

On the subject of...

Got God?

by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

When one resolves to take up residence in the very buckle of the Bible belt, there are necessary adjustments. For one thing, one must learn not to gasp aloud when a prayer precedes a meeting of a government body, like the board of aldermen. In other parts of the world, this would represent a scandalous violation of that fabled separation between church and state.

Here, one learns to expect that kickoff at the local high school football game will be delayed by the prayers of the players. Please don't misunderstand. I have no problem with public prayer here, but I did mind it back in the days when I lived in an almost entirely Mormon community in Southeast Idaho where my sons were the only "gentiles" enrolled in the school system. Being decidedly NOT Mormon, I lived in daily fear that my young ones would be indoctrinated in a faith foreign to my own.

Now, six years into my southernization, I find the

local habit of public prayer to be refreshing – particularly now that I know our belief systems are similar.

Just so we'll understand each other, my relationship with God is a very personal and highly private one. I have generally found that other "Christians" bring about the most significant impediments I experience in my daily communications with my Maker. In case you've forgotten, some of the most hideous atrocities committed in the last two thousand years have been perpetrated upon human beings by people who claim to be Christians acting in the name of Jesus Christ (the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem witch trials for example).

I like to keep my spiritual side away from public view. I don't make a big to-do of my faith or my habits of worship. In my understanding, to do so is offensive in God's eyes. A few years back when I was running for public office, I was flummoxed when I received an

invitation from a local church to come and speak to the congregation (at the price of one small "love gift" of \$50). I suppose this is another of those cultural things, but I wouldn't *even think* of defiling my Father's house by bringing into it such worldly discussion. Perhaps in time, my southernization will be complete and I'll feel differently about this curious custom.

Basically, I believe as I do and I would fight to the death to preserve your right to believe as you wish. That's how I think the founding fathers planned for it to be in this great nation. They never intended there to be freedom FROM religion. They simply wanted to ensure that government could never impose a belief system of any sort upon the governed.

Recently, though, I've learned of an unsettling invasion of constitutionally protected religious freedoms

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AHS posts dismal achievement numbers

By Contributing Editor Don Rowe

For the past month or so, *The Aberdeen Advocate* has reported in detail the state test score results as released by the Mississippi Department of Education. Overall, those results were a mixed bag, ranging from abysmal scores for Aberdeen High School to respectable results turned in by Belle Elementary.

Just to refresh your memory, on average Aberdeen High School fell 21.6 points below the state average on the Algebra I, Biology I, U.S. History (from

1877) and English II tests, and well below the composite scores of its Monroe County neighbors Amory, Hamilton, Hatley and Smithville high schools.

Also, *The Advocate* reported on the percentage of each school's students whose test scores placed them in one of four proficiency levels:

- Minimal – Students at the minimal level are below basic and do not

demonstrate mastery of the content area knowledge and skills required for success at the next grade.

- Basic – Students at the basic level demonstrate *partial* mastery of the content area knowledge and skills required for success at the next grade. *Remediation* may be necessary for these students.

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right here in Aberdeen. Guess where? In the municipal courtroom of all places!

When I first heard of this, I was sure it was a one-time “woopsie” — a function of ignorance that would quickly be corrected. Alas, reader friends, it has continued — nay, it has escalated! On several occasions it seems our esteemed Municipal Court Judge, Adrian Haynes, has seen fit to “sentence” offenders to attend church services instead of sending them to jail or imposing an appropriate fine as state sentencing guidelines suggest. Further, the judge has offered to assign the church of her choice if the “bad guys” don’t have a church of their own in mind.

Can you spell ACLU???

I do not doubt that a healthy helping of God might be useful in the rehabilitation of criminals. Nevertheless, I’ve scoured the online law books and pored over the opinions at the Attorney General’s website and can find no statute which would bestow such authority upon a real judge, and most certainly not upon a pretender to the bench as is Adrian Haynes.

