

Student's Name

Instructor's Name

Course

Date

Prayers in public school

The subject of religion beliefs and values have over the years elicited mixed reactions since on one hand, there are those who are deeply religious and strongly believe that religion should entrench all the different aspects of their lives. On the other hand, there are those who are not religious at all and believe that their rights are being infringed upon whenever they are required to conform to certain religious views and beliefs. This paper focuses on the subject of religion and discusses in detail the controversial debate pertaining to prayers in public school before coming to a conclusion on whether prayers should be permitted in public schools or not.

The topic of prayers in public schools has been a highly debated topic mainly due to the fact that there are numerous religious beliefs and opinions pertaining to the issue. Indeed, it can be pointed out that there are those who argue that prayer should be a private initiative while on the other hand, there are others who allege that it is good to pray in public since when praying in public, the members of the public who pay attention to the prayers also become part of the prayers and can be able to receive blessings by simply taking part in the prayers.

In the United States, many years have passed since the Supreme Court of the United States prohibited prayers in the public schools in the publicized court case that involved *Engle V. Vitale*. This case had been advanced by a group of families of public school students in New Hyde Park, New York, who argued that the words "Almighty God" that were present in the state board of regents was against their religious beliefs. Stephen Engel who was a staunch believer in Judaism was the leader of the group and had made the claim, that the state's prayer in the school policy was not constitutionally right. In addition to that, it can be pointed out that Engel and his groups were backed up by other groups that also opposed the school prayer. Those supporting group comprised of rabbinical organizations as well as Judaic organizations among others. In this specific case, there were five plaintiffs that comprised of three Jews and two other individuals who alleged that they were religious even though the religion to which they pledged their allegiance to could not be established. The main prayer that was in question was: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country. Amen". After the hearings of the case, it was Justice Hugo Black who returned the verdict which specified that government written papers should not be recited in public schools due to the fact that they were an infringement on the establishment clause of the first amendment as well as the constitution (Dierenfield, 17, 18, 22, 35).

Nevertheless, even though the ruling was expected to help settle any disputes pertaining to the issue of prayers in public schools, the ruling resulted to what can be

referred to as cultural war and has been undergoing for many years and is still taking place in modern day America.

In view of the public school administrators, instructors and other school leaders, they are all required by the federal obligation to uphold an unbiased environment when it comes to the subject of religion. Nevertheless, one of the common misunderstandings on the outcomes of *Engle V. Vitale* entails the notion that the ruling actually banned praying in schools since while in real sense, it is still possible for students to pray on their own or in voluntary prayer groups. Thus, the ruling can be said to have made it possible for those who want to continue praying to continue doing so even though they are expected to do so peacefully. In addition to that, it can also be explained that it is under the mandate of the school administrators to ensure that students who want to pray in public school are afforded that opportunity (Dierenfield, 26).

On a different perspective, when students get a chance to publically address their fellow students, the students are presented with a chance to express their views and opinions as stipulated in the First Amendment. Nevertheless, students have been limited on what they should say in some situations. For examples, the content of the speech made by students during their graduation ceremony has for many years been under contention since while some students feel that they should give honor and praise to God, there are some people who are of the opinion that that giving praise and honor to God in would be contrary to the ruling in the case of *Engle V. Vitale*. Consequently, it has turned out that graduation ceremonies have frequently been one of the main

reasons on the lower court of appeals since each year, graduates plan to honor and praise God in their commencement speeches only to be surprised when they find out that their words have been suppressed by their respective school board. The decision by the school board to not allow honoring and praising God is mainly is mainly due to the fact that the board does not want to be accused of offending the people who do not believe in God. As explained by Robinson (15), a high school valedictorian who was based in California was forbidden from giving a speech that persuaded his audience that they should acknowledge the love of God in the lives. Even though attempts were made to have that decision overturned by the Supreme Court, the court declined to hear the appeal resulting to the lower court ruling remaining in place.

