Reimagining Liberal Education: Affiliation and Inquiry in Democratic Schooling

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Religious Education: Educating for Diversity

L. Philip Barnes and Andrew Davis

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Recent books by Hanan Alexander (*Reimagining Liberal Education*) and by Philip Barnes and Andrew Davis (*Religious Education*) take us to the heart of one of the hard problems of twenty-first-century schooling: how *should* we respond to religion?[1] Barnes and Davis write in the context of a British education system that has long seen religious education as a legitimate, if somewhat marginalized, element in the curriculum. As Mark Halstead notes in his introduction to their book, "[h]ow to accommodate religious diversity in schools … is one of the most challenging issues facing educators today" (*RE*, 1); he goes on to observe that "[t]he relationship between religious education and religious diversity … is more complex than it first appears" (*RE*, 5). Alexander's task, in a somewhat longer collection of papers, is more extensive. He argues that many people live in (imperfect) liberal democracies and that this is a matter for which to be grateful. For many people, including Alexander, specific religious commitments are central to what makes life worth living. It is also how they make sense of, and decide how to act in, the world. However, religion has been marginalized in contemporary education, with, Alexander claims, significant negative implications.

For educational thinkers who aspire to influence educational practice this generates a series of difficult questions: How do we respond to the religious commitments of students, parents, and teachers? How do we respond educationally to religious diversity? What kinds of civic virtues and behaviors should we seek to develop in students, specifically with respect to religion in general and to those with different religious commitments? Such educational questions do not arise in a vacuum. I write against the contemporary sociopolitical background of, in the United States, the 2016 presidential election and the early presidency of Donald Trump and, in the UK,

an ongoing "post-Brexit referendum" analysis of what kind of society Britain has become. Without drawing conclusions as to the impact of political discourse on the election results, it is clear that in "liberal democracies" the related issues of religious commitment, diversity, immigration, and community integration have become a staple of political rhetoric. Britain and the United States are not alone in this; anti-immigration agendas ride high in many liberal democratic countries across Europe and the Pacific Rim. Democracy is alive and well, but its historical twin, liberalism, appears to have lost vitality. I have talked of "political discourse," "rhetoric," and "agendas" rather than conversations or dialogue. In the UK, there has been a lack of *reasoned conversation* about religion and diversity; this appears to be the case in the United States also. Instead, as Alasdair MacIntyre identified, we are seeing "protest," as different groups shout over each other knowing that they are not in the business of changing each other's opinions.[2] Alexander, in particular, seeks in his book to provide a foundation for more productive discussion about religious commitments, schooling, and civic needs that moves beyond such "protest." As he notes, "there has been a flight from normative discourse grounded in philosophical, theological, ethical, or political tradition" (*RLE*, 1).

While religion is only one aspect of "difference" and the need for understanding between groups, it has particular contemporary significance. George W. Bush's reference to a "crusade" in relation to terrorism suggested to some an erasure of those who serve another deity.[3] As Rahul Mahajan points out, almost all world leaders, including the Taliban's Foreign Minister, denounced the 9/11 attacks;[4] nevertheless, the recent debates on both sides of the Atlantic continue to invoke religious differences as highly significant. John Wolffe takes up the issue of religious conflict.[5] Writing from an Irish perspective, he argues that the rise of Islamophobia mirrors the decline in anti-Catholic sentiment, and that secularism may well not be the best way forward to deal with such conflict.[6]

In the UK, the domestic aspects of this policy agenda have impacted schools and universities through such measures as the "Prevent Agenda"[7] and the rise of a concern with "British values," which, as Halstead notes, has become a significant aspect of religious education in British schools.[8] On a positive note, early analysis of the Brexit polling data shows that younger voters — those who were in full-time education from the mid-1980s through this discourse on crusade, terror, and anti-immigration — voted by a significant majority to remain in the European Union.[9]

Schools in recent times, it may be claimed, seem to be doing a good job at cultivating an inclusive account of British identity.

I read both Alexander and Barnes and Davis as offering an alternative to the contemporary approach to managing difference through a commitment to unbounded civic integration. I begin with two summaries of the main aspects of their arguments before offering some concluding reflections: first, on the purposes and limitations of this type of policy-oriented philosophy, and second, on how Barnes and Davis's arguments offer a development of Alexander's use of "transcendental imagination."