One might argue that since it’s not uncommon for judges to sentence criminals like DUI offenders to safety-oriented driver’s programs and/or even 12-step programs (both of which have proven to be successful in some situations), why isn’t religious fellowship an option? Well your privilege to drive is just that, a privilege bestowed upon you by the State of Mississippi and it can be revoked in a heartbeat. Your right to determine how and when you’ll worship, however, is bestowed upon you by the highest court (the Almighty Himself) and protected by the Constitution of the United States of America. That particular right may not be abridged by ANYONE!

If you have any doubt about the “wrong headedness” of this practice, ask yourself this: What if one of the “criminals” sentenced to attend the United First Missionary Baptist Lighthouse of Love and Divine Prophecy were Jewish? What if he were a Buddhist or even a student of Islam? Gulp! (The sound you hear is Thomas Jefferson rolling over in his grave.)

It’s bad enough that Aberdeen’s board of aldermen have opted to appoint this

most influential position to a woman who has no law degree and precious little legal experience beyond what little she’s learned at the bench these past few years, but it is beyond comprehension that they have allowed this woman, because of her ignorance of the law, to put Aberdeen’s taxpayers at serious litigious risk.

Beyond the obvious risks imposed on the citizenry by such judicial insanity, there are other, HEAVENLY reasons why sentencing persons to church (as if such sentences were punishments and not a divine privilege) is a very bad plan. I seem to recall that *my* Lord told us we are to come to Him of our own free will. He stands outside and knocks at our door. He doesn’t use a battering ram to enter our hearts.

It may be that Thomas Jefferson himself said it best when he wrote his 1779 Bill for Religious Freedom: “Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested His supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, burthens, or civil incapacitations tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion.”

Jefferson put it plainly. “...to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion...is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty.

“WE the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.”

(I implore you to, take the time to read the entire text which can be found

at: <http://members.tripod.com/~candst/tnppage/status.htm>.)

All of that high-minded stuff said, I must admit that it’s very entertaining to imagine what Her Honor would do if her perpetrator opted to go to church in Bangladesh. (Would the city provide airline tickets?) Or, what if he asked to take part in one of those “services” the ancient Aztec’s enjoyed wherein they sacrificed small children upon the altar. Ok, that may be a bit outlandish. What if he simply chose to take the American Indian approach and used peyote to assist him in his vision quest?



It would almost be worth getting a speeding ticket just to see what sort of odd choking noises the judge might make if I asked the city to produce a bit of the “divine cactus” in order that I might seek spiritual guidance from the Lakota’s great spirit Wakan Tanka. Almost.

Your Municipal Employees

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369-4985



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North Hwy. 45

369-4275

Monday thru Wednesday 5 am — 2 pm

Thursday and Friday 5 am — 9 pm

AHS posts dismal achievement numbers

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- Proficient – Students at the proficient level demonstrate solid academic performance and mastery of the content area knowledge and skills required for success at the next grade.
- Advanced – Students at the advanced level consistently perform in a manner clearly beyond that required to be successful at the next grade.

Remember, the stated goal of the state department and that of all educators throughout Mississippi (including Aberdeen) is to have all their students perform at the proficient level or above. Aberdeen's results show the lower grades in the Aberdeen school system had a far greater number of students ranked at the proficient and advanced levels than did the high school and Shivers Junior High, which had the majority of their students ranked at the minimal and basic levels as noted below:

AHS fell short of the state average in 17 of 18 measurable categories (not counting the proficiency level).

- On average, 30.9% (three out of 10) of AHS test-takers fell into the lowest proficiency level (minimal), ranging from a low 15.6% in Biology I to a high of 47.3% in English II.
- On average, 36.4% (over three out of 10) of AHS test-takers fell into the second-lowest proficiency level (basic), ranging from a low of 31.9% in Algebra I to a high of 44% in History I.
- On average, 67.3% (two out of three) of AHS test-takers fell into the bottom two proficiency levels (minimal and basic).
- On average, just 8.3% (less than one in 10) of AHS test-takers finished in the top proficiency level (advanced), ranging from a low of 2.2% in English II to a high of 14.9% in \$\$\$\$\$\$.

