



The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel: The Rise of a Village Theocracy and the Battle to Defend the Separation of Church and State

Louis Grumet, John M. Caher

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Twenty years ago, on the last day of session, the New York State Legislature created a publicly funded school district to cater to the interests of a religious sect called Kiryas Joel, an extremely insular group of Hasidic Jews. The sect had bought land in upstate New York, populated it solely with members of its faction, and created a village that exerted extraordinary political pressure over both political parties in the Legislature. Marking the first time in American history that a governmental unit was established for a religious group, the Legislature's action prompted years of litigation that eventually went to the Supreme Court. The 1994 case, *The Board of Education of the Village of Kiryas Joel v. Grumet*, stands as the most important legal precedent in the fight to uphold the separation of church and state. In *The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel*, plaintiff Louis Grumet opens a window onto the Satmar Hasidic community and details the inside story of his fight for the First Amendment. This story—a blend of politics, religion, cultural clashes, and constitutional tension—is an object lesson in the ongoing debate over freedom *of* vs. freedom *from* religion.

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