

RESPONSE TO ROGER GREELEY

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I was wondering earlier what I could possibly add about separation of church and state that two previous speakers would not have already said. It reminded me of the time that I was standing with a friend who had been a featured speaker at a conference and someone approached him and asked him how he felt about genocide. He said, "I'm against it!" It is a little how we must all feel when we first consider separation of church and state. As Humanists, we are for it!

What I want to consider today, is some of the problems that we, as Humanists, face when dealing with the issue of separation of church and state, particularly when dealing with those people with whom we agree. I am going to discuss this topic from the perspective of non interference of the state in the church, and leave the discussion of non interference of the church in the state for another time.

This issue of separation of church and state which seems so obvious to us in the United States is not so clear cut for Humanists in other countries. About a year and a half ago, Ze'ev Katz, an Israeli and founder of the Israel Association for Secular and Humanistic Judaism, spoke at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and some of what he had to say was shocking to me. He said, and I quote:

"Here I would like to present an idea which I support through others in Humanistic Judaism might disagree with me. If religious parents feel strongly about giving a religious education to their children, but they cannot support a school system on their own and ask for state aid of the kind given to non-religious schools - then in the conditions of Israel a humanistic Jew should support their request... When thinking about Israel, one should remember that it is another culture, another people, another place. Separation between church and state may be a very positive and pro-ressive thing in the U.S... Transferred *in toto* to the different society of Israel, it might turn out to be negative. If there are large masses of people in Israel to whom a synagogue, or a religious school are of supreme importance and if they cannot themselves support these by their own means - then state aid to fulfill this utmost need of its citizens may be as much in order as fulfilling their need for food or shelter. As long as it does not involve any coercion or privilege; which means that if some citizens are in need tomorrow for a humanistic synagogue or school, state aid should be granted to them on an equal basis. The demand therefore is not for separation of religion from state but rather 'equal treatment of each religion by the State and complete freedom of equality to the non-religious.' This is the central issue in Israel."

In Canada, the situation is even more limiting. The state primarily supports a dual system - public schools and separate, i.e. Catholic, schools. Education is a provincial matter, not a national concern. In Quebec, until

the 1960's there was in effect no public school system. The school system was Catholic. The only alternative was private schooling. In Ontario, there is state aid to separate schools and again, separate means Catholic. Just recently aid for separate schools has been expanded to include 11th and 12th grades, so it now extends through the completion of High School.

There is something intriguing and enticing about the possibility of state aid for Humanist schools which captures my imagination for a brief moment. But held up against the principle of separation of church and state and what this principle does to protect the theist and non-theist alike, it quickly loses its attraction. I cannot agree with my friend from Israel. His approach is a pragmatic answer to a hopeless situation in his own country and *not* a goal for Humanists everywhere to strive for.

It seems that an issue often touched upon when discussing religion and the state is the intent of the founding fathers. A few months ago, I watched a feature on *20/20* on school prayer. The reporter, who did a thorough job of covering her story, ended her report standing in the church that many of the founding fathers worshipped in. Obviously, the point that she was making was even though the founding fathers were firm about the non-involvement of the state in religious matters, their reason was not from a lack of personal belief, but more a concern that individual beliefs and freedoms be protected. We, of course, know differently. In fact, many of the founding fathers were deists and freethinkers. But what concerns me most about this issue is not the intention of our founding fathers, but rather the time and energy that people, including humanists, spend trying to justify their position today by arguing about the intentions of our ancestors. This is a significant problem in liberal religious circles currently. Both in Judaism and in Christianity enormous time and energy is spent trying to justify traditional textual material in light of modern society. Within the secular and humanistic Jewish movement, there seems to be a need on the part of many people to find the humanistic streams in the tradition. I am not suggesting that we ignore our past or fail to study history. Much can be learned from our past, and history teaches important lessons. What I am concerned about is that we use this energy in order to justify our position and therefore, we waste precious time that should be spent pursuing new ideas and writing new texts that celebrate and explain our position today. To fall into my own trap, I think that the intention of our founding fathers when they created our constitution was to create a document that was fluid enough to survive the test of time. As Woodrow Wilson said, "But the constitution of the United States is not a mere lawyers' document: it is a vehicle of life, and its spirit is always the spirit of the age."

The issue of separation of church and state creates strange bedfellows in political coalition. Humanists are not alone in support of this issue. We find ourselves allied with others who support the separation of church and state, but who are not Humanists. While I agree that it makes political sense to work with all those people who support a particular issue, I think there are some things that Humanists should be conscious of in these situations. I call this the problem of context. It has two aspects. We must not lose sight of our basic intent and realize that we may be working with people who sup-

port this issue for very different reasons than we do. What is important for us to understand as Humanists is that our support for the separation of church and state derives from a belief in personal freedom and liberty; whereas, many religious minorities support this issue out of a need to protect their own positions. Psychologically, we have two very different dynamics functioning.

Last March, at the first seminar of The Humanist Institute, we became embroiled in a discussion of this sort. Someone raised the point that our main goal as Humanist leaders is to do good humanitarian work and that the goal of doing the work should override all considerations of whom we do the work with. I think the example at the time was something innocuous like soup kitchens, but the discussion escalated into a debate. My concern then and now is that we stay very clear, when we are working with people and groups in coalition, as to what our goals are and why.

My concern leads me to the second aspect of this problem of context. We must also be aware that the areas of agreement with the people that we are working with may be isolated to this issue alone. I was struck by this a few weeks ago when I was reading the text of the statement from the leader of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He encourages political responsibility amongst Catholics and sets forth a number of positions which Bishops have taken including 1. safeguarding human life from the devastation of nuclear war, 2. the enhancement of life through promoting human rights and 3. satisfying human needs like nutrition, education, housing and health care for the poor. I think we can all agree with these. The other issue was to protect human life from the attack of abortion. Now on this issue, I think some of us would have difficulty agreeing with the Bishops. Again, I am not suggesting that we not form coalitions for our political work, only that we be aware of what we are up against when we do so.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that the purpose of my remarks was to illustrate that even when an issue appears to be very clear cut and straightforward, there are questions that we must consider that recognize the complexity of life. As Humanists, I think it is crucial that we do not fall into the trap of oversimplifying events. Our goal must be to understand fully the issues involved in any question. We must do this so that we can intelligently weigh the consequences of our actions.