feature that appeared every Tuesday and Friday for four years in the *Times*’ Commentary and op-ed pages, and its disappearance has cost the paper readers.

I served the *Times* as an editorial writer and junior editor from 1986 to 1991. In May of the latter year, Pruden offered me the position of staff columnist, writing two signed columns and two unsigned editorials a week under the new editorial page editor, Tod Lindberg. For the next two years my column, which gained national syndication in November 1991, appeared in the Commentary section of the *Times* and, as the *Washington Media Guide* reported the next year, as a columnist I “quickly established [my]self as a force.”

When I began the column, I knew what I wanted it to be—a hardball expression of paleoconservative principles that would not hesitate to criticize the mainstream right and the general political and cultural direction of the country. I had no interest in rewriting Republican Party press releases or booming the idols of neoconservative or movement conservative adoration. I also wanted to broach a variety of issues from a perspective that was seldom heard in the press—immigration, trade policy, questions of globalism and national sovereignty, post-Cold War foreign policy, race, and American conservatism in general. I have, some tell me, a gift for sarcasm, and I did not hesitate to use it.

I understood that there was a risk in what I was planning, that I would be stepping on a great many toes and pushing the boundaries that surround the fashionable dogmas of both the Washington right and left, boundaries the

Times seems petrified of transgressing. But Wes had assured me when he made me a columnist that I would have a much freer rein than I had as an editorial writer, and I cannot say I found this to be untrue.

In September 1993, the paper’s Commentary section underwent a reorganization. It lost one of its three regular pages of opinion pieces, and a separate op-ed page was created that would carry opinion pieces from outside writers as well as those of the three staff columnists. The editor of the new op-ed page would be Tod Lindberg, who continued to run the editorial page as well.

If Hillary Clinton is a “congenital liar,” Tod Lindberg is a congenital neoconservative. In his college days at the University of Chicago, he studied with the late neoconservative guru Allan Bloom and, perhaps more significantly, was the roommate of John Podhoretz, son of neoconservative czar Norman Podhoretz and by 1991 an editor at the *Times* himself. Tod had previously worked as an editor at the neoconservative journals *The Public Interest* and *The National Interest*, both founded by the other neocon heavy, Irving Kristol, whom Tod once described to me as his “mentor.” As for Tod’s view of the paleoconservatives, in a recent interview with Washington’s *City Paper*, he called their ideas “horsesh-t.” Thus speaks the “official voice of the conservative movement.”

Despite the obvious divergence between our views of conservatism, I got along well with Tod in the four years I wrote editorials under him. He was a remarkably easy editor to work and write for. He never held editorial staff meetings, did not require writers to stay in the office after meeting their deadlines, and seldom altered what I submitted for the page.

As for Wes Pruden, a notoriously aloof editor, I had little contact with him. Other than grunted greetings from him in passing (sometimes not even that), I had no conversations with him at all between the time he made me a columnist in 1991 and the day he canned me in 1995. My talk with him on the latter occasion was the longest I ever had, and that seems to resemble the experience of most writers and reporters at the paper.

The son of a Baptist minister in Little