An Address

by

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"TEACHING MORAL AND SPIRITUAL VALUES
IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS"

I am deeply grateful for the rare privilege to speak to you on one of the most vexing and critical problems which face teachers today. I confess that I have deep misgivings about my competency. Though I may not be able to solve the extraordinarily complex and vital topic which we are considering, I trust that what I say may provide fruitful discussion for you in the balance of your convention.

My ambivalent feelings are much like those of the little girl who ran away from home and left a note behind saying: "Dear Mommie: I hate you. Love, Karen." But I have a great hope that I may be able, at least, to shed some light on the problem because I have indeed that first ingredient: a deep and abiding respect for you who are teachers. I trust you believe that this is said not as a polite amenity, but out of conviction and my own religious background. For a long time I wondered about my role here tonight. I am not an expert in the field of education. I would gladly sit at the feet of many of you to explore the ways of discovering the key to the greatest power on earth which is the development of the full potentials of the human mind. Your colleague, Vaughn Phelps, extended your invitation to me. His graciousness was simply a matter of mutual friendship overriding good judgment. And I told him so. But I took advantage of him — and you — by accepting this cherished opportunity.

And I justify my action to myself by reflecting upon the inescapable fact that my own religious heritage of Judaism rests almost totally upon learning and study. As a rabbi I am not a clergyman, but a teacher. It would therefor be an evasion of my duty as a rabbi, if not as a concerned parent and citizen, were I to hesitate to give serious thought with you on the demanding question which we face. I dare to hope that in those areas where my own thoughts and views may differ from yours there will be maintained the kind of common search that will, of the differences produce something of value for us all.

Let me approach our subject by saying categorically that I believe that the more firm the separation of church and state the better. With variations and new interpretations this principle has served our country well. With the guarantee of religious liberty in America there has emerged in our society the American Public School, one of the greatest institutions of learning the world has ever known in all its long history. It is also the greatest educational force the world is ever likely to know. Any development of the concept of the Public School here or elsewhere can only expand or adapt upon the goal of education for every child. It is this idea of universal free public education which ought capture our allegiance and our unwavering loyalty. Let me simply bring into the forefront of your consciousness that which you already know and perhaps take too much for granted. The only requirement for entrance into the Public Schools of our country is that you be a boy or girl living in America. You need not even be a citizen. Just a child living in America.

And make no mistake about it. This grand and glorious idea of public education for all is under double assault, very serious assault. In the southern states the problem of integration has already weakened public education and could very well destroy it. In frantic efforts to avoid integration of pupils and faculty many schools, formerly public, have used legal fictions to classify themselves as private schools to

evade and frustrate the principle of education for all.

The second source of danger to the public school comes from the increase of parochial schools. This growth of private religiously oriented schools is to be seen not just among Catholics but among Protestants and Jews as well. As a religionist and as one who would wish all children, my own included, to have a more intense grounding in their own particular religious heritage I can well understand the need for Elementary and Secondary Schoools in which moral and spiritual values would be taught from the point of view of a particular faith and where that specific philosophy would be interwoven with other disciplines and areas of study in the curriculum. It is interesting to note however that juvenile delinquency and misbehavior is not significantly less among students in parochial schools compared to the record of students in public schools.

As a Jew I can especially sympathize with those who choose for their children the path of parochial education. I know that, generally speaking, education in the public schools is taught from a white Protestant point of view. It is likely to remain that way for quite some time.

Still in all, considering even the most obvious advantages of private religious sectarian education, I cast my choice for the public school. At its worst it is still the broadest educational medium ever devised. At its best it is the hope of a society of free men engaged in common search and unrestricted inquiry into the deepest wisdom that the human mind can comprehend.

Given then both the limitations and the opportunities of the public school, what shall we do about bringing moral and spiritual values into the curriculum of elementary and secondary education?

The question itself has considerable background that is part of its own answer. No teacher, no parent, no citizen can fail to be impressed by the urgency of the moral and spiritual problems which

cluster around the education of the youth of our land. Sadly, there is abundant evidence that while we are the most powerful nation on the face of the earth, living at the highest level of material prosperity in the history of any nation anywhere, we have inherited at the same time a host of ethical problems. The most serious of these are manifested among our youth.

I do not need to catalogue them for this audience. They range all the way from outright brutality in the case of race relations in many areas of our country to the fearful gang wars of the large metropolitan centers. They include the violent and pathological syndromes of personal destructiveness in the form of dope addiction, defiance of authority and unleashed sexual license. These and many other variants all point to a decay in the groundings of moral and spiri values and the bankruptcy of family and church and social control.

