

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE NATION-STATE

**Gabriel Moran**

*Department of Humanities and the Social Sciences, New York University*

### **Introduction**

This essay is a reflection on the ambiguous role of the nation-state in its relation to religion. I examine the way in which the nation-state is a protector of religion. I also examine the way in which the nation-state needs to be resisted and criticised by religion. Religious education thus has an important part to play in maintaining a fruitful tension between the nation-state and religion.

Our present system of nation-states is usually traced to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Since then, the nation-state is assumed to be the main agent in the world's politics, economics and social dealings. The twentieth century had opposite movements relative to the nation-state. Some national groups strove to get the privilege, power and security of statehood. At the same time, there have been regular announcements that the nation-state is finished, that it has outlived its usefulness. Is one of these movements completely mistaken? Or is it possible that the nation-state, while destined for eventual retirement, is still important for both good and bad reasons?

The nation-state has had a key role in the articulation of modern ethics. The central problem of ethics is how to unite two outlooks. One outlook is a commitment to family, friends and neighbors. This particularistic view might extend as far as the nation. The other outlook recognises the limitation of all groups, including the nation. It looks to a universal concern with all humanity and the whole earth.

At their best, the major religions of the world embody such a twofold ethics: a passionate attention to the particular concerns of everyday life, and at the same time a recognition that every human being and all of the earth is dependent on the creative power of God. Religion, of course, is not always at its best. When not challenged by disciplined understanding, religious passion is placed at the exclusive service of a small segment of humanity. The love of one's neighbor is interpreted to mean love for one's close kin, and indifference or hatred for everyone else. Religious beliefs too often dichotomise the world into good and evil.

Modern Western Enlightenment began as an attempt to retain the hope of a universal ethic but without the passions and prejudices of religion. The parochialism of Jewish and Christian religions was to be superseded by Platonism and Stoicism. The new sciences would gradually replace religion; the ideal of a single humanity would be the guide of ethics. The individual, cut loose from encumbrances of family, tribe and religion, would exercise rational control of life. When the individual understood what his own good is, he would treat others with fairness and equality. Erasmus, one of the first humanists, already had the idea in the sixteenth century: if the name of country is of such nature to create bonds between those who have a common country, why do not men resolve that the universe should become the country of all (Chapiro, 1950, p. 173).

The contemporary thinker who has most consistently developed this outlook is Peter Singer. He has rigorously applied a utilitarian principle to the world as a whole, overriding all claims of what he calls a partial benevolence (Singer, 2003). The only thing that can justify concern with a family member or a friend is that it makes the world as a whole better off. Where conflict arises between partial and impartial commitments, the former should be jettisoned.

Our sense of moral obligation is thus made dependent on our commitment to humanity, or more exactly, to human beings impartially considered. This account of moral responsibility seems at odds with the way that responsibility originates, namely, as an answer to being personally addressed. A professor of philosophy may view the world as a collection of individuals who are linked as members of the human community. The mother of an infant or a nurse in hospice is not likely to see the world in such impartial terms. *This infant, that patient, my beloved* become the particular embodiment of all humanity. This experience can be blinding; it can also be profoundly humanising.

Thus, while the world's religions have an argument with nationalism as a tendency to divinise the nation-state, they also have to be skeptical about the collapse of all intermediary structures into mere instruments of a single world community. In the latter case, instead of the nation being divinised, a life or an ideology of unity may claim ultimacy. All of the religions warn that nothing in experience is divine. Every moment and every place can be revelatory of the divine, but none is guaranteed to be so.

Religious education should, therefore, approach the nation-state as something more than a temporary instrument that is blocking human unity, but also as something less than the ultimate arbiter of justice and the seat of ultimate loyalty. A love for one's country is healthy if it grows out of love for one's family and neighboring community, out of respect and appreciation of the physical environment and out of a knowledge of the actual history not just the political myths of the country.

The nation-state protects the rights of religion and the rights of individuals to practice their religion. The nation-state is also a serious competitor with religion for the life and death commitment of a country's citizens. In the latter case, the nation does become a block to seeing the human community as well as the human relation to a creative power in the universe.

## Protector of Rights

Despite the nation-state's tendency to divinise 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 authority 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 in the United Nations is 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 in 1976. 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 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, but many of the leading voices in the struggles for human rights consider the issue of a philosophical basis for these rights to be a distraction from the practical problems at hand.