Alexander's Reimagining of Liberal Education

The complex and multifaceted nature of Alexander's monograph makes it difficult to capture the nuanced and interrelated arguments he presents. In broad brush strokes he identifies two related issues in any schooling system that separates itself from the religious beliefs of the communities of which it is a part. The first is that it ignores the central value that many individuals place on their religious commitments. The second is that this approach distorts the educative process by relying on scientistic principles to underpin curricula and pedagogies, and to articulate an artificial and superficial account of human nature. Both issues emerge from what Alexander identifies as the school system's "faith commitment" to a form of ethical liberalism. In seeking to remain "agnostic" on matters of faith, he claims, the state falls into an illiberal accommodation because it excludes some legitimate, alternative conceptions of the good.

Alexander recognizes that by directly addressing religion and religious difference he is seeking to overcome the familiar, complex arena of managing the tensions between respecting pluralism and meeting the demands of the common school. His approach is twofold. First, he articulates "transcendental pragmatism" as a foundational principle of schooling. Second, he conceives of the basic problem that emerges from ethical liberalism's approach as a loss of pupils' "transcendental *imagination.*" For Alexander, a key educational aim is to "teach youngsters to celebrate the ways in which they choose to be different while at the same time accepting and respecting the differences of others" (*RLE*, 87). Transcendental pragmatism and the transcendental imagination are key terms on Alexander's account, and in the next few paragraphs I outline what he means by them.

What is required, according to Alexander, is no mere modification of the education system; he proposes a grassroots transformation of how education is conceived. For Alexander, "[b]ecoming educated … entails being initiated into a community that embodies the conditions of human agency in concrete social and cultural norms" (*RLE*, 99). I find much in Alexander's broad analysis with which to agree. Specifically, I concur with a view of education that focuses on developing and enhancing the agency of young people in their community.[10] In liberal democracies, where individuals have choices as to how to live their lives, there is a need for some way of ordering these decisions. Alexander seeks to "explore the human need and propensity to order life in terms of transcendental ideals often expressed in terms of liberating myths" (*RLE*, 19). Such myths go beyond those of traditional societies; Alexander identifies, as examples, the role the Exodus narrative has played in modern political struggles, Jefferson's conviction of the "divinely ordained right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and "the basic principle of science that states that one event may be caused by another" (*RLE*, 20–21). For Alexander, these liberating myths form the core of the *transcendental imagination*. Expressed in cultural and often religiously specific terms, the *transcendental imagination* sets out the ordering narratives for individual lives. Although Alexander articulates the central issue as one of religion, he is clear that transcendental imagination could be nonreligious. He later expresses this in terms of "moral ideologies," that is, substantive life narratives. It is unclear whether Alexander, reflecting arguments developed by John Hick,[11] holds that liberating myths, religious or secular, share a similar structure (creation, fall, redemption, and eschatological vision) reflective of religions, or if he has a more limited view that these myths must have some internal coherency and purchase on the imagination of the individual. The argument suggests the latter and, hence, one wonders what distinctive role *religion* plays in the account. For example, in the UK, talk of the "Big Society" gained clear prominence in the build-up to the 2010 general election. At the heart of this political narrative was the necessity of a strong civic society, both to provide a source of meaning to individuals and to underpin democratic institutions.[12] While faith narratives were seen as a significant aspect of civic society, so too were a range of other meso- and micro-level narratives that brought cohesion to particular communities and direction to young people's lives.

From Alexander's perspective, however, not all narratives (whether religious or not) are appropriate. A *transcendental imagination* ought to enable us to "think and communicate about

human values, indeed about sharing our humanity together" (*RLE*, 23). Thus, he makes much of a distinction between "moral" and "amoral" ideologies as narratives for our lives. Moral ideologies incorporate visions of the good and are structured by norms that are "layered, multifaceted, and open to (even dependent upon) interpretation" (*RLE*, 97). Education should therefore develop particular conceptions of the transcendental imagination, ones that are conducive both to linking individual lives to wider cultural/religious narratives, and to narrating lives of good citizenship within a pluralist, liberal democracy. This is difficult and will give rise to a number of controversies, but Alexander concludes that "the alternatives, as suggested by a tendency towards rootless openness, on the one hand, and the rising tide of radical fundamentalisms, on the other, may be far more frightening" (*RLE*, 35).

