

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL ETHICS

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In a book that I published fourteen years ago, I argued that religious education needs to have four qualities: interreligious, intergenerational, inter-institutional and international.¹ I think all four of these “inters” remain as important or more important today. In this essay, I wish to highlight the fourth, international; the other three show up along the way. In some respects, the case for “international” has become obvious. We live in a world of interconnected nations. Not only the nation next door but a nation half way around the world can influence a group’s life.

A counter argument might be made that the category of “nation” has no intrinsic meaning for religion, and therefore, for religious education. In Samuel Huntington’s much discussed book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, the conflicts are not between nations but civilizations in which religion plays a central, often the primary role.² In that framework, an international religious education might be too restrictive, too caught within the very boundaries that need examination.

In the second part of this essay, I pursue this point that religions have to challenge the pretenses to supremacy of the nation-state. In the first part, however, I examine the movement toward an international ethics and its positive possibilities.

Rights in International Law

Despite the nation-state’s tendency to divinize itself, it is currently the main protector of rights, including the right to practice one’s religion. The weakening of the nation’s power is dangerous unless there is a legitimate authority to replace it. The twentieth century failed to develop a better pattern than was bequeathed to it by the nineteenth century. It seems safe to say that the twenty-first century will not have such a luxury of time.

What we now have is the United Nations as a fragile symbol of what might be. An old saying at the UN is that “when there is a conflict between two small nations the conflict disappears; when the conflict is between a small nation and a large nation, the small nation disappears; and when the conflict is between two large nations, the UN disappears.” The saying may need an addendum today that when the United States has a conflict, the UN either agrees or is declared irrelevant. Nonetheless, with all its limitations, the United Nations has had some success in establishing the idea of an international ethics.

The language of international ethics is “human rights.” One can easily forget how recent is this language and how much progress has been achieved in a short time. The phrase “human rights” was practically unheard of in the United States until the presidency of Jimmy Carter. The discussions of the 1960s were about “civil rights,” an

appeal to explicit laws defining specific political rights. The claim of human rights is a far more ambitious undertaking, that is, the claim that all people have rights simply as human beings. The wider that a claim is, the deeper has to be its roots. And that is where all talk of human rights is worrisome. The ultimate basis for human rights is unclear.

Many of the leading voices in struggles for human rights consider the issue of a philosophical basis for human rights to be a distraction from the practical problems at hand. Religion, rather than one of the sources of human rights, is often thought to be the enemy. The human rights movement in this respect is similar to the environmental movement. Religion, more specifically, Christianity, hovers over most of the environmental discussion as the supplier of oppressive language and imagery. But a better acquaintance with Christianity, while not letting that religion off the hook, would reveal other possibilities that the environmental movement needs. The environmental movement cannot succeed unless the positive possibilities of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and other religions are part of the movement.

In a similar way, positing human rights either in disregard of or in opposition to religion cannot work. Diane Orentlicher rightly criticized Michael Ignatieff for refusing to consider religion's role in the discussion of human rights. Ignatieff had argued that human rights requires staying at the table to listen to all parties. Only religion seems too far beyond the pale. Orentlicher argues that human rights have to be accepted *within* religious traditions. That does not mean claiming that Christianity or Judaism or Islam invented the idea of human rights, but only acknowledging that human rights and the major religions are compatible.³

My own inclination is to wish to search for the philosophical and religious basis of human rights. I realize that the world cannot wait for a consensus that might take decades to emerge or might never be reached. Politicians, diplomats or lawyers understandably put ultimate questions to the side in working through currently needed agreements. But "human rights" might be a category that religious education could investigate.

I wrote in a 1981 book that the Religious Education Association was like the UN flag. That is, neither organization had much power, as the world usually measures power, but each was a sign of hope. I did not realize at the time how apt the comparison was. The United Nations is constantly dealing with religious differences and looking for educational (nonviolent) solutions. The UN is an international religious education association that seldom brings up religion.