In addition to the test scores and proficiency levels, each school has been assigned a school performance classifica-

tion ranging from a Level 1 (unsuccessful) to a Level 5 (superior performing). In between are the schools ranked Level 2 (under performing), Level 3 (successful) and Level 4 (exemplary). In other words, Level 4 and Level 5 schools are the better schools; Level 1 districts are going to be taken over by the state; Level 2 schools are cause for alarm; and Level 3 schools, despite the state's "successful" tag, are nothing more than average schools – the middle of the pack so to speak. (For the record, 207 (25%) of Mississippi's 842 schools were classified as Level 5; 215 (26%) as Level 4; 313 (37%) as Level 3; 96 (11%) as Level 2; and 11 (1%) as Level 1.)

In *The Advocate* article on Aberdeen High School back in August, it was reported that AHS was "unofficially" rated as a Level 2 (under performing school), as the state department had not yet released the "official" performance classifications. Several weeks ago, however, the state department released its final version, and it has been confirmed that Aberdeen High School has indeed dropped to a Level 2 school. That, dear readers, means Aberdeen High School is ranked in the bottom 12% of all the schools in the entire state.

In addition to performance classifications, the state department also released its annual Achievement Level Index (ALI), a measure of student achievement which is used to produce a numeric scale in which a school's performance can be mapped. The ALI, according to the state department, "provides a finer, more sensitive measure of a school's performance," and thus, gives a better idea of how each school performed.

So, exactly how did Aberdeen High School measure up on the ALI this year?

Not too well, I'm afraid, for according to the state department's own figures, Aberdeen High School finished with an ALI of 269 – a figure which proved to be the 62nd worst of the 840-plus elementary, middle, junior and senior high schools in the state. Worse yet, out of Mississippi's 250-odd high schools, Aberdeen's 269 ALI was ranked the 27th lowest in the entire state.

Interestingly enough, none other than Noxubee County High School finished one notch below Aberdeen with a 268 ALI, making Noxubee the 26th worst high school in the state. Care to guess who just happens to be the principal at Noxubee? Why it's none other than appointed school board member Royce

Stephens, who was appointed to his position by three of our outstanding aldermen despite the fact he was given the choice to resign rather than be fired by school superintendent Lavon Fluker-Reed. (I'll bet that's one record which would be hard to top – principal of the 26th worst high school and school board member of the 27th worst high school in the state!)

ALI numbers for the remainder of Monroe County's high schools were considerably higher than Aberdeen's 269, with Hatley at 427; Hamilton and Smithville coming in tied at 409; and Amory just behind at 398 – almost 130 points better than Aberdeen.

As far as the remainder of Aberdeen's schools is concerned, Belle Elementary's ALI was 400, followed by Aberdeen Middle at 365, Prairie at 360 and Shivers Junior High at 332.

The state department assigns ALI numbers only to individual schools, not school districts. But had the department averaged the entire district's numbers, Aberdeen's school system would have been assigned a 345.2 ALI – a number which would have ranked Aberdeen as the 37th lowest in the state out of 152 school districts.

As has been her custom the past several years, Reed should release what she calls her *Aberdeen School District Report Card* any time now and, if it follows her last two "dog and pony show" report cards, she will proudly proclaim that all of her schools did well on their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and other Academic Indicators (attendance/graduation rate), and she will report that the district's status is "Accredited" because it is in compliance with all state accreditation process standards. And finally, she will point out that, based on the 2007 results of the Mississippi Statewide Accountability System, Aberdeen's school district has NOT been identified for improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and none of her schools have been designated as Priority Schools.

What you won't read on her report card, however, will be anything concerning the low test scores, the high number of basic and minimal students and the horrendous ALI score for the high school.

I believe that would fall under the definition of selective recall.



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Subscription Rates:
12 Weeks— \$12.00
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"I am convinced that I am acting as an agent of our Almighty Creator. By fighting Jews, I am doing the Lord's work."

...Adolph Hitler , Mein Kampf