Such matters point to the need for finding ways of re-establishing the values which we believe protect the integrity of the individual, and offer to every child the opportunity to grow in mind and body and spirit in accordance with his capacities. And so we look for ways to teach these values.

There is another imperative which drives toward the same goal. It is the fundamental difference between East and West. It is the basic conflict between the so-called Free World and the nations in the Soviet orbit. I think we know that at root the fundamental difference between these two worlds is not economic and not political and not sociological. The free world itself displays wide variety of choice of economic systems, political and social structures. The basic difference between East and West is a spiritual matter. This involves a concept of Man, his dignity and the inviolability of his personality. In our society we regard the individual human soul as the paramount value. The Nation, the state or the government is conceived and

operates only in order to serve the individual. Another way of putting it is couched in religious terms: "Man is created in the image of God." And by that we mean that every human life, and every child of God is a sacred value that we dare not traduce. Whether we live up to this principle is quite another matter. But at best this is our stated conviction. It is now being taught and ought always be taught in our publi schools.

The opposite is true of the Soviet philosophy. There we see a kind of abstract generic concept of man and which human destiny transcends individual happiness, health, desire and even life. There the highest form of human creativity is the State for the perpetuity of which and the power of which the individual may legitimately be made to suffer, labor, live and die. This is called the philosophy of materialism. In common parlance - Godless Atheism.

We Americans do not want to be identified with that philosophy. So we make a great show of the religiosity of our nation. Witness the phrase "under God" in the pledge of allegiance to our flag. Without any doubt this phrase, unknown when I was a boy, was inspired as a kind of counter-propaganda to the Godless Atheism of the Community world. To my dying day, religionist tho' I am, passionate Jew that I am, servant of God that I hope I am, I will resent those words because I believe they are a phony intrusion on the part of government into a deeply personal right of conscience. I do not believe that every man must declare his belief in God in order to be a good and loyal American. You must know as I do many who profess to be religious believers who are anything but good citizens. And I know of nothing in the pattern of the American form of government or of the American concept of society that is more important than the guarantee of freedom of belief <u>or disbelief</u> according to one's own intellectual and spiritual choice.

Or witness the pious phrase: "In God We Trust" on our coinage and our currency. If there is anything more subject to corrupt usage

and defilement than money, I do not know what it is. Let me observe also that I have not yet seen the mottoe "In God We Trust" on anything higher than a one dollar bill! I suppose that is as far as trust in God goes!

It is my feeling that these two obvious situations: the deteriorating moral climate in American among our young people and the urge to declare our nation as a "religious" or "God-fearing" nation in contra-distinction to Soviet Russia have provided the sense of urgency behind the drive for more formal recognition of the effects of religion upon our culture and our American heritage.

The proponents of plans to introduce a heavier emphasis upon religion in the public schools are motivated by the highest of principles. For many "religion" seems to offer a way to inculcate into young minds the moral and spiritual principles to which we assent. It is believed the study <u>about</u> religion can demonstrate how the heritage of Judaism and Christianity have influenced western thought in art, government, law, ethics, music and philosophy.

I believe, however, there is still another motive for this proposal and the search for ways to implement it. Here I must necessarily beg your courtesy in an area of sharp disagreement with many knowledgable men. Still I believe that the effort to introduce <u>any kind</u> of conscious religious instruction into public education, even the emphasis of religion in areas such as history, art, social studies and the like, where it would not naturally flow from the regular development of the course, indicates the failure of the churches and synagogues to do their job. The poverty of the programs of religious education in the church is camouflaged, however, by the unwarranted attack upon the public schools as "Godless." Honest critics of schools ought to look to their own clergy and their own religious

schools and Sunday Schools for the key to inculcating moral and spiritual commitment, not to the public schools. The public schools ar doing the job they were meant to do.

In one sense the public schools are and ought to be godless. Theologically, the public school has no proper definition of God (OR OF GOD'S WILL) to offer! There is no theological concept of which I can think which woul not be counter to the accepted teachings of some church or some religio There is for that matter no proper definition of Man, Sin, Holy Scriptures, revelation, sainthood, what Jews believe, what Catholics believe, what Protestants believe, the Protestant Reformation, the Pharisees, Jesus, the Messiah or the good life which could possibly be in place in a public school. If (ANY OF) these topics (WOULD) be discussed in a public school and were a teacher willing to run the risk of offending those who disagree, then such watered down "common core" definitions and concepts have emasculated the heart and soul of religion.