The Religious Education Association, founded in 1903, has had international aspirations from the beginning. Canadian presence in the REA, and its offshoot APRRE, has been a reminder to U.S. participants not to sink into our usual solipsism. It seems unlikely that there will ever develop many national bodies of religious education

that could be federated into an international association. However, an international outlook and international conferences do not have to wait upon such a development. The language of “human rights” is an example of an international or a transnational idea that did not wait upon the constitutions of all nations-states. Those of us who belong to one of the world’s religious traditions are already in an international or transnational framework whether or not we reflect on that fact.

I will make a brief summary of United Nations documents that are related to religion and religious education. This history is inescapably intertwined with the idea of human rights, even though there has been an unwillingness to wrestle with religion’s place in the human rights story.

The story begins in 1948, as most people know, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt, who had been appointed to head the committee that drafted the declaration, was put there mainly because the project was thought to be innocuous.⁵ To nearly everyone’s surprise (perhaps even Roosevelt) the committee produced a document that was debated and ratified without a single negative vote (The Soviet bloc, Saudi Arabia and South Africa abstained). More surprising, the document has continued to gain in importance during the last half century.

The only agreement that was possible at the time was a “declaration” which is not a legally binding document. The United States Senate would not have approved a binding agreement. The hope was for a binding “covenant” in the future. When the Republicans came into office in 1952 they immediately announced that they would not sign any covenant.⁶ The covenant became two covenants (because of U.S./Soviet conflict) that were produced in 1966. The United States ratified the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights in 1992; it has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The Universal Declaration has very little to say about religion. Some heated controversy over religion occurred in the writing of the document. After a heated exchange one Sunday afternoon between the Lebanese Thomist Charles Malik and the Chinese Buddhist, P.C. Chang, Eleanor Roosevelt ruled out discussion of religion in the origin of human rights.

The document’s only references to religion are in Articles 2, 18, 26 and 29. Article 2 says that rights apply “without distinction of any kind” including sex, race and religion. Article 18 asserts a right to “freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” This freedom of religion includes the right to change one’s religion and the right to “manifest” one’s religion.

The UN’s first step toward seeing that the right to religion is observed was through a 1959 commission. A report was made on a study of 82 countries. The author, Arcot Krishnaswami, struggled with the complexity of a right to manifest one’s religion. The

right of one group to disseminate its religion can conflict with another group's right to their own opinions and privacy. Article 29 of the UHDR had acknowledged the need for some limitations in the exercise of the right. For example, in a United States case this year a woman claimed a religious right not to remove the covering of her face for a photo on her automobile license. The court ruled against her.

The most important international document barring discrimination against religion is the 1981 *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*. The clumsy name is indicative of the difficulties in reaching any consensus. The Soviets objected that religion did not cover atheism. The face saving agreement was that the Preface and Article 1 refer to "whatever belief."⁷ This document noted that not all differences are unfairly discriminatory. Religions need leeway in hiring personnel, mandating dress or organizing observances.

Both of the Covenants adopted in 1966 have an interesting reference to "religious education." I would like to know how they came to use the term. Article 18 of the Covenant on Political and Civil Rights and Article 13 of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights use identical language: the parents have a right to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in accordance with the parents' convictions. The good news here is the recognition of religious education as a universal right. The drawback is the assumption that religious education is exclusively concerned with parental rights. I would not disparage this parental right. It is indispensable that the parent - not the state - should decide on the child's religious education. But religious education does not cease at age 6 or even age 18. As I have suggested, the United Nations itself is enmeshed in religious education. Until it conceives of religious education as a lifelong and life wide endeavor, it will not be very effective in seeing its own role as mediating religious forces.

One fascinating aspect of this UN affirmation of a parental right to control the religious education of their children is a claim by some Christian groups that their religious rights are being violated by the school's teaching. The most common complaint is that homosexuality is being taught as morally acceptable. The UN text is vulnerable here, having declared that the parent has the right to the child's moral and religious education being in accord with the parents' beliefs. Since the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone below the age of 18 years old, the parents' right would seem to apply to 17 year-olds as well as 7 years-olds.