The identification of such narratives is one role of transcendental pragmatism. It rejects the *view from nowhere* and "requires admitting the possibility of a view from somewhere, even if we cannot come to agreement concerning where that view is from or what vantage point it allows" (*RLE*, 40); and it maintains that "[p]ractice, not theory, is the driving force of all scientific endeavors" (*RLE*, 47). The "transcendental" aspect of the pragmatism is intended to defend it from "the quagmires of self-defeating relativism" (*RLE*, 40) to which pragmatism often succumbs. Alexander claims that these "higher ideals … are not dependent upon but govern human activities" (*RLE*, 40). This ties pragmatism, Alexander claims, closely to Aristotelian practical wisdom (see *RLE*, 40). It is unclear, however, what transcendental pragmatism adds to such an Aristotelian account. It may be the case that Alexander wants to remain at a distance from a range of particular metaphysical assumptions, or, like Stephen Carden, sees John Dewey, William James, and others as theoretically preferable to the recent rise in Aristotelianism.[13]

In any case, as noted earlier, the educational agenda Alexander presents requires a reappraisal of the underpinning contemporary conception of education and the processes of educational research. His critique is of rationalism, scientism, and ethical liberalism, all of which have marginalized the transcendental imagination. It is not that guiding myths are absent, but rather that the myths of various religious and spiritual traditions are replaced with "[n]arrow accounts of science and technology" (*RLE*, 25). The result is an age "of curriculum as technology … with techniques serving not only the content but also the method of instruction" (*RLE*, 25). Alexander's alternative is to "understand education as an art … [and] to assess pedagogy artistically" (*RLE*,

53). If educational research is to be conceived as a form of "art criticism," it requires "a reshuffling of our very conception of the relations between science, art, and ethics, and in turn a reimagining of how we view education, not merely a new research paradigm or alternative epistemologies" (*RLE*, 54).

Much more would need to be said to satisfactorily outline Alexander's thesis, but this sets out the basic form of the argument. The call is for a radical reconception of education centered on the "sovereignty of the good" that seeks to develop young people's transcendental imagination. This is an education that not only respects young people and their communities' conceptions of the good life, but also promotes the kind of civic virtues that sustain liberal democratic societies. Before reflecting on Alexander's account, I want to review a similar education project in a different educational context, one in which, at least rhetorically, religion has a more central, state-sponsored role — namely, the UK.

Barnes and Davis: Educating for Diversity?

Barnes and Davis, writing as part of the "key debates in educational policy" series, consider the current state of religious education in UK schools. The book offers an extensive foreword and conclusion by its editor, Mark Halstead, himself a well-regarded expert in the field, while the core of the book is a critical debate between Davis and Barnes. Barnes begins by offering a reappraisal of religious education in the UK, which he claims "is conceptually incapable of challenging bigotry and intolerance" (*RE*, 12). He proposes an approach that takes seriously the "reality of difference" (*RE*, 22) between religions. This reality often brings with it an "exclusivism" in relation to the veracity of the claims of a particular religious community. This difference and exclusivity itself is not the problem, according to Barnes; rather, it "provides the occasion for intolerance" (*RE*, 22). The educational challenge is not to erase the reality of difference, but to "enable pupils to behave responsibly and respectfully towards those who are perceived as different" (*RE*, 22). Davis, however, opposes Barnes's "religious exclusivism and defends a 'modest' religious pluralism" (*RE*, 63). Davis disputes Barnes's claim "that we need not 'fear that recognition of real differences between people is somehow incompatible with respect for them'" (*RE*, 71). Barnes and Davis, therefore, share some of the same concerns Alexander expresses, but each in different ways indirectly questions the legitimacy of transcendental imagination. Barnes

rejects an education founded on a phenomenological merging of different religious narratives. Davis, on the other hand, rejects religious exclusivism, the claim that the experiences of believers are so distinct that they cannot be experiences of the same divine reality. He argues that different religious traditions may well be expressing an experience of the same transcendent object, though emphasizing different aspects of it and communicating it in different languages.

