

## FREEDOM FROM RELIGION AND FREEDOM FROM IRRELIGION

*James Franklin*

Cardinal Pell's Notre Dame speech on religious freedom in August 2013<sup>1</sup> laid out the two main issues: firstly, on the world scale, it is very dangerous to be religious in many countries. The recent excellent books, *Christianophobia* by Rupert Shortt, and *The Global War on Christians* by John L. Allen, detail the killings and the harassment of Christians in Nigeria, Pakistan, many countries in the Middle East, India, Vietnam and other places.<sup>2</sup> The current chaos in Egypt and Syria has unleashed new persecutions. Christians, Falun Gong, Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims in China are all in trouble. Secondly, creeping secularism in the West, while a much lesser problem for religion, is creating growing difficulties for the ability of religious institutions such as schools, charities and hospitals to act according to their tenets.<sup>3</sup>

While those issues are the main game, there are two

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/08/23/3832073.htm>; G. Pell, "The Struggle for Religious Freedom in an Age of Militant Secularism", *Quadrant* 57 (10), Oct 2013, pp. 28-33.

<sup>2</sup> R. Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith under Attack*, Rider Books, London, 2012; review at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/christianophobia-a-faith-under-attack-by-rupert-shortt-8274142.html>; J.L. Allen, *The Global War on Christians*, Random House, New York, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The Ambrose Centre for Religious Liberty provides information at <http://ambrosecentre.org.au/>

other issues concerning religion and freedom that have had very little discussion. First, what about freedom *from* religion – the freedom of those with no religion to avoid oppression and bullying from the religious? And even less on the agenda: what about the rights of those deprived of knowledge of religion to have some opportunity to develop the spiritual side of themselves?

### **“Religion poisons everything” and freedom from religion**

“Religion poisons everything” say the New Atheists. According to Christopher Hitchens in *God is Not Great*, religion is “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children.”<sup>4</sup>

Now, this is not a fair characterisation of religion in general, neither absolutely nor in comparison to truly lethal atheist ideologies from Maoism down. But it is not entirely false either. Like fire, religion is a very powerful force. It can be used for good or ill. The history is mixed. In the West, the long and close relation between religion and public affairs played a crucial role in forming the generally compassionate and law-governed society that we take for granted, with its high levels of peace and security and respect for the rights of others. But then again, inquisitions, crusades, wars between sects, and oppressive confessional states are also part the story. Where religion overreaches itself and violates human rights, protection from it is called for.

<sup>4</sup> C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Twelve Books, New York, 2007, p. 56.

In the contemporary world, the most serious issue involving persecution *by* religion is the Islamic threat of death for apostasy. While this is not a universal doctrine of Islam, it is still a widely held one, and is far from being a dead letter in many places.<sup>5</sup> Ayaan Hirsi Ali is only the most prominent of the many ex-Muslims who cannot move about freely without heavy security, and outspoken atheist ex-Muslims are still very rare.<sup>6</sup>

This is plainly contrary to the most basic of human rights, the right to life. As the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states, in article 18:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

The right is notably absent in the Islamic alternative to the UN Declaration, the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam.

Protection is needed to ensure freedom *from* religion, in such cases where religion is a serious threat.

Christianity has a better record, especially in recent times when the Inquisition and Calvin’s Geneva are in the remote past and apologised for. But violation of human

<sup>5</sup> P. Day, “Australian Apologetics for Islam”, in D. Claydon, ed., *Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy* (Acorn Press), repr. in *Quadrant* 53 (5), May 2009.