This parental protest has taken on added fuel with the arrival of the Internet which links groups world wide. Schools understandably can be distressed by the attack of these religious groups. Nonetheless, it is amazing to have right wing groups citing UN documents to defend their rights. That step could lead to discussion of other rights.

One final document I note is a 1998 UN report by Abdelfattah Amor. It is a survey of 77 states on the problem of compulsory religious instruction. Most states still seem

oblivious of the rights of religious minorities. Students are not given alternatives to instruction in the religion of the majority. There is very little teaching of what the report calls “comparative religion.” Education is needed, Amor notes, for the development of a culture of tolerance. But religious education that is unaware of the students’ diversity of religion can be oppressive and intolerant.

Religion as Challenge

This second part of the essay is a near reversal of perspective. From looking at the nation as protector of the right to religion and religious education, I now look at the need for religious education to be critical of the nation. That suggestion may seem to be one of biting the hand that protects you. However, criticism is not rejection or condemnation. Religious education has to aim its criticism at specific policies of the nation. I assume that patriotism can be a virtue if it is truly a love of the *patria*, the people and the land that have nourished a person. But what is called patriotism is often a manipulated endorsement of the nation-state in its entirety. Unbridled nationalism rather than the nation is what lays claim to a religious commitment.

No religion totally identifies with a nation-state. At least theoretically, a religious community keeps some distance from national policies and is willing to protest policies seen as evil. Christianity has a complicated history of this issue. Its early history is marked by heroic stories of Christians willing to die in defiance of empire. Then for a millennium the Christian church (or Eastern and Western churches) tried to work in tandem with the ruling secular power. The critical voice was often muffled. The Protestant Reformation sparked a return to a biblically based prophetic criticism. But it did not resolve the problem of the relation of Christian churches to the nation-state. A state often had an “established” church which did not leave much room either for other Christian churches or other religions. It was also not the healthiest condition for the established religion. There was little room for a religious education that was other than indoctrination into the religion of the majority. The 1998 Amor Report, as noted above, seems to show that religious education still means just that in most of the world.

The Jewish history on this point is simpler than that of Christianity but more tragic. Living in diaspora for two thousand years, Jews were not tempted to wield state power against their enemies. They survived by creating enclaves of Jewish life and practice. In modern times, however, they have shared some of the possibilities and temptations that Christians have had. They identified with the secular culture of European nations. Many Jews of the nineteenth century were proud to be German Jews, not only accepting of but leading the way in German culture and philosophy. That fact was what made the Holocaust so shocking; the slaughter was not by barbarian invaders but by the nation-state they had experienced as their own.

The two main alternatives for Jews have been the United States of America and Israel, each providing an experience of freedom but fraught with new problems. One of

the great glories of the United States is that it provided a home for Jews. Among most immigrant groups that came to the United States, about fifty percent stayed, the rest went back home. In contrast, nearly all the Jews stayed. They saw the possibilities in the United States and in general they made good use of those resources to prosper. They did not get the power of political office in the United States but they used the educational system to become physicians, lawyers, professors and other professionals. The danger has been in too close an identification with the freedom offered by the secular nation-state. But some Jews have continued to risk popular disapproval by standing up for the dispossessed. The American Civil Liberties Union, for example, continues to supply Jewish lawyers to fight unfair policies of the United States government.

The situation in Israel is radically different from almost all previous Jewish experience. I would not presume to narrate the story of the last fifty years or to propose what policies should be followed today. I just note that Jews are finding how complex it can be to bring an ancient religion and a modern secular state into a working relation. Which takes precedence when there is conflict? What interpretation of the bible and Jewish history will influence state policies?

