

Can we talk about religious supremacy?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

As I was writing this, I learned Mary Wilson of The Supremes passed away. I've been humming "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" while considering supremes – superiority and supremacy especially in religion.

"Supreme delight"; "supreme happiness"; "supreme secret"; "supreme word." Each of these phrases appears in one of the most holy scriptures ever written: "The Bhagavad Gita." A classic Hindu story, a revelation of the "Supreme Lord" (Krishna) to the awestruck warrior, Arjuna. The "supreme mystery" culminates in a mind-blowing display of the almighty Power of the universe. "Here today, behold the whole universe, moving and unmoving and whatever else you desire to see, O Arjuna, all unified in My body" (11:7). The dumbfounded Arjuna responds: "Thou art the Imperishable, the Supreme to be realized. Thou art the ultimate resting-place of the universe; Thou art the undying guardian of the eternal law. Thou art the Primal Person" (11:18).

Reflecting on these ancient teachings I wondered about Religious Supremacy

(supremacy: "the state or condition of being superior to all others in authority, power, or status"). In religious experience we hear many superlatives: "The Almighty," "The Most High," "God is Great," "You are exalted far above all gods" (Psalm 97:9). Once a person or group holds these concepts in mind, it's but a short step to thinking "our faith," "our religion" is the greatest, the highest – supreme.

Our culture has supreme problems with "supreme" thinking. We think we're best, number one, first over all others. What ever happened to the humility of "The first shall be last?" When one group asserts superiority over others, assuming power and privilege, wiser people need to speak out and step into the tension. The social, economic, political and ethnic divisions call us to more equitable ways of viewing others and treating others.

What about religious supremacy? Every time we hear of special privileges given to one faith over others we might consider the larger question: Is religion itself being elevated to an honored position of superiority? When some claim their faith is exceptional, that it deserves priority over other faiths or secular laws, we need to ask ourselves if this is liberty or supremacy.

The story of the Bhagavad Gita offers a lesson for our own battles of belief. As Arjuna steers his chariot between the

opposing armies and picks up his bow, prepared to fight, he pauses and ponders: "Arjuna saw standing there fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons and grandsons and their companions; also fathers-in-law and friends in both the armies. When he saw all these kinsmen standing arrayed for battle, Arjuna was overcome with great compassion and uttered this in sadness: 'When I see my own people arrayed and eager for fight, O Krishna, my arms quake, my mouth goes dry, my body shakes and my hair stands on end. The bow slips from my hand, and my skin is burning. I am not able to stand steady. My mind is reeling'" (1:26-30). He's ridden straight into the center of conflict and faces the predicament. Where will he turn? Who can help?

This moment presents the dilemma of supremacy. Who's side am I on? Which side is God on?

Where does the Supreme God appear? Not on one side; not on another. Not above or around to watch over or protect. Krishna appears, not as a dream or apparition, not as a Supreme Lord up in the sky. He is revealed as the driver of Arjuna's chariot – right in the middle of the battle-lines. The rest of the story is for you to read.

For the person of faith, as for the humanist, this is the moment of decision. God's not going to fight for you; someone else won't think or act for you. You

must decide, choose, move. If your supreme (ethical principle, God) isn't willing to meet you in the midst of the tensions, the middle of the most uncomfortable circumstances, and offer some wider perspective, real balance, then you have an "Our Side/Their Side" problem.

When religious supremacy takes power in a community or culture, the body politic must respond with the highest form of supremacy: the Greater Good. A utilitarian approach (what works the best for the most) seems the wise guide, especially in a secular society that protects religious freedom but not religious supremacy. If, like Krishna, we can show the interrelatedness of the human community, grounded in space and time (an open field, a city block, a town square, a classroom, a community center), the highest and best can be achieved by people meeting eye to eye in the middle of the battlefields where no one is higher or greater, no belief is supreme.

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