

THE VOLCANO

BACKGROUND

In Gulliver's Travels the author Jonathan Swift makes fun of religious and sectarian differences. On the island of Lilliput, there is a deadly dispute between those that crack their boiled eggs on the more pointy end, and those that crack their eggs on the roundy end. The idea is to highlight how random and unimportant the difference between the different groups is. From the outside, a lot of disputes (Protestant/Catholic, Sunni/Shi-ite) seem to be based on trivial differences. But if those two sides have done real harm to each other, the people involved can be locked in a cycle of violence for centuries.

The painting of Boyarynya Morozova by Vasily Surikov (easily found online, for example at: http://https://en.wiki2.org/wiki/Sign_of_the_cross) depicts a martyr in the Russian Orthodox Church who was arrested, tortured and starved to death for being an 'Old Believer' in the 17th Century. In the picture she is defiantly holding up two fingers to the crowd. Making the sign of the cross with two fingers rather than three was the old tradition. To us now, it sounds a tiny unimportant detail, but Morozova was prepared to lose her enormous fortune and then her life to defend it.

STIMULUS

Once upon a time, there was a town on the side of a mountain. In that town there were two religions. Half of the people followed a god called Ruby. They were called Ruby-followers. And the other half, the Sapphire-followers, believed in a god called Sapphire.

No-one knew where the Ruby and Sapphire names came from. There was a story that back in the old days all the people followed the same religion but then there was an argument, and the religion separated into two. Both sides were certain that their religion was the original, real, religion and the other side had broken away.

One thing they did know was that the mountain they lived on was actually a volcano. Every now and again it rumbled, and steam curled out of the top of its crater. It had not erupted for a hundred years, but there was always a fear that this towering tyrant would completely destroy the town if it did.

Every week, in their different temples, with different books and different songs, the two groups of people prayed for the same thing. They asked God to protect their village from the volcano.

But then one day, the one thing they feared most happened. The rumblings grew louder and louder. Rocks were flung into the air. A vast jet of ash rose above the crater, the sides of the mountain cracked open and glowing lava slid down the slopes. The townspeople ran for their lives. Some refused to leave and stayed in their houses praying desperately that they would not be flattened by the creeping carpet of molten rock.

Those that had escaped to a safe distance began to argue. Those in the Ruby religion blamed the Sapphire-followers: they said that Ruby was punishing them for ignoring the one true faith. The Sapphire-followers argued that Sapphire was angry because the Ruby followers had not listened to his word. Meanwhile the lava edged closer and closer to their town. But then they saw something that amazed them all: just before it reached the town, the lava stream split, making two streams, one on each side, leaving the buildings untouched in the middle.

The volcano calmed. The smoke blew away. The lava cooled into hard, grey rock. The people could still hardly believe their eyes. The whole valley had been buried beneath the lava - except for their small town. They had been saved by a miracle. Half of them started praying in thanks to Ruby and half started thanking Sapphire.

Task Questions

- ✓ Was it a miracle?
- ✓ Was the town saved?
- ✓ Were the Ruby-followers right or the Sapphire-followers?
- ✓ If you lived in the town, which religion would you follow and why/?

LESSON COMMENTS

Here are some of the different positions that might be taken on this story:

1. The prayers have no effect, there is no miracle, and the town was just lucky. Neither of the groups is right.
2. There is no real difference between the two groups, and they should all realise that God saved them both.
3. Both groups are mistaken because there is a true religion - but not the one they follow.

No-one listening to the story is likely to conclude that either of the two sects is more right than the other. The story is set up to make that point - just like Swift's Lilliputians and their boiled eggs. And apart from the two different names - Ruby and Sapphire - the story gives no clue as to what the differences in belief between the two groups might have been.

It is worth noting whether any children ask for information about what the difference in beliefs was. It is similar to the question lying beneath the Bhagavad Gita story, where children ought really to be asking why the war started and what the opposing sides are fighting over. In real life wars and disputes, the opposing sides rarely agree and what they are fighting about. Each one will tell a story in which they themselves were originally the injured party and any seeming aggression on their part is a retaliation or an attempt to regain what was rightfully theirs.

As a follow-up, you could divide your class into the two groups: Ruby and Sapphire and see if they can persuade anyone on the other side to cross over. This is something of an experiment because, of course, as things stand there is no good reason to switch sides or even feel allegiance to one side to begin with.

However, we should be careful with how far we take that kind of activity. Experimental psychologists have gathered evidence that when we divide people into separate groups, tension and rivalry are inevitable - even without any cause for antagonism. That being the case, it only takes a spark of aggression for one side to feel aggrieved and attack the other.

The 1968 'Blue eyes-Brown eyes' experiment of Jane Elliott, (where she told the blue-eyed children in her class they were superior to the brown-eyed children, and saw huge effects on the children's behaviour) is a cautionary tale here: it illustrated the evils of prejudice brilliantly but was probably too stressful for the participants to be considered ethical.