

1

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019



Religion as a Tactic of Governance

Podcast with **Naomi Goldenberg** (21 January 2019).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-as-a-tactic-of-governance/>

DR: *We're still here in Belfast at the BASR conference, in 2018. And I am privileged to be joined today by our keynote speaker from last night, Naomi Goldenberg, of the University of Ottawa. Welcome to the Religious Studies Project – a return visit, Naomi!*

NG: Thank you.

DR: *So we're going to pick up where the keynote . . . well, we're going to pick up where the keynote started, last night, for everybody who couldn't be here for what was an excellent session. Thinking of where to start a conversation today, then . . . So the idea was, as I understood it, that religion – and just to clarify, we're talking religion as a category here – has been projected . . . The idea of religion as a separate sphere, a separate category, has been projected onto the past for strategic purposes. Tell us what you mean by that and especially this idea of strategic purposes – as a tactic. What are we talking about?*

NG: Religion is a modern category, the way I see it. Not just the way I see it – the way many scholars see it. And not just the way we see it. It can be demonstrated that the term as meaning some kind of special separate sphere of human activity is a very, very recent idea. So in the past – “the past” is so big! I'll maybe try to explain this in terms of probably the most effective sentence that I've ever come across to explain it, is that there is no religion in the Bible. And last night I began with a passage from Deuteronomy to illustrate that you might have – you do have – God in the Bible. You have all kinds of people that we identify with the category of religion now. But all of these figures were involved in government, not in anything separate that we could hive off and call religion. God was some kind of . . . conceived as some kind of monarch, some kind of director, someone who human beings could claim to speak for. But we get God as a principal of Government. Now, of course, government is a modern term as well. So I speak about governance with lots of different words. You could say ruling with

Citation Info: Goldenberg, Naomi and David G. Robertson. 2019. “Religion as a Tactic of Governance”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 21 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 11 January 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-as-a-tactic-of-governance/>

2

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

authority, you could say commanding a polity, and it's a very loose concept of governance that I'm using. But this governance was, we might say now, theocratic, whatever. So you don't get something separate. Clergy – that's another modern term projected onto the past – were involved with ceremonies of government. And anything that gets called religion, translated as religion in various ancient texts, tends to mean ceremonies that are related to governing. OK so if that's accepted, then when the modern category of religion emerges – and it emerges in fits and starts in different places and slightly different times, in different ways – it emerges as a way for governments to manage displaced populations, according to the theory that I'm putting forward. And it's a struggle of institutions, usually – always, actually – between males who were running various institutions. And the loser institution evolves as a religion – or can evolve as a religion – instead of being eliminated completely; instead of the polity being banished or murdered. So you have a category that allows for a quasi-government within a larger government. And then that quasi-government derives some sort of authority from seeing itself as, or perhaps truly being, a government of something in the past. And the strength of that vestigial government – (5:00) those displaced people, that displaced sovereignty – gets to fit into the category of religion. And with that, the state grants certain status to a group. I would say to the – it's not just me who is saying this – the vestigial group is denied certain forms of violence, marshal violence, police violence, violence in waiting. That's the violence needed to enforce court decisions. The mystification of that vestigial government occurs because of the connection with something in the past, or something with the narrated idea of a government that existed in the past. The sense of religion as a strategy is that it's a strategy of dominant governments to manage this displaced or marginalised population. However, it can also be a strategy for the displaced population to claim the category, claim the mystification that surrounds the category, and put pressure on the dominant government for more rights. So it's a double kind of strategy going on there.

DR: *Right, yes. There was a great line you used in the keynote: “Religions as resting once and future governments.”*

NG: Restive

DR: *Restive, right*

NG: Restive once and future governments, yes. I like that phrase “once and future” – sort of the “once and future prince.” It's a sense of the government looking . . . considering itself to have been something more dominant in the past, and something that will be dominant in the future. So you get that double sense of time going on. And always ambitious – even though sometimes there can be long periods when you don't see the ambition to aggrandise, to get more and more power, to have more and

Citation Info: Goldenberg, Naomi and David G. Robertson. 2019. ““Religion as a Tactic of Governance”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 21 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 11 January 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-as-a-tactic-of-governance/>

3

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

more spheres to be controlled.