Religion is often thought to be the enemy of human rights. 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 presumed 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 criticises Michael Ignatieff for refusing to consider religion's role in the discussion of human rights. Ignatieff argued that human rights requires staying at the table in order to listen to all parties. But for Ignatieff, 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 it does mean acknowledging that human rights and the major religions are compatible (Orentlicher, 2001, pp. 141–158).

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

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 is usually begun in 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 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. To the surprise of nearly everyone (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 legally binding 'covenant' in the future. When the Republicans came into office in 1952 they immediately announced that they would not sign any covenant (Evans, 1998, p. 87). The covenant became two covenants (because of U.S./ Soviet conflict) that emerged 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 one heated exchange 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 UDHR had acknowledged the need for some limitations in the exercise of the right. On one side, the ban in French schools of the scarf worn by Muslim women seems to run counter to the right to express one's religion. In contrast, a recent court ruling in the

United States against a Muslim woman seems justified. She had claimed a religious right not to remove the covering of her face for the photo on her automobile license.

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 that existed 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’ (Lerner, 2000, p. 20). This document noted that not all differences are unfairly discriminatory. Religions need leeway in hiring personnel, mandating dress, or organising observances.

Both of the Covenants adopted in 1966 have an interesting reference to ‘religious education.’ I have not been able to discover how they came to use the term. Article 18 of the Covenant of Political and Civil Rights and Article 13 on 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. The United Nations itself is enmeshed in a kind of 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 determine that the child’s moral and religious education is in accord with the parents’ beliefs. Since the Convention of 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 year-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 the discussion of other rights in other contexts.

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 that of 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 a Challenge to the Nation-State***

The second part of this essay is a near reversal of perspective. From looking at the nation-state 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-state. 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-state. 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, every religious community keeps some distance from national policies and is willing to protest against policies seen to be evil. Christianity has a complicated history on this point. Its early history is marked by heroic stories of Christians willing to die in defiance of empire. Then for a millennium the Christian church (Eastern and Western) 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 both some of the possibilities and some of the 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 that Jews had experienced as their own.

In recent history, 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 of the immigrant groups that came to the United States, only about half of the group 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 closely identifying Jewish life 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 with all religions, there are Muslim voices of protest when dominative and oppressive power reigns.

At present, Western countries hope that Muslim countries will become modern and accept the canons of European Enlightenment. That development may be both possible and desirable, but perhaps the more realistic hope would be for a religious education in the Muslim world that is other than indoctrination, which 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 Europe, it has a chance to work out a relation between 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 religious and civil powers interact (Hamburger, 2002). 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 suggesting, however, a context for whatever aspect of religion we deal with. I do not think that one should go into the classroom every day to criticise 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 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.

Recent polls show that in practically every part of the world the United States is considered to be the chief threat to world peace (New York Times 2004). 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 resentment about 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 so 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 realised 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.'

At the beginning of the United States, its religion was an unsteady combination of Deism and Evangelical Christianity. After about 215 years of existence, the picture is remarkably similar. The Deists are still here, having pushed God further off the heavenly map. The Evangelicals, after getting pushed out of sight, are back stronger than ever. Catholics and Jews have increased in number but always with some trepidation about how they fit into 'America.' Liberal Protestant Christians are still in control of key positions in the country but with some worry about the shrinking size of their congregations.

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 the country were the United States of America (instead of the states of Virginia, Massachusetts, New York, and so on) that would be logical. But reference 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 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 few 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 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 from within the country. 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 (Coulter, 2003). 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 criticising the nation itself would be a more difficult meeting place, but criticism 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. The critical interplay between America and Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions would signal the emergence of a field of religious education in the United States.

## References

- Chapiro, J. (1950). *Erasmus and our struggle for peace*. Beacon Press.
- Coulter, A. (2003). *Treason*. New York: Crown Forum.
- Evan, T. (1998). *Human rights fifty years on*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Glendon, M. (2001). *A world made new: Eleanor Roosevelt and the UDHR*. New York: Random House.
- Hamburger, P. (2001). *Separation of church and state*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lerner, N. (2002). *Religion, belief and international rights*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Orentlicher, D. (2001). *Relativism and religion: Human rights as politics and idolatry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Singer, P. (2003). *One world*. New Haven: Yale University Press.