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Seeking a moral lantern

School debates whether religion would help light path to virtue

By Larry Witham
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BALTIMORE — Students at Chinquapin Middle School still pledge allegiance with the words "under God," but the morning drill is a far cry from the piety of 30 years ago.

In those days the school was named Woodbourne Junior High and the morning began with a reading of Old Testament verse and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

It was a time when schools posted the Ten Commandments, courthouses displayed holiday creches and religious songs, Scripture, invocations and allusions to the deity flowed freely in public forums.

But since the Supreme Court banned prayer and Bible reading from schools on June 17, 1963, most of these symbols have been stripped from the scene.

A look at the current place of God in a nation that separates church and state reveals new anxieties, new conflicts, new searches for meaning, new educational initiatives — and perhaps a bit of a comeback.

Like many Americans, some teachers and parents at Chinquapin still wonder what is supposed to take the place of those former symbols of authority, order and goodness.

"Something is missing, and prayer would help," said Priscilla Scharek, an education assistant. "When I went to school the teacher got the Bible out first, and then we knew everybody should quiet down. The world's gone so bad."

Others don't blame the legal decisions, but rather the gradual dismantling of a moral society — which a school devotion wouldn't have a prayer in stopping.

"What's happening is not a legal problem, but a cultural problem," said Christian Legal Society Executive Director Bradley P. Jacob.

One group, creating an index to watch the nation's "leading social indicators," began with a bleak report

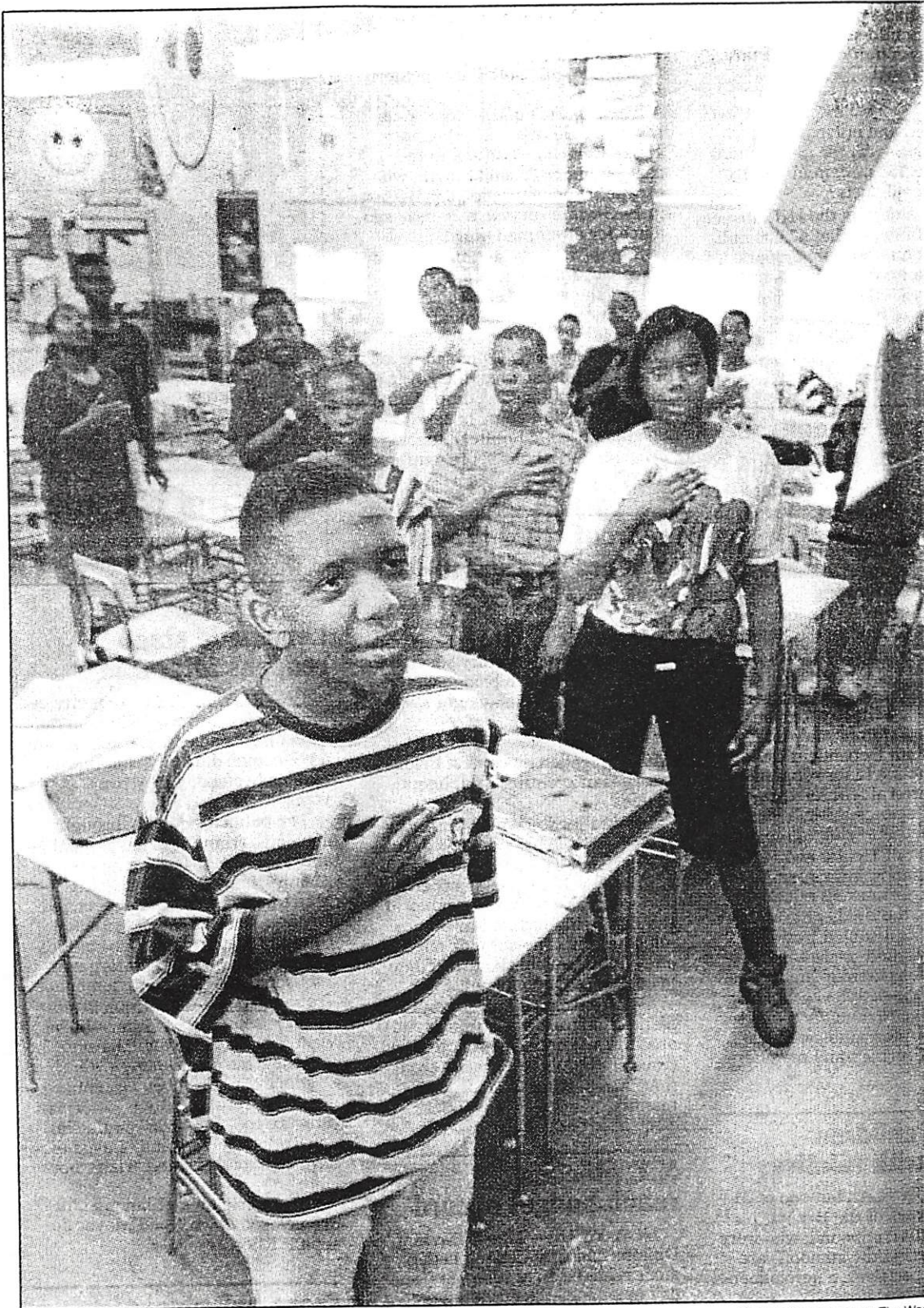


Photo by Peter A. Harris The Was

...and other Chinquapin Middle School seventh-graders start the day with the Pledge of Allegiance.