Barnes begins by asserting that any form of education assumes religious commitments and transmits religious values; it "takes a stance in relation to religion and conveys a message about the nature and importance of religion" (*RE*, 11). If we fail to develop knowledge and understanding of religion, we "fail to equip pupils to participate in civil society and contribute to public debates" (*RE*, 12). This is a general claim for all pupils, but Barnes is also concerned about pupils with specific religious commitments. He argues that (a) there are no necessary reasons to exclude *confessional religious education* from schools, and (b) the representation of individual religions needs to take seriously the differences between them. Contemporary religious education, in seeking common ground, teaches distorted accounts of religious traditions; in consequence, adherents

> may justifiably conclude that the nature of their religion and their particular religious commitments are not faithfully represented in education. They may conclude that there is no real respect for them and their values and beliefs, or appreciation of the full significance of religious difference and diversity. (*RE*, 54)

Barnes sees contemporary approaches as fatally flawed. This is problematic not just for the faith development of individual pupils, a matter that is outside the scope of his essay, but for "the development of respectful relationships between individuals and communities" (*RE*, 12). He asks, "what kind of religious education is best suited to meeting the current challenge of diversity to society and to schools" (*RE*, 15).

His argument develops through four stages: a consideration of diversity; a defense of confessional religious education; a critique of the dominant phenomenological approach to religious education; and a conclusion that contemporary approaches to education fail to promote respect for others.

In the first stage, Barnes asserts that the significant differences between individuals and communities are "culturally and socially conditioned" (*RE*, 20), and that it "is a natural human propensity to classify people into categories and to distinguish between 'them' and 'us'" (*RE*, 20). For Barnes, there is a need to recognize the effects of difference, rather than a need for its erasure. He goes on to argue that religious beliefs are not the source of prejudice, and "policies and methodologies framed specifically to lessen religious prejudice are based on an incomplete and flawed interpretation of its cause and of the wider phenomena" (*RE*, 21). Differences "provide the occasions for intolerance" (*RE*, 22) rather than being the causes of such prejudice.

Second, Barnes argues that there are no good reasons to reject school-based confessional religious education per se, that is, an education "which aims to commend and nurture some particular version of religion" (*RE*, 22). He argues that it is no more likely to be indoctrinatory than other areas of the curriculum, and that prejudice against confessional approaches reflects a commitment to rational autonomy as an essential aim of education (see *RE*, 24). This is a distinct conception of the good life, and while it may be appropriate, he asks "what moral right does a liberal democratic state have to impose one particular version of rational autonomy on Muslim pupils?" (*RE*, 24) — or, one may add, on any pupil. In a state with diverse populations (ethnically, racially, religiously), all with different conceptions of the good life, at the very least the aim of developing rational autonomy "should be reinterpreted in more educationally and philosophically defensible ways, which in all probability are compatible with religious nurture" (*RE*, 26).

The third strand of Barnes's argument is the rejection of the phenomenological approach to religious education, which reflects the theological assumptions of liberal protestant Christianity. The phenomenological perspective identifies religion as concerned "with inner experiences and the hidden life of the soul and not with public knowledge or public life" (*RE*, 31). Thus, he notes "[i]f religious *experience* has priority over its *conceptualization* in beliefs and doctrines[,] … religions can posit agreement at the foundational level of experience, even though the religious experience is expressed in different doctrinal ways" (*RE*, 31, emphasis added).

The methodology of the phenomenological approach, Barnes argues, is to listen to the experiences of believers, take what they say "at face value," and imaginatively use these experiences to

identify the meaning of religion per se. This not only identifies the content of religious education, but also shapes its pedagogy. Understanding emerges from "abstracting oneself from one's own beliefs and values … and then entering imaginatively into the subjective life-world of others" (*RE*, 33). The difficulty is that it fails to work in practice, largely because, as a "psychological perspective" suggests, "most pupils in primary schools are conceptually incapable of adopting a viewpoint contrary to their own"; these "psychological and imaginative limitations … endure until well into secondary level education [in some cases]" (*RE*, 35–36).

