

Who Cares? Am I My Brother's Keeper?

by Theodore Plantinga

Diane Francis is an American who has taken up residence in Canada and is now a prominent commentator on financial and political affairs. Some Canadians wish she had stayed home, for she seems to advocate the further Americanization of Canadian life: will Canada still be Canada once Francis and others of her ilk have had their way?

I share the concerns of critics who raise such questions, but I suspect they may be doing her an injustice. Her thinking is more nuanced and geared to Canadian needs than people might suppose at first. It turns out that she is indeed willing to criticize her native land on a point that would win agreement from a great many Canadians. She writes: "America's biggest disgrace is its lack of equalization payments for education. Only a handful of states have adopted this system, which is used in Europe and Canada. The result is unevenly funded public education and unfair opportunities for wealthy children." She explains further that the problem is that "... Americans have no equalization mechanism to spread taxes evenly among schools. Instead, high tax-paying white suburbs deliver first-class education, and poor black neighborhoods are stuck with fourth-grade education." [NOTE 1]

Francis, it appears, is not quite the "privatizer" that some might take her to be. She does have a social conscience after all. She is willing, in some sense, to be her brother's keeper -- or the keeper of his children who need schooling. It's all right with her when funds derived from her tax payments are used for the education of youngsters who are not her offspring. She wishes to share in the responsibility for the children of the community, and so she pleads for a mechanism to make this responsibility operative, lamenting its absence in parts of the USA.

Because many conservative folk respond so readily to the "privatization" mantra chanted by certain commentators today when they deal with social issues, her defense of equalization payments will be probably rejected in some quarters in which she is otherwise well thought of. I suspect that some of the

people who would take issue with her would find themselves drawn to the radical privatization of learning that was proposed decades ago by that noted gadfly and social critic Ivan Illich, the man who proposed to "deschool" society. (See his book *Deschooling Society*.) [NOTE 2]

Part of Illich's appeal is his timely warning not to fall into impulse buying -- whether in the supermarket of food or in the supermarket of learning opportunities. Buy only what you need, is his advice. By putting control over educational choices firmly in the hands of consumers, Illich hopes to limit the influence of the institutions and bureaucracies he warns us against.

Many Christians who are supporters of separate, religiously-based day schools have a lingering admiration for Illich's position. While it might seem uncharitable to say so openly, their concern is that they don't like paying for the education of just anyone -- or just anyone's child. They do not wish to be their brother's keeper, educationally speaking.

Such an attitude on the part of religious folk might seem small-minded, and so the people in question tend to hide it by enunciating something that sounds like a principle, namely, that they do not wish to support "secular" education. They may have no choice in the matter and wind up supporting public schools regardless of whether they enroll their own children in them. But such an arrangement leaves them feeling hard done by. To them it seems unfair, but the question is: in what exact respect is it unfair? Is it unfair that I must pay for the education of others? Or is it unfair that I must pay for an education whose underlying philosophy is at odds with my own convictions?

My objective in this essay is to explore this sense of unfairness, a sense that is grounded in an implicit denial that I am my brother's keeper, and to point to a possible compromise that might bring us back to an earlier and better era of schooling. To bring my objective into view, I must first distinguish two reasons for the unease about so-called "public" education. One is, indeed, that supporting public schools or being involved in them in some way brings one into contact with elements in society that might be regarded as undesirable. Do you really want your children associating with those of low degree, so to speak? Do you want them associating with children who seem to come from no family whatsoever, who have perilously little in the way of manners and breeding about them? To some extent, the desire to keep one's own children away from the "rotten kids" is a motive for supporting separate Christian day schools. Such a sentiment might not sound worthy when stated so baldly, but it lives in the hearts of many parents.

When we consider the "rotten kids" motive we see that there is a neighborhood aspect to schooling. Just as people may choose to live in a better neighborhood so that their children will interact with a better class of people, parents may be fussy about the classmates with whom their children wind up associating in school. Such a determination on the part of parents may have its place, but it does not, in my opinion, erase the responsibility that such parents have toward the welfare of children in our society in general. In a democratic society like ours, we are indeed our brother's keeper, even if our brother does not share our faith or fundamental convictions.

How, then, can one acknowledge the need for "public" schools while still protecting one's own children from undesirable influences in school? This is not a question that admits of an easy answer. But it is a question which Christians sometimes dodge -- perhaps unconsciously -- by protesting against the secular attitudes and presuppositions in public schools (the second reason for being uneasy about public schools) and then pointing to those secular attitudes as a reason to steer clear of the public school community (along with the children it seeks to serve). One then becomes an enthusiastic adherent of the "privatization" approach. Each family is to pay its own way when it comes to education, and each family takes full responsibility for what its children are taught. Some home-schooling thinking falls into this camp.