SEPARATING CHURCH AND STATE

U.S. Supreme Court rulings on religion in public life.

1947 — Everson vs. Board of Education. The First Amendment ban on "establishment of religion" by Congress was extended to the states. It stated the idea of "neutrality," but ruled a tax subsidy for bus transportation of Catholic school students was constitutional.

1948 — McCollum vs. Board of Education. Use of public school facilities for interfaith religious instruction of pupils in Champaign, Ill., is constitutional.

1951 — Niemotko vs. Maryland. Religious groups can use public parks.

1962 — Engel vs. Vitale. A prayer composed by the New York regents to be recited voluntarily by students attending public school is unconstitutional.

1963 — Abington School District vs. Schempp. Officially sponsored Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools is unconstitutional.



The Schempps gather around a Bible after helping outlaw school prayer.

1968 — Board of Education vs. Allen. New York statute requiring tax-subsidized textbooks for parochial and private school students is upheld.

1971 — Lemon vs. Kurtzman. "Excessive entanglement" between church and state should be avoided. Entanglement was added to "neutrality" and "secular purpose" as

the three-part "Lemon test" now used by the court.

1970 — Waltz vs. Tax Commission. Religious bodies have a right to tax exemption because it allows less entanglement with government.

1971 — Tilton vs. Richardson. Government aid to colleges and universities with religious affiliations is secular in purpose if the school is not pervasively religious.

1972 — Wisconsin vs. Yoder. Wisconsin has no "compelling state interest" to make Amish attend public school.

1980 — Stone vs. Graham. Posting the Ten Commandments in public schools is unconstitutional.

1981 — Widmar vs. Vincent. Religious groups can meet at colleges and universities receiving public funds.

1982 — U.S. vs. Lee. Government has a "compelling state interest" in requiring Social Security tax, even from religious believers who want no retirement support.

1984 — Lynch vs. Donnelly. Display of religious symbols on public land is unconstitutional.

1985 — Wallace vs. Jaffe. Alabama's law requiring a moment of

silence in school is unconstitutional because its intent was not secular.

1989 — Allegheny County vs. ACLU. Religious holiday symbols on public property are constitutional if balanced or mitigated by equally prominent secular symbols.

1990 — Board of Education vs. Mergens. The 1984 Equal Access Act, which allows religious clubs to meet at schools on the same terms as other clubs, is constitutional.

1990 — Employment Services vs. Smith. Government need not show a "compelling state interest" to limit a sincerely held religious practice, in this case use of the drug peyote in American Indian religious services. The ruling reversed the 1972 Yoder precedent.

1992 — Lee vs. Weisman. School-sponsored, nonsectarian prayer at graduation ceremony "coerces" students into worship, which is an unconstitutional "establishment" of religion.

1993 — Lamb's Chapel vs. Center Moriches. Religious groups may use public school facilities on par with other public groups as a matter of free speech.

Sources: The Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court and "The Battle for Religious Liberty"

SCHOOL

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in 1993: "The forces of social decomposition are overtaking the forces of social composition," said the group's founder, former Education Secretary William Bennett.

The index, to be announced annually, showed dramatic rises in crime, teen-age pregnancy, youth suicide, television viewing, divorce, drug use, school drop-out rates and single-parent homes since 1960.

The Rev. Gregory Perkins, Chiquapin's PTA president, said, "I actually believe that there is a spirit of mindless madness that has permeated our nation."

These questions are of special interest at Chiquapin because in 1960 as Woodbourne Junior High it bore the burden of Madalyn Murray O'Hair's lawsuit to free her son from a religious exercise carried on in Baltimore since the passage of a 1905 school ordinance.

In banning that practice, the high court warned: "The breach of neutrality that is today a trickling stream may all too soon become a raging torrent."

Today the nation is divided on whether the "raging torrent" hasn't instead gone the other way, toward a bland neutrality or a public "religion" of secularism.

"I'm hard pressed to come up with something different from then and now," said Chiquapin Principal Ian Cohen. "Kids are kids. They need

lots of structuring and support."

But he also said that when it comes to values in a society, a vacuum is abhorred. "If we try to pretend that we're valueless, we're teaching values," Mr. Cohen said.

On the need for values, at least, a consensus has arisen in America. If Hillary Rodham Clinton calls it a "search for meaning" and educators "values," pastors, priests and rabbis still name it religion.

