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*It's O.K. to Pray in Your School*  
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In the wake of the Columbine High shootings last year, the Colorado legislature addressed a bill that would have required all schools to have a minute of silence, since the proposers knew that a minute of prayer had no hope of passing. But the minute of silence was defeated, largely on constitutional grounds having to do with the separation of Church and State. This defeat is already being pointed to in some political circles as another indication of the "godlessness" of our schools and society. Since the issue is sure to be discussed in the election process this year, let me take this column to review what is and what is not allowed with regard to prayer in public schools.

What kind of prayer is allowed in a public school? Everyone and anyone who goes to a school may pray there. "Everyone," that means students, teachers, staff and administrators, may offer a private prayer to the divine at anytime they choose. "Anyone," that means any person of any religious faith, be they Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, or Mormon, or even Native American, Jewish, Moslem, Hindu, or Wiccan. Thus, praying in the schools is permitted to everyone there, as long as it is private and personal. It is also O.K. for students of like beliefs to join together to pray, whether informally ("let's meet at the west door before the bell") or more formally in a religious club of voluntary membership. This club may meet on school property, such as in a classroom, at times when clubs are usually allowed to meet. The only exception to this is if the school has banned clubs altogether. The rule of thumb is that religious clubs must be treated the same as other clubs.

What kind of prayer is not allowed in a public school? It is not O.K. to pray in a school in way

that would coerce anyone of a different belief to join in. Thus teachers, principals and others in a position of authority should not use that position to persuade, require, or intimidate students or others under their supervision to take part in prayer that they otherwise would not. Schools are inherently hierarchical and those who are higher in the hierarchy should do nothing that would seem to exercise that position to make those below them pray. Furthermore, prayer should not be conducted in such a way to exclude or stigmatize those who do not participate. Finally, participation in prayer should not be used as a basis to reward or promote those who take part or to withhold such rewards from people who do not.

These rules, both positive and negative, are designed to ensure every individual's freedom to believe and worship as they choose, and to prevent the power of the state from interfering with that right.