

Foreword

AN ARRESTING ASPECT of the growing fascination with the role of religion in global politics is the effort to show that however much religion may contribute to violence, intolerance, and discrimination, that is not its only function. Alongside the expanding number of studies purporting to demonstrate the perverse influence of religion on civil war, terrorism, illiberal nationalism, and the like, there emerges a contrasting set of studies endeavoring to exhibit a more constructive, irenic, and tolerant side to the political and diplomatic contributions of religious individuals and groups. Such accounts are commonly described as examples of “religious peacebuilding.”

The volume before us clearly falls into the second category. It is the story, compellingly told by John Nurser, of the disproportionate influence of a few committed, persevering, and highly effective religious individuals, along with the supporting groups to which they belonged, on efforts during the 1940s to include and elaborate human rights as part of the United Nations system that was then being created. This contribution was particularly important in formulating what we now call “religious” or “belief rights,” namely, those human rights aimed at ensuring tolerance and nondiscrimination regarding the expression and exercise of religious and other fundamental beliefs. For all who celebrate, some fifty-five years later, the significance of that accomplishment for the cause of “freedom, justice, and peace in the world,” as the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, this account of a creative and successful act of public intervention by religious individuals and the groups they represented will stand as an inspiring addition to the growing literature on religious peacebuilding.

The acceptance of human rights as a central part of the structure of the United Nations could not be taken for granted at the time. In fact, there was considerable resistance to the whole idea. In the opinion of a congressional member of the U.S. delegation to the founding conference of the UN in San Francisco, human rights “means nothing.” If other members of the delegation were more supportive, they were nevertheless initially pessimistic about their prospects, particularly with regard to creating a Human Rights Commission as the indispensable first step to codifying universal human rights standards.

Nurser shows that it was the indefatigable efforts of one of the book's heroes, O. Frederick Nolde, an American Lutheran seminary professor from Philadelphia, and an early proponent of the World Council of Churches, as well as of like-minded colleagues, such as Joseph Proskauer and Jacob Blaustein of the American Jewish Committee, and other mostly religiously motivated participants, that combined decisively to redeem the cause of human rights in a fateful late-afternoon meeting with the U.S. delegation on May 2, 1945. According to the report of one who was there, "it was that afternoon that the Commission on Human Rights was born."

This was a gigantic achievement. It was, after all, the Human Rights Commission, eventually headed by Eleanor Roosevelt, that went on to bring into being the Universal Declaration, and thereby to make way for and inspire a whole array of subsequent human rights documents on civil, political, economic, social, cultural, racial, gender, minority, environmental, and other issues, that today set international standards for what is expected of nation-states, both within and outside their borders. Although these standards are not uniformly enforced around the world, they are more and more taken to comprise the basic international requirements of political legitimacy. It is simply the case now that states found systematically and grossly to violate these standards are regarded as pariahs. Whatever the final accounting of the causes of this revolutionary state of affairs, the crucial contribution of a key group of religious actors appears, thanks to John Nurser's revealing narrative, to have been indispensable.

But that is not all. Nolde and his associates also made a signal contribution to the drafting of what became Article 18—the article on religious freedom in the Universal Declaration—and he influenced other aspects of the document as well. In the fall of 1947, as the Human Rights Commission was struggling to overcome sharp controversies among its members over the meaning and scope of religious liberty, Nolde weighed in actively. In representing the newly formed Churches' Commission on International Affairs, and in reflecting the thinking of key figures in the World Council of Churches (which was still in the process of formation), he presented proposals for wording, some of which were apparently adopted in the final version of the Universal Declaration.

This is a very significant part of Nurser's story, and his discussion of it sheds considerable light on critical developments regarding the general connections between religion and human rights that emerged during the formative period of the late 1940s. Much of the impulse for the protection of religious freedom had originally come from the Protestant missionary movement. Leaders thought of the new postwar international institutions and rights as a means of advancing Christianity. They were frustrated by local resistance in Latin America and elsewhere toward attempts to open opportunities for untrammelled Christian propagation and conversion. On this understanding, the campaign for human rights and religious liberty depended on a particular religious point of view. According to Nurser, this understanding was widely shared among Protestant leaders and church groups, which saw the campaign for human rights as part of a Christian-based crusade.

Such an outlook converged with similar attitudes in other quarters. Some members of the Human Rights Commission proposed that the Preamble to the Universal Declaration should include specific references to the deity and to the spiritual destiny of humankind. Such members, like the Protestant counterparts Nurser discusses, could not imagine that the Universal Declaration might be advanced without an explicit religious foundation.

Interestingly enough, Nolde and some of his associates gradually came to a different view—a view that eventually prevailed. As early as 1944, Nolde concluded that a strongly parochial bias would weaken the appeal of human rights for those who did not share his Protestant outlook, or, for that matter, any religious outlook at all. Having interacted with people of widely divergent convictions and points of view, Nolde arrived at the belief, as he said, that “freedom demands a broader base than can be offered by religion alone,” and, moreover, that ideas about extending religious liberty needed to be placed in “a secular context.” By “secular context,” Nolde evidently meant a common, religiously impartial moral space shared by peoples of very different fundamental commitments and identities.

These were prophetic sentiments, and they conformed to what turned out to be the dominant view in the Human Rights Commission. After heated debate, the commission ruled out all confessional references in the Universal Declaration as being inconsistent with the nondiscriminatory character of human rights. Human beings are held to possess human rights, and to be accountable and obligated to live up to them simply because they are human, *not* because they are Muslim, or Christian, or Buddhist, or Jewish, or Hindu, or a member of any particular religious or philosophical tradition. The whole point of human rights is that they are taken to be binding and available, regardless of identity or worldview.

This does not mean, of course, that people are not free to harbor their own personal reasons—religious or otherwise—for believing in human rights. It only means that such views may not be taken as “official” or in any way binding on others who do not share them. Such is the meaning of religious liberty enshrined in the Universal Declaration. Such, too, is the implied conviction that all religious, as well as non-religious, individuals and groups are equally free to propound and advocate their point of view, as long as they do not violate others’ fundamental rights and freedoms as elaborated in the international documents. This understanding itself is not, to be sure, uncontested. However, it is hard to imagine a solution better suited to reconcile common standards with the world’s religious and philosophical diversity.

The connection of Nolde and his associates to these developments reveals an important new wrinkle in the annals of religious peacebuilding. Here are individuals, themselves strongly motivated by religious commitment, supporting and contributing to a set of standards, deemed indispensable for establishing peace and justice around the world, that do not necessarily depend on any particular religious or other point of view. Rather, they depend on a shared moral basis taken to be universally common to all people, a basis Nolde described as “secular”—or perhaps “pluralistic,” in present-day parlance. The ultimate, somewhat paradoxical, assumption is that religious people may best contribute to peace, and at the same

time most successfully express their own deepest commitments, when they surrender proprietary claims in favor of sharing common ground with others, and thereby create maximum space for freedom of fundamental belief, religious or not.

Both because of the large gap it fills in the story of the founding of the United Nations and the events surrounding the adoption of human rights, and because of the wider message it conveys about religion and peacebuilding, *For All People and All Nations* is an immensely important contribution. We are all mightily in John Nurser's debt.

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