Religion's Law Of the Jungle
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# Religion's Law Of the Jungle

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Our monastery in Hawaii lies near the foot of an extinct volcano on a river whose banks are so dense with tropical trees and undergrowth as to be nearly impassable. The daytime temperature rarely falls below 70 or ventures above 85. Rainbows and waterfalls are plentiful. It's not quite a jungle, but the law of the jungle is at work here, just as it is in your community.

I am speaking of the law which decrees that strength and numbers will dominate. Our Holstein cow, being larger and more powerful, pushes aside the smaller Jerseys in the milking stall to get to the grains first. Our blue and yellow Macaw parrot runs roughshod over the smaller birds. The koi (Japanese carp) grow fat on the flesh of smaller pond mates.

There is a wisdom in this jungle justice. It is rita dharma, the way of nature, and we know its animal instinctiveness is somehow good and right. We even extend our acceptance of the law of the jungle to sports and business. But in most human enterprises rule by brute strength becomes unacceptable. Civilized men and women cringe to see the strong enslaving or subjugating the weak. We feel ourselves hurt when we see others' rights of justice and freedom violated. One such place is religion, man's most refined and noble sensibility. Yet even here the jungle instincts prowl.

Christian school teachers in Alabama, emboldened by numerical superiority, are not shy about thrusting forward Biblical interpretations of creation or requiring Jewish and Hindu children to recite the Lord's Prayer. Nor are they demure about belittling the principles of Buddhism, the celebrations of pagans or the heartfelt convictions of atheists.

I know what you're thinking. The majority has rights, too. And it is just this fact that puzzles and perplexes communities and lawmakers everywhere. How to provide the rights of the many and protect the rights of the few. This is a question in Nepal, where Christians are seeking rights from majority Hindus. It is a question in every Islamic nation, where Hindus are denied rights which Muslims expect their faithful to be given in India or Europe. Each faith is naturally driven to protect and promote its heritage. Each is being required, more and more, to not deny that same right to others. The growing reality of global pluralism is changing the way nations and individuals look at these matters. And in one of the strangest twists of all, India - which has provided exemplary protections for minorities - is straining this year to extend equal rights to its majority Hindus. It's true!

Is there a solution to these quandaries? Consider the brain twister above. The problem seems to have no solution - certainly no obvious one. How can six minus three make four? And yet, a solution does exist. See if you can find it before looking at the answer at the end of the column.

Those of minority religions everywhere need to be more creative in finding solutions to religious education problems. The obvious solutions are at work in most communities: parochial schools, separation of faiths for religious tutoring, elimination of all religion from the education process or, most popular of all, ignoring the problem.

Because of the influx of peoples from all the world's faiths, the defense of religious liberty has become a growth industry in the US. The Seventh Day Adventists, whose sabbath is Saturday, found themselves losing jobs when they refused to work on their holy day. They became vocal advocates of the First Amendment of the US Constitution, and found a creative solution. They began publishing Liberty, a magazine dedicated to educating people in the need for religious freedom and separation of church and state. In the world of education, the First Liberty Institute at George Mason University in Virginia has made another creative leap. They developed a new curriculum which introduces the concepts of religious liberty into social studies lessons tailored for upper elementary, junior high and high school students. It is called Living With Our Deepest Differences: Religious Liberty in a Pluralistic Society, and it uses historical documents, literature and creative strategies to teach students the "new three R's - rights, responsibilities and respect." We can learn lessons from these innovative approaches.

We spoke with Dr. Charles Haynes, executive director of the First Liberty Institute and president of the National Council on Religion and Public Education. He noted that one bishop of the Buddhist Church of America was involved in the formation of the Institute, but no Hindus had come forward.

"Certainly the work we do would be of abiding interest to the Hindu community in America and we would welcome Hindu participation."

Dr. Haynes described the purpose of the Institute: to make sure that in every school in every community there is a framework to negotiate religious differences, to protect rights, especially of persecuted minorities, and to promote understanding between faiths. The basic thrust of the Institute is to recognize that "a society is only as just and free as it is respectful of this right for its smallest minorities and least popular communities," and to base any resolution of religious differences on a civic framework, on the core ideas and democratic values embodied in the First Amendment. If people can agree on such principles, Dr. Haynes explained, then they have a basis for dealing with religion in schools.

The Institute also acts as a non-partisan resource to negotiate disputes in schools. For instance, if Hindu or Sikh parents find their child's religion is being denigrated by teachers or feel the local school board promotes a majority faith or suppresses a minority one just because they are in charge (remember the law of the jungle), they can call the Institute who will "work to include all people in the conversation." This is a wonderful opportunity for Hindus having difficulties in schools to seek a just resolution with people who deeply understand these problems. You can also call them to get their video tapes on teaching children or to arrange for their curriculum in your children's school.

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