The Muslim relation to the modern nation-state is a very different story from either the Jewish or the Christian. Islam is a more overtly political religion, not content with a separation of religious and secular powers. The temptation to identify the religion with worldly power is great. But as in all religions, there are Muslim voices of protest when dominative and oppressive power reigns. Western countries put their hope in Muslim countries becoming modern and accepting the canons of European Enlightenment. That might be both possible and desirable, but perhaps the larger hope should be for a religious reform that comes from a return to the best of the tradition. A religious education in the Muslim world, that is other than indoctrination, is as important as political and economic modernization.

Islam has never fully endorsed the idea of the nation-state, especially in those parts of the world where European nations carved out the boundaries of states. Islam puts its hope in the *umma*, the community of Muslims world-wide. As Islam grows in number within the United States, Canada, Australia and European nations, it has a chance to work out a relation of religious and secular powers that differs from Christian ideology. In the United States the metaphor of church-state, which became legally enshrined only in the 1930s, is patently inadequate to discuss the many ways that religion and civil powers interact.⁸ The United States still cannot admit the need for some form of religious education in its state schools, a fact not unrelated to the widespread ignorance of religion among its citizenry.

I make the above sketches of the Abrahamic traditions to point toward the scope and complexity of religious education internationally considered. Most of us most of the time have to concentrate on our humble piece of an unimaginably complex picture. I am,

however, suggesting a context for whatever aspect of religion we deal with. I do not think one should go into class every day to criticize the policies of the government. That would quickly degenerate into ideological rants. I do think we need to maintain a critical distance from the ideology that substitutes national chauvinism for a Christian, Jewish or Muslim commitment.

I think that every religious believer has an ambiguous relation to his or her nation-state, even the kindest and gentlest state. A Muslim in India or a Christian in Indonesia may have problems of direct conflict. But a Jew in Canada or a Christian in Norway has a problem living in an open and democratic society. Each situation has its own subtle difficulties that have to be looked at in detail. Here I concentrate on the situation I know best: the United States of America.

Polls this year show that in practically every part of the world the United States is considered to be the chief threat to world peace. To most U.S. citizens that is surprising; they think of their country as peace loving, as mediating the conflicts between other nations, as generous in helping the oppressed. The gap between these two perceptions is bewildering. Is the rest of the world blind with envy? Are people in the United States incapable of understanding their nation's history and its present policies? As for the explanation of other-nation-envy, I assume there is some understandable resentment to one country using its economic and military clout, even when well intended. Nonetheless, the main concern of every U.S. citizen has to be the perception of their own country by others and a willingness to be pointedly critical about their government's policies.

The reason that there is no little effective criticism either from within or from without the country is the confusion of the nation-state and a religious dream. From its very beginning, the United States identified itself with Europe's dream of the promised land. "America" had been coined in 1507 with a double meaning: the name of a continent and the name of a fabulous place variously identified with the original paradise or the realized kingdom of God. When the British version of America separated from the empire and became a sovereign state, it called itself the United States of America. The most important of those four words is the third one: of. If the country had been named the United States in America, the continental meaning might have emerged as primary. Instead, by identifying itself with the religious dream, the continental meaning was swallowed by the religious connotations of "America."

Not long after its founding this new nation announced to the world that the western hemisphere was closed. What may have seemed like amusing insouciance to the world's great powers in 1823 was no joke to Canada, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean Islands and South America. They experienced the oppressiveness of a country that, literally, knows no bounds. At present, in a world of international travel and communication, the rest of the world also knows the threat of a powerful nation that does not think of itself as a nation but as the fulfillment of the nations.

At the beginning, religion in the United States appeared to be an unsteady combination of Deism and Evangelical Christianity. After about 214 years of existence, the picture is remarkably similar. The Deists have pushed God further off the heavenly map. The Evangelicals, after getting pushed out of sight, are back stronger than ever. Catholics and Jews increased in number but always with some trepidation about how they fit into "America." Liberal Protestant Christians controlled key positions in the country but with some worry about the size of their following.