The kind of religion we are talking about is that deeply rooted emotional attachment to an idea of the Holy which motivates an individual's thoughts and actions in response to the will of his God. And this sort of thing you can't present by teaching "about" it. This brand of religion is learned by living within the context and atmosphere of an "ecclesia" — a church or a community of people or a family whose roots draw nourishment out of a particular historic tradition and heritage.

Well, you will say, how about all the obvious and important effects which religion has had upon history, art, literature, and music? Of course, these should be and must be taught in public schools. But I add an emphatic and inescapable caveat. Such matters can legitimately and effectively be taught IF they are really germain to the subject. It is dishonest to drag religion in by the coat-tails in deference to a preconceived notion of what religion ought to mean

or what we wish it had meant in a specific area of concern.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. In the public schools of Indianapolis, Indiana just such a program of teaching moral and spiritual values was attempted as concerns our discussion here. In fact, some years ago with the blessing of the Board of Education, Catholics, Protestants and Jews labored to create courses teaching "about religion" for the public schools. The so-called Indianapolis Plan — a 6-weeks course — was introduced in 1954. Ladies and Gentlemen, that course lasted exactly six weeks. It was withdrawn because of protests from Catholics, Protestants and Jews and because of educational inadequacies. Not long ago I had occasion to wish to see an outline of that course. A copy of it could not readily be found in the Archives of the Board of Education. It was disastrous. For in attempting to please everyone it pleased no one. Instead, it was decided to integrate the course material into the Social Studies curriculum of the 7th and 8th grades.

In this manner religion is mentioned only when it is truly intrinsic to the topic being discussed. Still even this has its dangers and pitfalls.

For instance: in the Tentative Guide for teachers in the Junior High School (Revised Edition) Curriculum Bulletin No. 3 there is a Unit for the Seventh Grade on the General Theme "Background and Early History of the United States." The particular Unit to which I make reference bears the heading Gifts of Ancient Civilizations -- The Cradles of Civilization -- Ancient Lands of the Mediterranean Area. Listed under the Ancient Civilizations along with Egyptians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Assyrians and Chinese are the Hebrews with a subheading of both Judaism and Christianity.

Now I understand the intent of the lesson. But the pupils won't. As a Jew or a Christian I would object to the inclusion of Judaism and

Christianity in the list of ancient civilizations. We are both very much alive.

Or another example of this kind of thing: Under suggested activities there is this. Pupils may "Discuss the Hebrew idea of one God." Note this does not say the Jewish idea of one God, but the Hebrew idea of one God. A fine topic: for a master's degree, but not for seventh grade pupils!

The same difficulty is to be met in discussions of the rise and spread of the Church, the Crusades, the reasons for them, their extent and effect. From those point of view?

Equally as serious as the variant points of view and the divisiveness such discussions must engender in a class is the blatant tendenticusness of many comments and questions. We have not the right to require a preconceived answer or point of view from our students when history does not really warrant that answer.

For instance: Pupils are encouraged to discuss the place of the Christian Church in keeping learning alive. Now it is true that the Christian Church in the main and at times ~~keep~~ KEPT learning alive. But I can also offer multiple examples of episodes in history where the Christian Church suppressed learning and free inquiry and scientific knowledge on dogmatic and doctrinal grounds.

In the same curriculum I am discussing under headings of "Evaluation" there are comments like these:

"That religion provides a spiritual and moral basis for the growth of countries." My question: Is that always true or has, on occasion, the opposite been true?

Or this:

"That the men responsible for the framework of our Government were men of religious faith." My question: How about the men who were not of strong religious faith?

And this:

"Discuss how the pioneers' religious faith helped them bear dangers and hardships." My question: Did it always? Whom did it help? Whom did it not help, and why?

It seems to me that this kind of tendentiousness does more harm than good because it must give rise to discussions of sectarian religious doctrine among a lot of students who are not willing to swallow the pap of preconceived notions of sticky religiosity. This kind of teaching uses religion to beg a question for propagandistic purposes. It can hardly have the desired effect on the ethical behavior of students.

In my view, religion, even at its best, is not an end in itself. And we should say so and teach it so. We are not concerned with the salvation of souls. That's the task of those churches who subscribe to this theological doctrine. For our part we ought distinguish sharply between information and inspiration. Some of the most learned students of religion are sharply opposed to religion. I have seen, for instance, a History of Israelite Religion which was written by a life-long anti-semite.