Meanwhile, church-state experts increasingly calmed the fears of public officials that religious expression doesn't always prompt lawsuits. Teaching "about" religion has gained fresh acceptance in public schools.

Major textbooks have been revised recently to say, for example, that Puritans celebrated the first Thanksgiving to thank God and later welcomed Jews and Muslims to American shores.

On Monday, the Supreme Court unanimously said what otherwise was not obvious — religious groups, like anyone else, can use public school buildings to express their free speech.

Laurel A. Jones, an English teacher at Chiquapin since 1974, said she learned recently in a graduate course on the Constitution that more is allowed in schools than she had thought.

"There's been so much in the media about what we can't do," she said. "We can teach moral values that transcend all religions." A religious Christmas carol can be sung, and the word "religion" is not taboo.

But some parents wonder whether these changes have come too late to reverse rampant social problems, said Mr. Perkins, the PTA president.

"We've gone from sticking gum on chairs to metal detectors to find weapons," he said. "Basic morality is discarded by the authorities but anything promiscuous is acceptable."

He is fighting a city proposal to distribute Norplant, a surgically implanted birth control chemical, through school clinics.

The Baltimore city school officials are developing a program called "Character and Citizenship Education," but only after city religious leaders announced the need for "values education."

Some religious leaders see the problem as the rise of "secular humanism" in schools, but for educators it was the failed experiment with "values clarification."

"Before, you went over a value [with students] but gave no direction," said Patelle Harris of the office of curriculum and instruction. "We're giving more direction now. The new program tries to enable students to demonstrate positive behavior."

Rob Reh, spokesman for the Roman Catholic archdiocese, which helped secure a United Way grant for the character project, said: "In an effort to protect people's differences of opinion in religion, they went too far in teaching no values."

Teaching morals still has risks. A court in New Orleans, for example, barred an abstinence-based sex education curriculum from schools,

saying it reflected a religious viewpoint.

"Prayer was just the catalyst, and then we removed all references to morality," said William J. Murray, who now says his mother "used" him to file the lawsuit. "The courts say schools can't teach that adultery is improper or premarital sex is improper because those are Judeo-Christian teachings."

Some have said the deeper problem is that religion no longer shapes American culture. Americans still attend church about as regularly as in 1950, though with less loyalty and more live-and-let-live views about belief and morality.

In that sense, "religion is going down the tubes," Quentin Schultze, professor of communication at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., said in a recent scholarly paper.

"Whoever controls the stories of a culture controls the fundamental stories and beliefs of a culture," he said. That control, he said, is mostly in the hands of television.

Amid this cultural debate, some have said the whole idea of separating church and state, a Colonial concern, is antiquated and needs reassessment.

"Can you name one church that could take over the federal government?" asked John Whitehead, president of the Rutherford Institute, a religious liberty legal service with headquarters in Charlottesville.

The problem today, he said, is not a state church, but judges trying to separate religion from culture — an almost impossible task that ends up

treating religion as a "second-class citizen."

In disagreement, American Civil Liberties Union legislative counsel Robert Peck said religion differs from all other philosophies and customs. "Religion has a coercive appeal," he said. "It's getting additional protection, and that's why it is also separated from the government."

What "separationists" like Mr. Peck and "accommodationists" like Mr. Whitehead agree upon is that the Supreme Court has left a tangled trail of rulings in the past 40 years.

"The court's decisions are impossible to reconcile," said Mr. Peck.

More sinister than that confusion, however, is the court's consistent effort to foist a modern secular view of religion on American society, said Russell Hittinger, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

"The court's consistent in only one thing, and that is viewing religion as divisive, coercive, irrational and meaning... whatever you want," Mr. Hittinger said.

He calls this a secular "prejudice" of elite judges. "The Supreme Court has supplied out of the bounty of its imagination certain 'facts' about religion," Mr. Hittinger said.

While the Founding Fathers said America was meant to be a society of "factions," the modern court has decided religious factions subvert what Justice Felix Frankfurter called "secular unity" and expelled them from public settings, he said.

Mr. Hittinger's solution? Lawmakers should have "the guts" to defy the court. Some are trying.

Arkansas and Tennessee, for example, passed laws this year allowing students to lead prayer at graduation ceremonies after the Supreme Court banned it.

Perhaps the broadest church coalition ever seen, making friends of even the fundamentalists and the ACLU, formed to back the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The law would overturn the effects of a 1990 Supreme Court ruling.

In that decision, the court said government could curtail sincere religious practice without showing a "compelling state interest." This abolished a safeguard the court had given religion in 1972.

But unlike Supreme Court rulings, laws change, said Mr. Jacob of the Christian Legal Society. "What the government giveth, the government taketh away."

While separationists continue to say less entanglement leads to the flourishing of religion, others say government is now so omnipresent that religion needs some accommodation to get equal treatment in society.

Either way, Mr. Jacob said, "Bringing back God is not going to be accomplished through the legal system."

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