In we are to move in a better direction when it comes to attitudes toward the public schools, we need to open up a little space in the public system for the faith aspirations of Christians and of people in some other traditions, people who are united in wanting to re-admit God to the classroom. In choosing my words here, I am alluding to Lois Sweet's book *God in the Classroom*, which received quite some discussion in Canada when it first appeared before the public in the form of a five-part series of articles in the Toronto *Star* and also as a two-part documentary on CBC television's "National Magazine" in November of 1996. [NOTE 3]

Sweet and some other commentators are afraid that allowing God back in will result in religiously-grounded strife and hard feeling. Her concern is by no means unfounded; yet I believe that because the desire to have God in the classroom is so deep in a great many Canadians, excluding him altogether on the basis of some sort of formal principle (e.g. the American idea that there needs to be a "wall" between church and state) is in effect to give up on the idea of community-wide educational cooperation in Canada, a country which is already too fragmented and committed to regional blocks in its political life. We need unity in Canadian life, and we will not get it if people of faith feel

forced out of the public school system because God has been expelled from the classroom.

So how can we open the door just a crack to make some room for God? For one thing, we should recognize that "God in the classroom" is a clever but misleading phrase, a phrase that will not help us shed light on the issue. If there is no God, as some contend, we need not fear that he will enter the classroom. But if the God worshipped by Christians actually exists, there is no keeping him out. And so I suggest that the question is not so much whether *God* is in the classroom as whether *talk* about God and to God is permitted in the classroom.

Although I am an advocate of God-talk, I understand why it frightens some people. Many strange and dreadful deeds have been performed in human history on the basis of God-talk. And a number of the world's hot spots today are made hotter by God-talk.

Even so, we should not rush to abolish God-talk altogether in places we designate as "public." Instead we should ask whether there might be some fundamentally different types of God-talk. If the answer is yes, is it conceivable that some of them would be more tolerable in a pluralistic setting than others? I believe that there are indeed some fundamental types to be distinguished, and that our problem, educationally speaking, can be made more manageable if we can agree on the types. It might then be possible to open up our public discourse in public schools by allowing some forms of God-talk while continuing to exclude others.

The first and strongest form of God-talk to be distinguished is what I will call the class A version. Let's say that one has very recently received a verbal message from God which has a direct bearing on some situation here on earth. In effect, one says, "God told me to do this or that." There have been cases where deranged individuals have made such statements when explaining horrible deeds they have performed, such as murders. And so the instinctive fear of God-talk in many people today is grounded in some measure in such situations.

Now, some perfectly sane and respectable people occasionally engage in God-talk of this sort as well. Billy Graham is among them. Such Christians report getting direct responses from God when they bring some matter before him in prayer. And if God gives a direct answer of this sort, it must be accepted and acted upon. In the family setting this may presumably be done without much difficulty when the divine message comes via the head of the family, but in

larger organizational settings it can lead to friction. Indeed, some thinkers claim that God-talk of this sort kills discussion and dialogue: it is a guaranteed "conversation-stopper."

Is there something socially inappropriate about this sort of God-talk? I am tempted to say yes. Even in mild-mannered or moderate Christian circles, people generally avoid it. A person may say that he has prayed a great deal about a particular issue and is now convicted that he must do such-and-such. Yet this sort of appeal to God's guidance in one's life still falls short of a claim to the effect that what God wants in a particular situation is a simple matter of fact -- "He told me just this morning when I was talking with him. No argument -- just believe, and do it"

It is class A God-talk, in particular, that a great many people would like to banish from the classroom established for all the children in the community. But the determination to keep it out has, bit by bit, made the public school seem more secular by far than it needs to be if it is to serve the educational needs of children from atheistic families. Hence I would like to distinguish class B and class C God-talk as types for which room can be found in today's public schools -- provided we are willing to consider calmly what is and is not involved in such God-talk.

In the case of class A God-talk, we may feel we are in a bizarre situation. One person proclaims that he has just received what amounts to a telegram from the Judge of all the earth. Surely the telegram will settle whatever argument may have been underway. But another person in this situation is convinced that there is no Judge of all the earth. To confront the person with the telegram by refusing to accept the telegram's authenticity is a bit like calling him insane. And when we call someone insane, we are cutting off dialogue.