As regards religion, therefore, we must understand our place in teaching. Our duty is to inform through as honest and objective a recit of the facts of life as we are capable of presenting. Where religion or some facet of it, its ideas, its architecture, its music, its art forms or its philosophical view of men's problems and goals <u>are really germain</u> to the lesson, then by all means let us teach those facts. But to make religion say what we want it to say as a kind of pious bow in th direction of "faith" is to falsify history and to engage in self defeating debate between the varying points of view.

Besides, I maintain that there is no such thing as a "common core" faith. It is precisely the unique factors in each faith which makes Judaism or Christianity or any religion or even agnosticism and

atheism what they are. To dilute the uniqueness of each faith is to abuse it and to engage in intellectual surrender of integrity. It is the rare teacher, who being faced with a discussion of religious content or an evaluation of the role of religion in a social situation, who can resist the temptation to speak from his own point of view. And, further, meaning no disrespect, I find even fewer teachers who ha the background and training in Biblical literature, the History of Religion, the Psychology and Philosophy of Religion, in dogmatic or systematic theology to teach even the rudiments of these subjects objectively even if they wanted to.

To repeat: religion is not an end in itself. It is the means to an end. It is the emotional and spiritual background out of which a man finds a motivation for ethical behavior. It is that behavior with which the school ought be concerned. And you don't teach behavio the way you teach the laws of physics or the chromatic scale.

A teacher can open a world of knowledge to students in the newly learned facts of science. Similarly, a student may learn that on the Liberty Bell there is an inscription that says "Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof". The student may also learn that this verse is taken from the Book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible. But I doubt very much whether knowing those facts will necessarily motivate the student to emotional acceptance of the principle of human equality and to a dedication of his life's activitie in accordance with it. Anyone in the field of human relations will tell you that there is a world of difference between what an individual understands intellectually and what he can accept emotionally. The history of race relations in America and, indeed, throughout the world, at this moment is ample case in point.

It would, therefore, be my counsel and suggestion that the administration of public education be wary against over-reacting to

the pleas for full scale teaching of religious principles or what is evasively called moral and spiritual values in our classrooms.

Some of you may know that recently the matter has been an issue of discussion in the community from which I come, in the Omaha Public Schools. It would be pointless here to repeat even the gist of the discussions, except to point out that those who advocate teaching what they allege are merely the "facts" of the Biblical Literature and the teachings of various religions and religious denominations will be hard put to it to determine just what those facts are. Even the simple usage of Bible stories runs afoul of problems. Eschewing all interpretation of meaning, is it a fact or not that the Israelites came out of Egypt in the manner described? Is it a fact or not that the Ten Commandments were revealed by Moses at Sinai? Did Isaiah really see a vision of God as he declares in the magnificent Temple vision? There are those who would declare both yes and no in answer to these questions.

Still, this is not to say that moral and spiritual values or the influence of religion in various departments of learning are to be avoided. I repeat: they should not be, and they are not. I myself have been invited to classes in social problems and discussed the place of minority groups in the American society and their contributions to general culture. I have lectured to classes in linguistics on the influence of the Hebrew language via the various translations of the Bible on English and American literature. In cases such as these we are dealing with clearly demonstrable facts which can legitimately be integrated into a lesson and are honestly germain to the subject. Such presentations do not involve a conscious effort to teach "about religion" nor is there implicit in the discussion an effort to alter the meaning of history to accommodate guilt feelings from the imagined godlessness in our classrooms.

We have no right to raise to a level of false significance passing allusions to God, religion or religious convictions in the treatment

of any subject. Secular political documents whether they be our own Constitution or the great enunciations of other countries should stan on their own merits. It is the substance of such documents which counts not the use of words. We dare not to confuse the significant with the trivial in the hope that the more usage of words like "God" and "Divine will" and the like will automatically inspire moral and spiritual values.

If I knew how to teach moral and spiritual values in any setting with unfailing accuracy, I would be a far more important figure than I am. I don't think anyone really knows the answer to that question.

But I have some observations about it. Perhaps my views come from my own particular Jewish education and commitment which has no place for the sacramental and views ritual, prayers and ceremonies of all kinds merely as means to the greater end of the good life.