<sup>6</sup> “No God, not even Allah”, *The Economist*, 24 November 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21567059-ex-muslim-atheists-are-becoming-more-outspoken-tolerance-still-rare-no-god-not>

rights by Christian churches is not quite a dead issue. In living memory, Catholic children in infant school were terrorised by threats of eternal fire for missing Mass on Sunday, a form of child abuse which, unlike the sexual abuse of the same period, was open, and in accord with Catholic doctrine. In the present day, there are questions about Catholic views on the permissibility of an abortion when both mother and child will die otherwise. A case in Phoenix, Arizona, where a hospital ethicist was excommunicated for approving of a life-saving abortion for a mother who would have died with her baby otherwise,<sup>7</sup> and the 2012 Irish case of Savita Halappanavar, who died after being refused an abortion in similar circumstances,<sup>8</sup> show that in these rare cases, Catholic teaching can conflict with a right to life. Moreover, Catholic teaching on euthanasia has the potential to be interpreted so as to force an agonising death that could be avoided by shortening life, though also the potential to be interpreted otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

Understanding whether such cases represent a conflict between religion and natural rights is complicated by the fact that what are often said to be 'religious' objections to abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage and so on are claimed by at least Catholic theory to be based on natural law, not religious revelation. The Catholic objection to these is not that some Biblical texts forbid them. It is that they are inherently wrong, always and for everyone, as should be evident to anyone who thinks clearly about them,

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excommunication\\_of\\_Margaret\\_McBride](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excommunication_of_Margaret_McBride)

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_of\\_Savita\\_Halappanavar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Savita_Halappanavar)

<sup>9</sup> J. Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2003, pp. 425-30.

whether from a religious perspective or not. Christian spokespeople have not always emphasised such a position. Opponents have done so even less, and have often relied on slogans like "Get your rosaries off my ovaries"<sup>10</sup> that suggest anti-religious rather than ethical motivations are driving the agenda. Both sides need to play fair, that is, play philosophically.

Another human right that has potential to conflict with religion is the right to education. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration says "Everyone has the right to education. ... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality ..." Some varieties of 'education', such as that in extremist madrassahs, are directed instead to the narrowing of the human personality through indoctrination. A Christian school that wholly substituted creationism for evolutionary theory could, on a smaller scale, be accused of a similar violation of the right to education. In principle, children deserve to be protected from such attempts to narrow their minds.

On the other hand, protection from religion should not be used as a pretext for forcing religious people to act contrary to their consciences. This is what occurred in the Victorian 'Cobaw' case of 2010. Cobaw Community Health Services attempted to book the Phillip Island Adventure Resort on behalf of Wayout, a support group for same-sex attracted youth at risk. The operators of the resort, Christian Youth Camps Limited, refused the booking. The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal held:

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/ill-wear-ovaries-tshirt-again-nettle/2006/02/10/1139465826319.html>

The conduct of the respondents in refusing the booking was clearly based on their objection to homosexuality. They are entitled to their personal and religious beliefs. They are not entitled to impose their beliefs on others in a manner that denies them the enjoyment of their right to equality and freedom from discrimination in respect of a fundamental aspect of their being.<sup>11</sup>

The decision was recently appealed and the original finding upheld. Whatever one thinks of the rights and wrongs of homosexual activity, it is very dangerous to regard a religious group operating a camp on their own conscientious principles as 'imposing a belief' on others.

### **Freedom from irreligion?**

There is a final issue, largely avoided by both religious and non-religious people alike: what about the rights of children deprived of all access to religion?

John Finnis, the distinguished philosopher of ethics and Oxford Professor of Law, summarises the aspects of human nature that are especially relevant to ethics in a list of things which, he says, are self-evidently "basic aspects of my well-being", or "the basic forms of good for us": life (including health), knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, practical reasonableness and religion. He argues that they are all highly important, and incommensurable.

Now, what should we think of an education that

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<sup>11</sup> *Cobaw Community Health Services Limited v Christian Youth Camps Limited & Anor* [2010] VCAT 1613, quoted at <http://www.isaiahone.org/blog/cobaw-and-the-charter/>

deprives a child of one of those basic goods? If an education deprives a child of knowledge, as a narrow madrassah does, it is a grave evil, since one of the most important of human abilities is prevented from developing. But if a child is forced into a farm or a factory or an army at ten years of age, then such a child is deprived of play (as well, obviously, as knowledge); and this too is to its very great detriment. His or her childhood is stolen; UNICEF has everyone's support in its drive against child labour.<sup>12</sup> Or again, an education that cuts children off from the appreciation of music is unacceptably narrow in denying the basic good of aesthetic experience. No serious education system would dream of doing that.