Barnes's difficulty is not just with the methodology/pedagogy, but with the validity of the phenomenological approach more broadly. It is on this point that he and Davis have their most significant disagreement. Barnes argues for the legitimacy of religious exclusivism, contending that "in the case of religious experiences we have no epistemic basis for affirming that subjects from different religions experience the same spiritual object" (*RE*, 53).

Finally, Barnes brings the argument together by directly arguing that this liberal theological approach to religious education is ill-equipped to develop the kind of respect for others we seek. Many religious adherents "do not acknowledge the *equal* validity of religions other than their own" (*RE*, 54); given that, they do not see their religion "faithfully represented in education. They may conclude that there is no real respect for them and their values and beliefs" (*RE*, 54). He concludes:

> Acceptance of the "religious other" is predicated on underlying religious agreement.… It is for this reason that current representations of religion in British religious education are limited in their capacity to challenge racism and religious intolerance: they are conceptually ill-equipped to develop respect for others where there is genuine disagreement. (*RE*, 54–55)

Educationally, the focus needs to be on respect for persons rather than respect for religions per se. Schools should not seek to hide differences between religions but rather "to develop in [pupils] the personal resources and disposition of character to come to respect those with whom they differ" (*RE*, 57). Barnes recognizes that this approach raises the issue of religious truth and that "[p]upils need to be equipped with the skills to reflect upon and evaluate religious phenomena"

(*RE*, 60). The educational challenge is "to provide pupils with the moral resources both to tolerate difference and to respect those with whom they differ" (*RE*, 62).

Davis's analysis stands in contrast to that of Barnes. He views Barnes's political visions as too optimistic and directly counters the approach Barnes recommends with this assertion: "If my exclusivist construal of my religious faith means that I believe that other faiths are untrue, I may well struggle to pay adherents of those faiths appropriate respect. The contemporary international scene bears emphatic witness to these difficulties" (*RE*, 69).[14]

Davis's proposal for a "modest" pluralism rejects Barnes's argument that believers' different experiences of the divine necessarily mean that they are experiencing a different spiritual object. Rather, he contends that while there "is conflict between how different people refer to God, it neither follows that they cannot be referring to the same being nor that they cannot entertain beliefs about the same being'" (*RE*, 77). He considers the implications of "two contrasting philosophical accounts of what it is for a belief to be of, or about something": he identifies the first account as "the descriptive-intentional theory of reference," and the second as " the theory of 'direct' reference" (*RE*, 73). Davis's argument, in summary, might be stated thus:

> 1. The divine is believed to be "transcendent." He argues that this emerges from a belief that God is the creator, giving rise to the idea of "ontological transcendence" and/or a belief that God is, as the focus of worship: is "beyond our apprehension and comprehension[,]…is inherently 'wholly other' [and is] beyond our powers to know and understand Him fully" (*RE*, 71–72). Davis specifically notes that he is only concerned with religions that focus in some way on the transcendent (*RE*, 72).
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> 2. If God is not to be treated as a fictional character or abstraction, then there must be some causal connection between God and a believer's beliefs about God; that is to say, the beliefs are caused (somehow) by the believer's perception of God. Davis claims "beliefs about or of" something "come in a range of strengths and that the 'strongest' sense requires the subject of that belief … to play an appropriate causal role in the generation of that belief" (*RE*, 76). Davis notes, however, that he "will not attempt to say much about the nature of the appropriate causal link" (*RE*, 81).

3. Where an individual believes something in the strong sense — for example "Crippen is the murderer" (*RE*, 76) — then it is possible that they (and their speech community) believe several other descriptions about Crippen, and that the individual's "belief … about Crippen is compatible with some of these other descriptions being false or at least not being held with total understanding and certainty" (*RE*, 76).

4. Because God is "beyond our powers to know … Him fully" (*RE*, 72), we might expect there to be differing, even contradictory, beliefs about Him. However, the stronger the causal links between *the believer's beliefs about God* and *God Himself*, the less the inaccuracy of those beliefs undermines the legitimacy of the beliefs themselves (see *RE*, 80 ff).

5. Thus, Barnes's claim that "[t]he different descriptions of the divine … tell against the conclusion that they have a common referent" (*RE*, 72) is at best a partial picture, and a more nuanced account of what is involved in having a "belief about or of" something undermines Barnes's conclusion.

