

Christmas In The Schools

That time is approaching. Thanksgiving has always marked the practical beginning of the Christmas Season for most Americans. The streets become swollen with buyers of gifts. And the public schools become preoccupied with preparing "winter holiday" celebrations. San Francisco Bay Area public school classes are already beginning to make their plans.

The Christmas season has always been a little traumatic for most American Jews. They are suddenly reminded that they are living in a Christian culture. Christmas carols flow endlessly from car radios and restaurant Muzaks. Christmas trees sprout in street and store. And office buildings, Muslim oil permitting, burn their night lights in the design of a Christian cross.

But the season is most directly traumatic for many Jewish parents and children. Part of the trauma is the decision: what to object to, and what not to object to? There is *not* a thoroughgoing American Jewish consensus on this score. There *is* a strong Jewish consensus, of course, on the general matter of resisting sectarian religious instruction in the public schools. But the problem is to define what is, and what is not "instruction" — and then to decide what is objectionable even if it is not "instruction."



Raab

For example, Bible-reading and straightforward religious prayer in the school are instruction, and have been ruled out by the courts. But it has been suggested that most Christmas celebrations in the schools are cultural rather than religious. The JCRC has been told by more than one council of Christian ministers that they would like to eliminate Christmas celebrations in the schools, just because the religious content is necessarily laundered out. They add, however, that their congregants are committed to these "cultural" exercises, as part of their experience from childhood. Furthermore, the courts have not ruled out the kinds of activities which typically take place in the public schools during this Christmas season.

This is not just a lawyer's matter, however. There are situations which are offensive, even if they are constitutional. Simply, if "cultural" exercises make a school child feel distressingly alien because of the child's religion, then those exercises are objectionable from a civic and educational point of view. Thus, JCRC recently transmitted to all school administrators in San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula, the following message from a California educational journal: "As educators, we would seem bound to give priority to the principle of avoiding violation of any student's individual conscience in the selection of program material or specific events—such as the presentation of sectarian religious scenes or tableaux, or the use of sectarian religious symbols—which might be interpreted as so sectarian or so presented as to cause a child to feel set apart from his fellow students..."

But what is the point at which these exercises become objectionable? There is a Jewish consensus that such matters as Nativity scenes and Nativity plays in the public schools are objectionable. The organized Jewish community has always protested these. But the consensus falters further down the line. Some suggest that only those with relatively weak Jewish commitment worry about the current practices. One mother protested the issuance of red and white striped candies in the schools. Some are offended by the presence in schools of decorated evergreen trees (minus explicitly religious symbols); others are not. Some are offended by the school choirs singing traditional Christmas carols; others are not. This has been complicated by the increased interest of both school administrators and of many Jewish parents in having Chanukah songs included in the choirs' repertoires; and in having dreidels spinning around the Christmas trees—all in the name now, of "cross-cultural" exercises.

The Jewish agencies will move swiftly in those situations where there is a clear church-state violation, or where there is a community consensus. But beyond those points, each parent knows best how his or her child feels.

If there is a problem, there is no reason why that parent should not approach the school teacher or administrator who is involved with that child. Of course, there is a long history of experience about the kind of approach which is more effective than others — and consultation is available to all parents through the JCRC. Meanwhile the general debate within the Jewish community will continue.