To the rest of the world, the several hundred religious distinctions, called denominations, is of little interest. All of the different religions appear as variations on the country's all embracing religion, America. Unless the traditional religions can exercise restraint on that religion, America can be an excuse to do whatever leaders of the United States government wish to do. Who can possibly oppose God's mission to the world?

The difficulty in getting the problem stated is that the name United States of America is regularly shortened to America. If they were the United States of America that would be logical. But references to America in every few sentences spoken in the United States is a source of constant confusion. Europeans, originators of the dream, are of no help in straightening out the mess. They are always talking about Europe and America when they really mean Europe and the United States. Terrorists are well aware that America is the enemy; Osama ben Laden has had nothing to say about the United States. He probably does not know much about the United States but he is very aware of the effect of America throughout the world.

The problem, as I noted above, is more than two hundred years old. It may seem too late to change things. But two centuries is a short time in the life of nations and humanity. When Mao was asked whether he thought the French Revolution had been a success, he said it was too early to tell. The same could be said about the country born about the same time, the badly named United States of America. It sometimes is a force for good; it sometimes does terrible things, often inadvertently. Its greatest danger is that it has never considered itself one nation among many, subject to international agreements. Its foreign policy is confused with a religious mission to save the world. And the language it has taught the world to speak makes effective criticism nearly impossible.

What has always been a problem for the United States and the world has jumped in magnitude during the last two years. There was a moment between Sept 12 and Sept 16, 2001 when it seemed there was a possibility that this problem would be faced. The bully in the schoolyard had just taken a sucker punch. The other kids in the yard felt some sympathy (along with repressed glee) for the big guy. Would the bully strike out in rage or else consider that if even the big guy is not safe then a new order is needed in the yard.

The United States' moment of reflection and restraint was swallowed by the metaphor of war; since then "operation eternal war" has not had any serious opposition. America overwhelmed the United States. The absence of any sustained political, academic or religious criticism has been frightening. I am most disappointed by the left wing in this country. Supposedly, they populate the university faculties. But when it comes to "America," they speak the same language as the right. When they try to be critical they sound like they are attacking America.⁹ No one will ever get anywhere in this country attacking America. They will be drowned out by liturgical hymns such as God Bless America and America the Beautiful. Criticism has to be directed at the United States, its government and specific policies of that government.

Catholics, Protestants and Jews have to bring to bear the resources of their traditions that are older than the religion of America. When the Sunday Eucharist in my church finishes the service with the singing of God Bless America, I have doubts that the U.S. Catholic church can find the place to stand. Probably no one religious body can mount an effective criticism of the United States' relation to America. During the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, Catholics, Protestants and Jews found some common ground. The task of criticizing the nation itself would be more difficult but it is urgently needed.

The key to religious success in this country may lie in Islam finding its voice. Since "America" from the beginning was a biblical image, Christians and Jews could find a place under its aegis, sometimes being absorbed by it and sometimes challenging America's ultimacy. Every other religion, including Islam, has had difficulty finding acceptance in "America." Ironically, while Islam is thought by many people to be the external enemy of the United States, the future of genuine religious life within the United States may largely depend on a vibrant Muslim community. If the United States could accept Islam, the religion of America might finally receive some effective criticism. And a field of religious education might be closer to birth.

1. *Religious Education as a Second Language* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1989).

2. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997).

3. Diane Orentlicher, "Relativism and Religion," in Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 141-58.

4. This document and those that follow are available on the United Nations website: www.un.com

5. Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the UHDR* (New York: Random House, 2001).

6. Tony Evans, *Human Rights Fifty Years On* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 87.

7. Natan Lerner, *Religion, Beliefs and International Human Rights* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 20.

8. Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). Hamburger's meticulous study shows that for most of its history the wall of separation between church and state was simply an opposition to the Roman Catholic church.

9. Ann Coulter in her best selling book, *Treason*, (New York: Crown Forum, 2003) argues that "liberals hate America." One can dismiss the argument as silly but many liberals do make themselves vulnerable by the way they use the term America.