DR: *When we had . . . well, it wasn't our conversation, but the previous Religious Studies Project conversation when we talked about [religion as vestigial states](#) . . . this seems to build a little bit on that. Or my sense of religion as vestigial states was more of this group of people who consider themselves as sort-of restive once and future government.*

NG: I don't think they . . . Often they don't consciously think of themselves that way.

DR: *Not consciously, but that's the way it's working.*

NG: Yes. Right

DR: *But this seems to broaden it out and, actually, looking at it the other way round as well – in the way that this can be something that's very useful for the majority state.*

NG: Oh yes. Very useful. Because the majority state can claim, sometimes – depending on relationships with the vestigial one – that it is supported by the vestigial older government, more mystified government. And we see that in the United States with slogans such as “In God we Trust;” with having clergy open up governmental ceremonies, the closeness of Government and the church in some places.

DR: *And literally, in the UK, you know?*

NG: Oh, very literally in the UK. Right!

DR: *Literally. Yes and so, you know, mystification: obviously we have . . . if you want to listen to our interview with [Tim Fitzgerald on mystification](#), if you're unclear on that. Basically, this is a technique by which power relations are obscured and concealed.*

NG: And also the nature of something, such as religion as a form of government, a form of rules, a form of law, regulation, ritual ceremony that is very like government, like what we're considering government, is obscured by the mystification. So that's not seen. It's supposed to be something mysterious.

DR: *There was something that immediately struck me during this conversation. And it's always been of interest to me. We were talking about the fact that people who study religions in the classical world for instance, don't really talk to RS people. There isn't really a great deal of you know,*

4

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

interdisciplinary work on those kind of areas. And it's always seems to me that what we talk about as being religion in say the Roman empire, or Egypt, or Greece or something, is much more like the kind of statecraft that we do. It's much more akin to you and the Americans civil religion stuff that you do, (10:00) that [Robert Bellah](#) and people like that used to talk about.

NG: I think that goes . . . that approaches what I'm saying.

DR: *But, theoretically, it's the other way round. And that's what I find very interesting about that.*

NG: Yes. Good.

DR: *So, rather than saying this modern statecraft is a bit like some kinds of religion, actually we can flip that and we can say, "Well, we don't think of this as religion." So why are we imposing that idea on states from 2000 years ago? Why do we use the category religion to talk about the polis, and the Olympic Games, and these kind of things, in Rome? Is this part of this tactic of managing . . . ?*

NG: I'm not sure it's part of the tactic of management – although it might be, because it gives the vestigial government a lot of power, and a lot of mystery, and a lot of emotional valence. And then when the dominant government relies on the vestigial government, hearkens to it, hearkens back to it, it also gains that kind of power. But let's see. I'm so tired from last night! (Laughs).

DR: *Yes!*

NG: But the mystification, how thatWhere were we? Let's pick up the thread again.

DR: *So we talked briefly about mystification, then I switched to this other thing: this fundamentally, I think, changes that conversation. So we had, you know, in the sort of Sociology of Religion, in the classic 1960s Sociology of Religion, we had this idea of quasi-religion or state religions or civil religion. But this actually changes that conversation. Because now we could actually say, "Well, if that's religion then, you know, why do we have to call that religion?" We could just not call it religion. We could call it statecraft.*

NG: You could call it statecraft, exactly. Yes. There's a point I wanted to make. I'm sure as we start to talk it will come back. I have to explain to your Listeners that we spoke in a group. And continued speaking. . . . (Laughs).

DR: *We've been speaking for hours about this!*

5

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

NG: Hours! (Laughs) in the pub last night!

DR: *It's not uncommon, you know. We sit down to record these and we have to come back to the beginning because, yes . . . The Listeners don't want to hear our in-jokes, probably!*

NG: (Laughs)

DR: *Ok. Let's . . . I think it might be useful for the Listener to have a couple of examples. And there were a few interesting examples.*

NG: Oh, I'd like to say one thing about that. I think the mystification of something in the past, that we can say is religion and is eternal, comes from, in some ways, “world religions” discourse.