For Davis, Barnes would be right *if* "an exclusively descriptivist account of referencing is correct.… However, once we appreciate that a causal component needs to be incorporated[,] … we also understand that such reference is compatible with the use of at least some descriptions that may not be fully applicable or may even be not true of Him" (*RE*, 89). As a result, it is possible that apparent conflicts between different religions are nothing of the sort and that they are referring to the same God (though, as Davis acknowledges, it is also true that some conflicts are real).

Before returning to the implications for religious education, Davis considers how it is that the reality of different descriptions of the characteristics of God by different religions does not mean "that either one or both of the characteristics do not apply" (*RE*, 90). The argument is primarily that "language about transcendence is not literal" (*RE*, 90), or at least is not always literal (*RE*, 91). A key example is the claim "God is a person." Davis recognizes that it is difficult to deny that believers want to say that God is a person. Yet, the claim that "God is a person" does, Davis asserts, seem to be radically different from the claim that "Jones is a person"; hence "[t]his strongly suggests … that 'God is a person' cannot express its sense literally in the characteristic

context of religious utterances" (*RE*, 95). Further, Davis claims that "God is a person" is an irreducible metaphor, that it cannot be re-expressed in literal language. Any re-expression "involves further metaphorical expression" (*RE*, 97). Yet, in concluding this discussion on metaphor, he claims "the denial of literal truth is *not* the same as a denial of a profound truth. The language here works at a deep level, yet not literally" (*RE*, 107).

In terms of the policy implications of this proposal, the pupil who has little explicitly religious faith has a certain detached perspective, called to appreciate from the sidelines the nature of the debate. For pupils who are adherents of a religion, religious education ought to help them "realize for themselves that they can relinquish their exclusivism without threatening their religious beliefs and that a strong religious commitment is perfectly compatible with an openness to the possibility that there are other routes to the truth" (*RE*, 110).

Davis sees the arts as offering an analogy. Aesthetic judgment is more than mere feelings, with a "rich and complex character … [where the] phenomenon [is] open to a range of interpretations" (*RE*, 111). Judgments in religious contexts, then, ought to be similar in form to aesthetic judgments and to occur in a range of subject areas (not just religious education); as a consequence, such judgments require the kinds of cognitive abilities possessed by older pupils in the secondary phase of schooling (see *RE*, 111).

Discussion: Rethinking Religion and Reimagining Education

In different ways, and to different degrees, I have sympathy with the arguments of all three authors. I certainly share what I take to be critical to all three accounts: a commitment to employ clear, critical analysis to inform the practice of educators. As Richard Pring has pointed out, this commitment is not straightforward and scholars often fail to live up to it through an overemphasis on either practice or the technical aspects of their disciplinary perspective.[15] Alexander, Barnes, and Davis clearly and coherently balance the needs of being both philosophically robust and practically focused. Davis tends to the technically philosophical, but he engages substantially with Barnes's articulation and analyses of the real concerns of teachers of religious education. The book is nicely bracketed and unified by the introduction and

conclusion provided by the editor. Alexander's monograph develops from autobiographical and community biographical concerns that identify a critical target: the marginalization of religion in Western liberal educational systems. Given the nature of the book, a collection of largely previously published articles, there are a number of occasions where the necessity of the argument for the conclusions being developed was not clear. The educational focus is both illuminated and occasionally lost within broader concerns about the marginalization of religion in public life and about the impact of particular conceptions of research and educational research on educational practice. The links here are not fully explored, making the reader work, perhaps, harder than is necessary.

In assessing these books, I am left with questions not about the details of their arguments, but with more general questions as to the ways in which philosophical works such as these can influence educational practice. In particular, in different ways, the arguments in each call attention to three related questions.

The first question is how specific authors ought to be about the kind of claim that is being made, and within which discipline the claims are to be justified. Alexander, Barnes, and Davis make claims that would seem to have four legitimate, different types of answers: philosophical, theological, psychological, and sociological. A lack of clarity as to the particular claim being made left this reader unsure as to the validity of the answer presented. The second question is to what extent distinctively philosophical work concerned with educational practice ought to engage with social realities — in this case the realities of religious beliefs, practices, and religious education. Educational practices are conducted within the complex context of such everyday realities rather than in an idealized "other world." Further, educational policymaking also occurs in the light of such (presumed) realities. The third question is, more generally, what additional work is needed for the philosopher to explicitly engage with educational policymaking and practice — that is, to occupy the space of the "public intellectual"? I briefly explore these three questions.