So what if a child is deprived of any opportunity to develop his or her spiritual side, for example by being brought up by strictly atheist parents who shield that child from any contact with people of genuine faith? Or what should we think of a family, or ethnic culture, or education system that gives children to understand that religion in general is obsolete, a comfort blanket for the weak-minded that need not be thought about?

This is a serious deprivation when the child comes to an event in life for which religion might provide a consolation or a perspective. To face one's own mortality or the death of someone loved is always extremely hard. It is doubly so if the possibility of divine help and immortality has been forever ruled out of the question by one's upbringing.

Deliberate attempts to hide from children an

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<sup>12</sup> UNICEF: Child Labour, <http://www.unicef.org.au/Discover/What-we-do/Protection/Child-Labour.aspx>

understanding of religion are not confined, unfortunately, to individual atheist parents. Take the new Australian National Curriculum. The section on “ethical understanding” in the Curriculum has plenty to say about diversity, tolerance, global warming, indigenous studies and so on, but works hard to avoid mentioning that some people think ethics is connected to religion.<sup>13</sup> There have been complaints that the History curriculum neglects the Western Tradition in general. The History curriculum for years Kindergarten to Year 10 mentions religion in connection with ancient societies, but keeps it off the agenda for anything later than the Ottoman Empire’s policy of religious tolerance. The only mention of Christianity is in Year 8, “the transformation of the Roman world and the spread of Christianity and Islam”.<sup>14</sup>

There is a case for taking action. But religious people are not enthusiastic about the enforced teaching of religion to non-religious children, because they are especially keen to respect parents’ rights to bring up their children as they see fit. In some places, such as Canada where ‘human rights’ intrusion on free speech and religious freedom has gone much further than in Australia, Christian parents are defending themselves against compulsory gay pride education in schools.<sup>15</sup> In these circumstances, political realities demand a strategy of appealing for a truce: “You leave us alone to educate our children, and you educate your children how you like.”

So the status quo is as in the NSW education policy on

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Ethical-understanding/Introduction/Introduction>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/History/Curriculum/F-10>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.defendingparents.com/>

religious education: “Parents/caregivers in public schools have the right to have their children receive instruction in their religious persuasion, where authorised teachers of that persuasion are available.”<sup>16</sup> That is, live and let live – my children will be educated in my persuasion, your children in your persuasion (or lack of persuasion).

But parental rights also have limits. Children are ‘taken into care’ to save them from a range of parental defects; and parents who wish to educate children by homeschooling are subject to a number of rules and inspections.

Leaving aside policy practicalities and political realities for the moment, should every child be required to have some religious training? And if so, what could such a religious training possibly look like?

Actually, Australia has been down this track before, and has supplied one possible answer to the question. When in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the state governments withdrew support from religious schools and instituted “free, secular and compulsory” education, they did not envisage making “secular” education totally godless. The New South Wales *Public Instruction Act*, following the Victorian, laid down that “the words ‘secular instruction’ shall be held to include general religious instruction as distinguished from dogmatical and polemical theology.”<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, “No sectarian or denominational publications of any kind shall be used in school, nor shall

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/curriculum/schools/ethics/SEE-implementproced.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> *Public Instruction Act, 1880*, in *Public Statutes of New South Wales*, 43, Vic. no. 12–51, Vic. no. 15 (Sydney, 1888), p. 15, quoted in Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, p. 223.