Class B God-talk is not threatening in this way. Such God-talk consists of appealing to -- and applying -- the ideas expressed in written documents that are regarded by some community as having come from God some time ago. Hence the "telegram" discussed earlier does not qualify. The standard example, of course, is what Christians call the Bible. To re-admit God into the classroom under the heading of class B God-talk is to allow people to quote from and discuss the Bible while regarding it as having come from God in the manner laid down in Christian doctrine. But allowing class B God-talk does *not* require everyone to believe in the Christian account of the Bible's status.

What needs special emphasis here is that class B God-talk is not of such a nature as to cut off discussion immediately. Neither does it lead some people to

wonder whether their conversation partner might be insane. Class B God-talk can easily take place across a major religious gulf, with one person denying that what we call the Bible stems from God, while the other affirms it. Such a disagreement can be allowed to stand while the two parties to the discussion explore what the text of the Bible actually says about this or that issue, e.g. charging interest when we lend money to people. Thus class B God-talk does not kill the discussion that contributes so much to the health of a pluralistic and democratic society.

In this essay I am not presupposing that class B God-talk has been formally and completely rendered taboo in public schools. There are many schools, especially in the USA, where Christian prayer is feared as though it were the plague, leaving Christian children in the school who wish to pray together feeling a little like lepers. Presumably prayer is thought to open the door to class A God-talk. Yet the Bible, as a book, can still find its way into some of those schools. Sometimes it is admitted as "literature," which means, at the very least, that it is something written that is thought to possess certain qualities of excellence.

To admit the Bible (and thereby class B God-talk) under this heading is a good beginning. If we can accompany such a step with some open recognition of the different positions in our society as to what the Bible actually is, we will have made some progress. Of course there are other documents that would have essentially the same status, such as the Book of Mormon and the Koran.

In a way, what I am proposing is so simple that one hardly dares to state it, for fear of coming across as simple-minded. In any school one can study the Bible, or a passage from it, and say, "This is what many people in our society accept as having come from God and as worthy of belief and obedience." Once this admission is made, God is back in the classroom -- not in the full-orbed way that some Christians would recommend, but in a significant sense indeed.

To have God back in the classroom in this sense does not exempt us from the trouble of thinking. Any text that has been around for a long time will be somewhat distant from today's problems and concerns -- unlike a telegram received just this morning. Thus it will be possible to ask, "But what does the Bible (or the Book of Mormon, or the Koran) say or imply about such-and-such a question?" Jewish believers, in particular, have a very distinguished tradition of studying sacred texts (the Torah) and multiple commentaries on those texts (the Talmud) as they explore ethical issues that did not face Jews of earlier centuries. The disagreements in their ranks as to how those texts bear on life today do not invalidate the status of those texts as having come from God. In

other words, believing Jews have set a wonderful hermeneutical example for us. Interpretation is by no means incompatible with reverence for the sacred text to which we have chosen to submit.

In our eagerness to accommodate persons of other faith communities and so to claim the title of pluralist, we have gone overboard in apologizing for our adherence to a sacred text. To appeal to the Bible as normative when one is not in a strictly Christian environment is almost like falling into bad manners. We need to set such fears behind us and learn to say to a discussion partner who is an atheist, "In my tradition we accept the Bible as normative and as stemming ultimately from God, and the Bible has the following to say about the point we are discussing" This might be faintly embarrassing the first few times you try it, but eventually it comes to seem quite ordinary.

There is also a third class of God-talk to be considered, but it is somewhat more nebulous. Many Christians do not confine themselves to the Bible when it comes to articulating what God wants in this or that situation today. They appeal to divine "norms" and claim that one "senses" such norms. Some of those norms have to do with aspects or dimensions of life today that are not mentioned in the Bible. Times have certainly changed since the final books of the Bible were composed.

A good example of class C God-talk is what some Christians say about environmental protection. Our environment will continue to deteriorate if we do not articulate general rules to safeguard its integrity and insist that those rules be respected. Many secular environmentalists state such rules freely. Their Christian counterparts may agree, by and large, on the rules that ought to be followed, but they will feel inclined to add that the rules in question represent God's will for life in our time. They are not thereby claiming to find them in the Bible. By taking such an approach, they are again bringing God into the classroom, or into the public square, or the legislature in case of a political discussion.

Class C God-talk can easily be ridiculed. I would therefore add that it does not suffice for an individual suddenly to attach divine sanction to his own wishes or desires -- otherwise we would be close to class A again. The sensing of a norm that underlies class C God-talk must be done by a substantial community -- but not necessarily by *all* the members of the religious tradition in question. Thus Christians may declare that God is opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, without thereby saying that his people are forbidden to make use of a sword when they are engaged in warfare. That God is indeed opposed to the use of

nuclear weapons is a widely held conviction in Christian circles and by no means a frivolous idea.