In modern times, various disputes pertaining to the subject of praying God in the public emerges on regular basis. For instance, some students even been aware of the fact that they should not praise God in the public as per the ruling that was made by the Supreme Court in *Engle V. Vitale* case still confidently convey gratitude to God in various school events. For example, a few years ago, schools administrators for one of the schools in Alabama forbid prayers taking place prior to a football game taking place after the administrators had received a letter written from a group that was referring to itself as the Freedom From Religion Foundation and was opposed to the prayers before the football matches started. In addition, there was also opposition from one of the local residents who has expressed his disappointment in the prayers that were said

before the game as they were contrary to First Amendment of the constitution (Thorton, 3).

The reasons for the opposition of prayers in football matches by the group can be explained to have been encouraged by the ruling that was made in the case of *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe in 2000*, where the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that prayers should not be held before any football game irrespective of whether the prayers would be initiated by the students or not. The school expressed the view that the fact that there was no coercion taking place and that the prayers were all in voluntary basis implied that there was no infringement on the First constitution amendment as those who were attending the football match were doing so from their own will and were never forced by anyone. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court rejected the argument that those attending the football matches were doing so on voluntary basis since it was a known fact that it was compulsory that some of the students had to take part in the football matches as it was part of their studies. Moreover, the Supreme Court also explained that football games were important occasions in the social life of any learning institution and thus were also crucial even for the students who were not required to attend the games (Bennett and Foldesy, 188).

Another court case that involved the topic was the case of *Abington School District v. Schempp* which commenced after Edward Schempp who can be explained as having been a Unitarian universalist who resided in Abington Township, filed a suit against the Abington School District to forbid the implementation of a Pennsylvania state law

that demanded his children, take part in the bible reading sessions that were part of school curriculum. Specifically, the law demanded that at least ten bible verses had to be read at the opening of each school day. After the hearing, the ruling was in favor of Schempp as the Pennsylvania statute was struck off. Nevertheless, the school was not happy with the ruling and it appealed it. However, during the appeal process, the Pennsylvania administration modified the statute to permit children to be exempted from the exercises once their parents have submitted their request through writing (Tushnet, 168; Burnette, 802).

On the other hand, it can be pointed out that the issue of prayers in public schools has been a common issue not only in the USA but also on other numerous countries throughout the world. Indeed, the topic has been highly debated in countries such as United Kingdom, German, France and even Turkey among others. As far as the United Kingdom is concerned, it can be pointed out that the School Standards and Framework Act that was enacted in the year 1998 stipulated that that all the students who are in studying in a school that has been classified as a state school have to take part in a day-to-day act of joint worship, unless their guardians or parents demanded that the students be exempted from taking part in the joint worship sessions (Gov.Uk, 2). On the other hand, in case of Turkey where Muslim is the main conviction, school prayers have for many years elicited strong debate as there are various religions in the country and there has always been disagreements on the type of prayers that should be held in public school due to the fact that the public schools have students who subscribe

to different religions. In case of France, the country is mainly considered as a secular country and as a result, there are no prayers that can be held in the public schools while those who want to say prayers on their own are required to practice their religion beliefs on their own.

Thus, as it is evident from the discussions, when it comes to the topic of prayers in public school, some people strongly support prayer in public schools, while others are strongly opposed to the prayers in public school. Thus, this issue has for many years dragged on since when the rights of those who want to pray in public are honored, the rights of those who are against praying the public are not honored implying that it is no longer possible to have freedom extended to all the people. Indeed, by the students who are Christians saying prayers in the public, the freedom of those who have no willingness to be involved in any religion activities can be argued to be infringed. Thus, in order to ensure that no part of the divide is discriminated against, it would be ideal if students who want to pray in public are allowed to do so on voluntary basis while those who are opposed to prayers in public are also allowed to be exempted from the prayers.

The reason why that would be the case would be due to the fact that by limiting those who want to pray in public pray, the rights of the students would be infringed upon. Nevertheless, it is important that the prayers are also carried out in a manner that the rights of those who are not believers in prayers are not affected. Moreover, it is obvious that majority of Americans believe in existence of God and if democracy was to

be applied, prayers in public school should be permitted. However, since the constitution guarantees everyone equal rights, it is vital that public prayers are carried out on voluntary basis while still doing whatever is necessary in order to ensure that the rights of non-believers are not affected.

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