any denominational or sectarian doctrines be inculcated.” On the other hand, “It shall be the duty of all teachers to impress on the minds of their pupils the principles of morality, truth, justice and patriotism; to teach them to avoid idleness, profanity and falsehood; to instruct them in the principles of a free Government; and to train them up to a true comprehension of the rights, duties and dignity of citizenship.”<sup>18</sup> And when there were continuing complaints that there was little such moral instruction, in fact, moral and basic scriptural lessons were instituted to put these guidelines into effect.<sup>19</sup> There was a subject called “Civics and Morals” in the higher primary school years, which incorporated authorised Scripture lessons, and dealt with such subjects as moral courage, pride in thorough work, temperance, the evils of gambling, patriotism, courtesy, kindness to animals, and gratitude to parents and teachers. Attempts to revive that kind of approach in recent decades through ‘values education’ have faced the problem that there is less societal agreement on values now, leading to the main ‘value’ highlighted being tolerance – a genuine enough virtue, but not a very inspiring one, given that one can realise it by doing nothing.<sup>20</sup> The role of environmentalism as a substitute religion has also attracted attention.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> NSW Dept of Public Instruction, *Public Instruction Act of 1880, and Regulations Framed Thereunder* (Sydney, 1886), p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> M. Clark, *History of Australia*, vol. IV, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1979, pp. 285-9.

<sup>20</sup> J. Franklin, “Secular versus Catholic Conceptions of Values in Australian Education”, in J. Franklin, *Catholic Values and Australian Realities*, Connor Court, Ballan, 2006, pp. 83-96.

<sup>21</sup> “Catholic cardinal and bishop condemn climate change extremism, radical environmentalism”, *LifeSiteNews* 3 January 2008, <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/archive//1dn/2008/jan/08010301>;

Still, ethics and values, even perfectly correct ones, are only a part of, or implication of, religion; they are not the thing itself. What could be done to introduce children with possibly no family or cultural religious background to what religion is really about – the genuinely spiritual or transcendent aspect of reality? A reasonable initial plan is that in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate subject, Studies of Religion. It combines some comparative religion with an in-depth study of one religious tradition, normally, of course, the tradition of the school teaching the course. The course is taken by around 4,000 students a year (virtually all of them in Catholic schools). While the plan is sound, and the syllabus is well conceived, it only makes sense where there is an existing religious educational tradition to provide the in-depth part of the course. This leaves as a mystery what could be provided for students from a completely non-believing family, the ones most deprived of an insight into the meaning of spirituality. If any compulsory education were to be provided for such students, most likely it would be something on comparative religion, giving some superficial overview of the doctrines and practices of different religions, and the real message of such a course would be relativism.

Devotees of religion will find this kind of instruction in religion very thin and unsatisfactory. It is hard to appreciate any religion, or religion in general, without some sort of cultural (usually familial) immersion in it. Trying to gain an understanding of religion by hearing a few colourful facts about comparative religion is something like trying

[lifesitenews.com/news/archive//1dn/2008/jan/08010301](http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/archive//1dn/2008/jan/08010301); Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, pp. 345-7.

to understand French cooking from a TV show, without eating any actual snails.

The problem is no doubt insoluble. A young person deprived of religious understanding deserves an intensive spiritual boot camp. Political reality is against it.

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*Professor Franklin contributed an article on "Objectivity: Mathematics and Morals" to CCQ, Vol. 1, No.1, 2011. His book An Aristotelian Realist Philosophy of Mathematics appeared in April 2014. It is published by Palgrave Macmillan.*

## THE KNIFE OF SERPENT HORN

### The Origins and Nature of Ecology as a Scientific Discipline

*Brian Coman*

Lynn Thorndike's massive *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, published in eight volumes between 1923 and 1958, is one of the lesser-known but nonetheless important reference books for modern scholars interested in the history of science, and of its early relationship to magic. I confess that I have only briefly dipped into the work, but one little piece of information has always stuck in my mind. Buried somewhere in this massive work is an account of a magical 'knife of serpent horn' which had the singular benefit of signaling to its owner that his/her food had been poisoned. Now, this seems fair enough for your average medieval warlord, but in this case, the knife was reputedly owned by Pope John XXII (1249-1334). Some readers might argue that he *was* a warlord anyway, but this does not seem to be the case. Perhaps it was a gift he could not refuse, or simply a precaution against *Salmonella* in poorly prepared food!

And this brings me directly to my main subject. Could it be that the course of science, so carefully charted through the centuries by Thorndike, is now *devolving*, as it were, such that we are now heading back to 'the knife of serpent horn' days? Professor Garth Paltridge thinks so. A few years ago he published a book titled *The End of Science:*