DR: *Right, yes.*

NG: And I think it works the way world regions does as a category – although there's a lot of argument about when that starts, exactly. Some trace it back to mid-1600's, or whatever, when Christians discovered that there were other peoples in the world who actually didn't know anything about Christianity. And then, various scholars have shown that when these new-to-the-Europeans areas were discovered, the first . . . one of the first things that explorers say is that, “Oh – there's no religion here. These people are primitive. There's nothing.” And then, after the explorers are there for a while, they begin to notice something that might be . . . “Oh, that could be a primitive form of religion.” And, guess what! It is! It's a beginning. And Christianity is the evolution, the apotheosis, the pinnacle of this development. So the fact that there is this thing we can identify maybe as a thing called religion – it could be anything, could be ancestor reverence, it could be rituals at tables, it could be anything, ghosts, spirits, whatever – gets named religion and then gets projected onto the past as a justification for the presence of Christian religion now.

DR: *Yes. Yes.*

NG: So I think that some of that is there – but as an inferior form. Or as another form.

DR: *Yes. Yes. I think it might be useful for the Listeners to have an example that I think is quite a clear one. I know this isn't particularly your original work, but I think it's a very good case study, to look at Judaism, and the way that we see that moving through a number of different ways of being interpreted, until we end up with Judaism as . . .*

NG: Or, as some people say, *many* Judaisms. There are scholars who trace this rather specifically

Citation Info: Goldenberg, Naomi and David G. Robertson. 2019. ““Religion as a Tactic of Governance”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 21 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 11 January 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-as-a-tactic-of-governance/>

6

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

(15:00): that you didn't have anything that could be called a religion. You just had people, who lived in a given area. And as these people were conquered by a range of . . . a succession of empires, if those who weren't killed cohered, or were allowed by some governments. You could look at the way [Cyrus](#) dealt with what we could call the Jewish people. He allowed them to have certain rituals, certain places, rebuild the temple – but temple in the sense of like a city hall. Because temples in the past weren't separated with what we would call worship, now. They were places of commercial exchange, they were law courts. There were lots of things going on. So by creating this separate space, or this area, governments at that point were creating what gets to be now called religion. In the case of Judaism . . .

DR: *They were also a lot to do with food practices. Now again, this is another example of reading religion into the past. So we go, “Oh they were involved in sacrifices, or ritual preparations of meat.” But the idea that these are religious practices is again, something that we read into the past.*

NG: Something that develops later.

DR: *But we could think: well, it's just the reason that, you know. . . . Like, Scottish people like to eat white bread, and would go to a shop that sells the only white bread from Scotland when they go to live in Canada, or something like that.*

NG: That's right. And if you made at certain points, you could make the Scots into a religion. It could be that kind of category. So, whatever the Jewish people did became cohered as Judaism. And as I was speaking last night about how there's It's true, in the case of the Jewish people, that you have a confusion – Is this a religion? Is this an ethnicity? Is this a nation? This is all together Is it a culture? And I think that underlies, actually, all polities that take on that category. That there's a lot of ambiguity there. That belief is maybe one factor and not a very important factor at all.

DR: *And there are quite strong arguments that Judaism, the idea of a religion, is quite a late development and they were seen, historically, much more often as a race than they were as a religion.*

NG: Which is another problematic kind of . . .

DR: *Which is a whole other can of worms! But the point is that these different categories . . .*

NG: All coming from the idea that to be a Christian you have to believe something. So, gradually, I see a change in Jewish people. Many Jews now think that you have to believe something to be really Jewish. Jews never have to believe anything. You were born of a Jewish mother, or you were part of

7

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

the community that made you Jewish.

DR: *Well . . . and that's "belief" in a very Christian sense of a credo,*

NG: Exactly.

DR: *You know, a stated belief: this is what I believe, I know it doesn't make sense to everyone but I'm committed to it in some way.*

NG: Yes. So then you have to worry, if you stop believing that, do you fall out of your Christian-ness in some way? And Jews never had to worry about that.

DR: *You also made a really good point, it was quite quick in the presentation, about the way that this – in terms of like "Islamist", and terms like this – where people seem to be reluctant to use the term religion.*

NG: Well, the key factor there is that when a group in contemporary times does something violent – marshal violence or police violence, particularly – that isn't authorised by the state, then the title of religion becomes problematic. Because the key thing for creating the vestigial government is that it will not have any kind of forms of violence that could challenge the state. So [Max Weber](#) said that a long time ago – not about the category of religion, but that legalised violence is the one thing that the state always holds onto for itself. So it's the one thing that isn't generally franchised out to religious groups. Of course, when we get to the sphere of sex and gender, those are the kinds of jurisdictions that are sometimes ceded by the dominant state to the vestigial one (20:00). And you would have family courts that are authorised by the state in some countries, family courts run by quote unquote "religious authorities", who would be able to decide.

