

Earl Raab

CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISTS STRIKE AGAIN- OR DO THEY?

A story in the San Francisco Chronicle last week suggested to some people that the U.S. courts were turning the country over to the Christian fundamentalists./p

To be a bit more precise, a U.S. District Court in Tennessee ruled that public school children of Christian fundamentalist persuasion could be excused from reading materials which offended them religiously. Perhaps the Jews were shaken most by the fact that the Diary of Anne Frank was one of the many texts listed as offensive. /p

The case had been brought by a Christian fundamentalist group called the Concerned Women of America. They wanted all the books on their list banned from the public schools. The school board had refused to do that, hence the court action. The U.S. District Court also refused to ban the books, but did say that parents could refuse to have their children read them./p

What did the Concerned Women for America find offensive in these books? The case of the Diary of Anne Frank was most illustrative. The group's complaint had nothing to do with the Holocaust, but with Anne Frank's one comment that you do not have to be Orthodox in order to be properly Jewish. /p

In this case, these fundamentalist Christian ladies seemed to be defending Orthodox Judaism against less fundamentalist versions of Judaism. In general, they oppose any material promoting the "humanistic" idea that values are not specifically grounded in religion - or that all religions are of equal value. Their opposition is based on their religious beliefs, to which they have an absolute right. The question is: how far can their opposition go without interfering with the rights of others? /p

The Anne Frank Center in New York raised strenuous objections to the court ruling. But Marc Stern, the expert in such matters in the national office of the American Jewish Congress, told the Bulletin that no other major Jewish organization had yet taken a position against the ruling. So far they felt that the court ruling might be a reasonable solution to a tough problem in religious pluralism. /p

Eli Wallach, the actor, associated with the Anne Frank Center, said, "Could you imagine if a Jewish or Moslem child refused to read books considered objectionable?" But Stern pointed out that there have been many situations in which the Jewish community has insisted on the right of Jewish children to absent themselves for religious reasons. Take the matter of Christmas plays, which many Jewish parents

have attempted to ban from the schools- and failing that, they have maintained the right of their children not to participate./p

The U.S. District Court in Tennessee was trying to find the line between guaranteeing religious freedom for one group and interfering with the freedom of others. So it refused to ban the books, but said the children could be excused. The fundamentalist mothers were unhappy with the decision, and so were their opponents. But it was a pragmatic ruling which could be seen as protective of minority religions./p

However, it is also a harbinger of more difficult decisions to come. The "old" church-state problem in the schools had to do with government imposing a specific religious dogma. But no Congress or state legislature will today even consider legitimizing a sectarian prayer for the schools. However, many fundamentalists- and others- think that society has gone too far. They feel that the "new" church-state problem has to do with government unduly downplaying religion. /p

Indeed a California Department of Education study has just concluded that public school texts tend to ignore religion or treat it as a topic of minimal importance. And Bill Honig, California's head of education, has just reportedly told a conference of "Christian educators" that "California

schools will push to eliminate bias against religion from textbooks." /p

We may again be allowing "extremists" to preempt an agenda which should partly be ours. Perhaps the Jewish community should be more actively involved in trying to increase school study about religions, in a way that will be nonsectarian. It may be risky, but so is the tendency to "ignore religion or treat it as a topic of minimal importance." /p

If we do enter this fray constructively, instead of just having defensive knee-jerk reactions to every fundamentalist sighting, we might undercut the extremists, and help raise the maturity level of religious pluralism in this country. After all, religion is a significant part of real life, and the U.S. is the most religious- and religiously diverse- country in the western world. The Concerned Women for America may not like the nonsectarian result, but then they will have the remedy suggested by the U.S. District Court in Tennessee. /e