A Christian who insists that nuclear weapons should never be used may well win the agreement of an atheistic discussion partner. If the Christian then goes on to say that *God* does not want us to use nuclear weapons in any circumstances, the atheist must of course disagree. But the two can still function as allies in a political struggle to get rid of nuclear weapons. The atheist need not feel threatened by the God-talk in this case -- indeed, he might even welcome it. And if his Christian discussion partner includes appeals to reason and experience while engaging in class C God-talk, the atheist will have even less reason to feel uncomfortable or to suspect that he is being confronted with an arbitrary dictate.

The upshot, then, is that we could let God back into the public school classroom by allowing class B and class C God-talk. Perhaps this suggestion applies more to Canada than to the USA, for in Canada we do not have the famous constitutional objection to deal with, the objection that so often stymies discussion south of the border.

However, I am not so optimistic as to predict that the kind of change I would like to see will happen soon. One reason why my proposal to allow God back into the classroom by way of class B and class C God-talk will likely be resisted is that we live in a society where people are quick to "take offense" or report that they feel "excluded" by something someone has said. "Political correctness" is offered as the guarantee that will ensure that no one feels "offended" or "excluded." In adopting "political correctness" we are in effect enshrining a new right: namely, that no one should ever feel uncomfortable or left out because of something that might be said. To be on the safe said, we don't say much, even when our words are many.

And so "God" also falls victim to "political correctness." Because many people throughout our history have been mistreated by other people who invoked God in the context of what they are doing, "God" is now a dreaded, oppressive term. One has the right not to hear the word "God" in a public place -- or so the argument runs.

Such thinking manifests a hyper-sensitivity and small-mindedness that we need to dispense with, for it will allow only the blandest type of public education and public discourse. Canada is in worse shape in this regard than the USA. Our neighbors to the south are not so frightened by an invocation of God in a public setting: they elected George W. Bush as president, who was more forthright

when it comes to God-talk than was his father, who became president twelve years before him.

But in Canada, God-talk seems to belong in the closet, politically speaking. In the 2000 federal election, Stockwell Day, the leader of the Canadian Alliance, was dogged by bad publicity stemming from his overt Christian convictions. His chief rival, Prime Minister Jean Chretien, steered what seemed a more acceptable course by keeping his own religious convictions under wraps. Likewise, Canada's illustrious former prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, was revealed at the time of his death to be a deep Christian believer in the Roman Catholic tradition, but during his days in office he, too, kept his religious convictions out of sight. It is worth remembering that he served at the same time as US President Jimmy Carter, who was overt about his Christian commitment.

If we can admit God to the public classroom in the way I am suggesting, we may find that a more generous spirit toward public education becomes possible. And that generosity in both spirit and dollars is needed, for public education has always been intended as a benefit to the poor, the people who cannot afford the privatization route to academic success. Thus Diane Francis also writes: "While money isn't everything in education, it certainly helps. And without good education, America's blacks and Hispanics have a tougher time breaking the poverty cycle." [NOTE 4] To help society's disadvantaged break out of poverty should be high on the agenda for all of us. Therefore Christians should not harbor an animus against public schools for all the kids.

One last observation is yet in order. Since I am a supporter of private Christian day schools (my own children also attended such schools), readers might wonder whether I have now forsaken that commitment. The answer is: not at all. I still maintain that the best place for the Christian child is in the Christian school. I also believe that the Christian community must reserve a significant proportion of its resources for maintaining a vigorous system of schools on the elementary, secondary and tertiary levels. But our responsibility for education does not *end* with our own children: *all* of the children in our society must be the object of our concern. Therefore we must in some sense advocate and support public schools -- public in the minimal sense that they are for *all* the children.

Inevitably there will be Christian children enrolled in those schools as well. In addition, we need to note that a number of the teachers and other professionals working in such schools will be Christian. Those children and the Christian adults in public schools needs our support and encouragement in their learning

and teaching. If we can help them find a way to bring God back into the classroom, we will all be the better for it. I am indeed my brother's keeper, and that's why I insist on finding a place for God in our schools -- all of them.

NOTES

[NOTE 1]

A Matter of Survival: Canada in the 21st Century (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993), pp. 55, 56.

[NOTE 2]

Published by Harper and Row of New York in 1971.

[NOTE 3]

Her full title is *God in the Classroom: The Controversial Issue of Religion in Canada's Schools* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1997).

[NOTE 4]

A Matter of Survival, p. 56.