DR: *And why is that different? Why . . . say, circumcision practices? Why does . . . why is that form of violence allowable, and not others?*

NG: For some reason. I think it's a vestige of male authority over women that both the dominant state and the vestigial one claim. But somehow the state is more willing to give that jurisdiction, which I suppose was not seen as all that important, over to vestigial authorities.

DR: *Perhaps it's a situation where it benefits the state, but it slightly clashes with stated aims. So, by sort of allowing – "We'll just turn a blind eye to these religions, vestigial states doing it – suits us in the long run." Because it restates male . . . patriarchy.*

8

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

NG: Male dominance and . . . supports male dominance that's another point I was making, that the male dominance of the vestigial state is generally always the case, always male – partly because it's hearkening back to something in that past which was . . . in recorded history it seems to be male governance all the time. I think you're right. It reinforces male-dominance. But it's quite frightening, because women and children become subjects of two governments. The dominant one and the vestigial one.

DR: *And male children to some degree, as well.*

NG: Male children to the same degree, because we let . . .

DR: *Circumcision.*

NG: So many countries . . . circumcision and then some oral suction in some Jewish communities. Female circumcision, in some other kinds of communities, is a very contested practice, but there's a lot of argument that it should be allowed in some degree, and some way. We allow that as a form of violence because it's supposedly religious violence, or it's not seen as violent.

DR: *And, of course, we do have many cases where the religious nature of a practice, or belief, or some sort of prejudice comes down to whether it is or is not religious – you know, the use of cannabis by Rastafarians. There was a recent case, in Scotland, where a guy who claimed he'd been fired from his job for being a Nationalist. He was campaigning as an SNP. And it was seen to clash with his government job. And in the preliminary ruling the judge said, "Well this is a sincere and worked out belief system about the world. So it's equivalent to a religion, and therefore it should be protected."*

NG: (Laughs). And that's an example of how that category can be anything. Anything can get into it. Sometimes I talk about religion as a category in which nothing has ever been excluded. I can't get anyone to name one thing that hasn't been included in the category of religion. Impossible to exclude anything from it. And yet it's supposed to be something unique.

DR: Yes. It's *sui generis* and unique to itself, but it's also everything!

NG: It's also everything! (Laughs).

DR: *It's just humans, in some way . . .*

NG: It show the problematic nature of that category.

9

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

DR: *Yes. Another interesting example, I think, which shows the edges of this, is how often new religions, new religious movements dream of governments.*

NG: Exactly!

DR: *They dream of alternative governments, but they're also the target of government ire. And often violence.*

NG: Well, governments are always a little bit edgy about the things they authorise as religions, because they're worried about takeover. Because there's a sense of competition, somewhere. And New Religious Movements tend to imagine the better government to come could be something local that they'll enact in a certain place and a certain way. But it could also be something in the future. It could be after death. Sometimes major dominant religions, or what we call world religions also imagine things like that. Or the government will be on another planet, or it will be after an apocalypse. But it will be better, whatever it is. And it will be something like what already happened a while ago – in that sense of being once and future.

DR: *Yes. I'm particularly thinking of the kind of . . . the stuff that [Crawford Gribbon](#) was talking about yesterday, of the American Redoubt (25:00) where these Conservative right wing traditionalists, essentially, are attempting to create little states within states where patriarchal theocracy can continue within. . . .*

NG: There we go. Because they're worried, now, about women getting some kind of power, and some kind of dominance.

DR: *And atheists, and non-white people, and homosexuals, and everything else . . .*

NG: Trans. people.

DR: *Everything, yes. And that is clearly harking back to a previous kind of . . .*

NG: Or an imagined previous. . . . Often an imagined previous state.

DR: *Yes, so. . .*

NG: “Make America great again” is that kind of slogan!

DR: (Laughs).

10

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

NG: Yes. When?