Religion for me is experiential. It is existential, if you will. What we learn of our world, its wonders, beauties and mysteries and challenges can, in the context of a religious education in the church or the synagogue, create an atmosphere in which men can be imbued with moral and ethical mandates that determine the direction of their life's decisions.

I have read, as have you, many defenses of the "godlessness" of our schools. They make comfortable reading and, in the main, are true. It is said that while God may not specifically be mentioned, or the concepts of theology may not be directly studied, our pupils learn fairplay, honesty, decency and loyalty in our public schools. Certainly they do. But only when the teacher is a fine person. When the teacher knows how to expand upon situations which arise in the life of the pupil and the school. When a good and kind person teaches <u>any</u> lesson: moral and spiritual values are being inculcated in the child.

And lest you think this answer too simple, let me say that the most intensely religiously observant person who is without kindness, without a sense of life's wonders, without a love for the soul and mind of the child will do more harm by oppressive dogmatism and religious authority AND APOLOGETICS than all the ethically oriented agnostics and atheists put together.

Let me tell you a story that will help me to justify my position and to explain my dilemma. It is told that once there was a centipede who had painful arthritis in all his 100 legs. In desperation he went to the wise old owl and asked for relief. Said the owl: "The matter is simple. All you have to do is remove 80 of your legs and you will have only 20% of the pain you now have." "Fine", said the centipede. "But How do I do that?" "Look", said the owl,"I don't explain THE method, I merely set policy."

I'm in that position. I can't explain method to you who are experts in that field. But I'm sure of the policy I set before you. I know from the history of Judaism through the ages that when religion becomes a ritualistic piety separated from the context of life, spirit perishes. I know that religion is an attitude toward home and office and business and nature and play and every human experience from birth to death. And above all I know that the pursuit of knowledge and truth in all forms leads inevitably to God no matter what the terminology.

There was a time when competent philosophers separated science and religion, regarding them as incompatible. Only the most narrowly fundamentalistic still hold to that approach. The dictates of religion, which is to say, its ethics and morals, are in no wise restricted by the enormous expansion of scientific knowledge. Religion is not based upon the unknown. It stands upon the known. And every time a new truth comes to be understood, every time there is new understanding and new appreciation of beauty and REKINDLED new wonder at the majesty of this total FRESH

universe of ours, we come closer to God. If you think this statement unwarranted, reflect very carefully upon what appears to me to be indisputably true: that all knowledge is tentative and every new discovery of truth enlarges our perception of how much more we have still to learn.

I suggest to you, fellow teachers, that you are the guardians o mankind. Not our military, not our diplomats not our elected representatives in government, but you, our teachers, are the guardians of our civilization. Ancient among my people is the story in the Talmud which tells that two rabbis were traversing the land of Israel inspecting the schools of the towns to appoint teachers. They came to one ci and they found no teacher in it. So they said to the townspeople: "Bring us the guardians of the city." And they brought to the rabbis the senators of the town. And the rabbis said: "Are these the guardi of the town?" And so they brought before them the captains of the guard. And the rabbis said: "Nor are these the guardians of the city but its destroyers!" "Who then are the guardians of our city", they cried. And they said: "The teachers of little children." As it is said: "Unless the Lord keep the city, the watchman wakes but in vain."

I think that we who are teachers need a new faith in our calling Ours is not to respond to every cry from those whose own vineyard is overgrown with weeds. Ours is the task to teach. To teach everything we know with full hearts and open minds. To lead every child in America to an understanding of all that is decent and good and just. To draw those lessons out of the great utterances of our people, the American heritage, the wonders of the laboratory, the poetic flights of imagination in literature, the exultation of music and above all from the lessons in the history of every people on this earth.

And ours is the Faith not to espouse a creed or doctrine or to insist that there be one. Ours must be a Faith in human goodness and

in the unlimited potential and power and glory that is the greatest gift of God: the human mind.

Perhaps this is why there is written large in my own tradition an utterance I fervantly trust will encourage and uplift you in the great task to which you have dedicated your lives: "He who teaches his neighbor's son is as if he had created him."

Let us continue in this spirit with all the strength of mind and heart within us to give life and hope and purpose through our teaching to the young people in our care.

So shall we join with an inspired predecessor of ours whose words are preserved in Holy Scriptures telling each generation that we who are teachers are charged with guiding our students:

"To know wisdom and instruction;
To comprehend the words of understanding;
To receive the discipline of wisdom,
Justice and right and equity;
To give prudence to the simple,
To the young man knowledge and discretion."

(Prov. 1:2 f.f.)