DR: *Well, yes . . . again. Which one are you talking about? The McCarthy era, World War II? What is it? The Civil War?*

NG: Exactly! (Laughs).

DR: *Yes. But the violence aspect of it is particularly interesting. We were riffing last night about the idea of . . . My colleague Chris Cotter was talking about how, you know, a child can be raised in a state, and told that he's working for Queen and country, and then signs up, and goes off to another country and kills people. And because this is for the state, this violence is . . . And you've made this point about violence being the thing that states . . .*

NG: Dominant states keep it to themselves.

DR: *The one thing they keep to themselves. Now, you have. . . there was another line in the keynote, which I want you to unpick a bit for me. And it's religion, the category religion, as an alternative to genocide.*

NG: I was suggesting, taken from Deuteronomy 20 verses 16 through 18, in which the Lord God commands a complete eradication of every living thing: people, livestock, everything in an area that has been given as an inheritance to a population. And I was thinking that if the category of religion had been invented – this is hypothetical, very much almost like a game to imagine that this could have been an alternative for that warrior God, that dominant tyrant. So that he wouldn't have to kill everybody there. He could create a religion in which all forms of violence would be forbidden to that group. And perhaps the group could endure. So I was thinking of it as . . . I think of its function that way, as an alternative to genocide. Cyrus, for example, didn't eliminate the Jews who were in his area of jurisdiction. He allowed them a space – a bounded space. That's a two-edged sword in a way. Because, by creating a special group with some kinds of status, sometimes that group can also then be targeted for genocide.

DR: *Mmm.*

NG: Later on. The way Jews have been, the way many minorities have. So it's a double-edged thing. It's the creation of a polity with a certain kind of regulatory apparatus internal to that polity that can also make it a target.

DR: *I'd like to wrap up then with. . . We – any of us who are working in the critical religion*

Citation Info: Goldenberg, Naomi and David G. Robertson. 2019. "Religion as a Tactic of Governance", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 21 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 11 January 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-as-a-tactic-of-governance/>

11

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

paradigm, broadly stated – will eventually be angrily demanded of us what the practical application of what we're doing is. And how does it matter to real to real people? And there are some quite clear practical examples here. You mentioned the journalistic covering of the abortion debate, for instance.

NG: Right. In Ireland. I thought that was an example – at least the newspapers I read – I was collecting articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*, about the abortion referendum in Ireland – the recent one. And what was done in most of those articles is that the Catholic Church was spoken about, not religion as a general category. Sometimes it was mentioned, but it was clear that this was a specific institution with specific ideologies. Someone mentioned last night that Evangelical Christians were also involved. But then there's a specificity about who exactly is advocating what, and for what purpose? And who exactly wins and loses in these various debates. And I think that's an important demystification of issues (30:00). So I would urge scholars in Religious Studies to be as specific as possible, to name the groups as specifically as you can. Are you talking about Jews, are you talking about Muslims, Are you talking about Christians, maybe? Which kind of Christians? Buddhists? Not this blanket category. That's already a step forward. I also think that a practical application – and this is where my heart is – is in the pushing the project forward. It's to demystify the category of religion, so that governments can't use it to fudge so much; that it doesn't get to be such a vague category that anything can be claimed as a right within it; and that restrictions can't be put on it; and that special male privilege can't be so easily granted. These vestigial governments have just as much contingency, just as much conflict within polities as any other kinds of government. So often they've tended to be seen as monolithic, as homogeneous, and the men – who claim to represent them – are given a lot of power. So because religion as a category is put into constitutions, it's put into Law, and because no-one knows what it is – courts don't know how to interpret it in a kind of consistent manner – I think it's particularly ripe for deconstruction, and I think that some very interesting clarity can be put to these debates. That would be an example of one of the practical applications.

DR: *You've brought a lot of clarity to the conversation here, I think. I think people are going to be very intrigued to read more of your work. But, unfortunately, I have the real privilege, today, of ending the interview!*

NG: (Laughs).

DR: *But I just want to say, thanks so much for joining us!*

NG: And thank you, David.

12

Podcast Transcript

DR: *Thank you.*

Version 1.1, 11 January 2019

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial- NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. The views expressed in podcasts are the views of the individual contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROJECT or the British Association for the Study of Religions.