Given that all three authors are concerned with the analysis of a human activity, rather than the elaboration of an issue internal to a particular discipline, it is unsurprising that they make a variety of different kinds of claims. This poses no problem as long as this approach is made clear and some justification is given as to why a particular answer, from a particular disciplinary

perspective, is more relevant than others. On my reading, the authors did not always adhere to that practice. We have, for example, Davis's deft handling of the "descriptive-intentional" and "direct" accounts of reference, which seem irreducibly philosophical. On the other hand, we have his consideration of "God is a person," which seems to hide theological claims. While God may be (conceptually) required to be transcendent, the Christian tradition also sees him as immanent, appearing at Mamre, at Zion, and most completely in Christ, who is "God incarnate." Jesus is a person, but he also claims "he who has seen me has seen the father" (John 14:9). Underlying Davis's philosophical consideration of the irreducible metaphor "God is a person" is a theological claim and one that is by no means straightforward.[16] What is more, underpinning the language and experience of mystics and contemporary evangelicals is not an irreducible metaphor but rather a meeting with the living person of God in Christ. Now Davis might here claim that I have misunderstood the argument, that he is (simply) concerned with the nature of language, not the nature of religious practice. The difficulty with this is that he risks being a "cuckoo in June, Heard but not regarded."[17] The issue is not the use of language per se, but the best educational response to religious pluralism and the desire for civic harmony.

Similarly, we can note the sociological and psychological claims made by the authors relating to the impact of religious exclusivism on the propensity of individuals to act one way or another. There seem to be (at least) two plausible possibilities: either the recognition of difference will, with appropriate support, give rise to a tolerance of those with different views, or it will encourage prejudice against those who are "unenlightened." This question is not amenable to philosophical or theological reflection; what is needed is some data about how actual people behave in the appropriate circumstances and what effect educational practices have on this behavior.

Alexander develops his argument in terms of the analysis of *human practices* rather than of knowledge claims. In particular, he argues that educational research needs to be seen as a form of "art criticism." In fact, he implies that addressing the issue of religion in education in the way developed by Barnes and Davis makes it irresolvable. The difficulty for Alexander is in developing a synthesis of the knowledge claims implicit in the analysis of human practices. This is one of the occasions I mentioned earlier where there is a lack of clear, explicit links between the different sections of his argument. There would seem to be two arguments within which to frame

the activities of the educator, both of which are consistent with Alexander's general approach and to which he at least hints. The first is to follow a line developed by Alasdair MacIntyre and focus on the development of an "educated public."[18] Such an approach emphasizes the need to reinstate the disciplines as practical means to resolve practical problems rather than allowing them to remain narrowly concerned with the sort of internal disputes of logic and consistency that MacIntyre claims had become their primary focus during the Enlightenment. It also emphasizes the need for an education of individuals that enables them to engage in critical debate across disciplinary boundaries. Such an education would ground them in the various debates in those disciplines, familiarize them with similar texts that provide a foundation for reasoned argument, and develop in them dispositions towards integrity and the value of reasoned, collective resolution of these practical problems. MacIntyre is of the view that the social conditions for such an "educated public" have disappeared; I am less pessimistic about the potential for its resurrection.[19] Regardless, achieving such an end requires, at the very least, a significant reappraisal of education broadly, not only of religious education. The second approach is to accept that there are no general answers to these questions. Therefore, the role of educators, informed by a range of disciplinary reflections, is to seek a good outcome for the young people they work with. For young people with religious belief, this will, normally, include a satisfactory deepening of their faith as well as a deepening of their sense of civic responsibility, tolerance, and so on. The educator works within particular concrete contexts and, to the best of their ability, applies what I have called elsewhere "critical common sense."[20]

The second issue raised by these texts is how closely one ought to pay attention to the apparent features of the world. It is perhaps an unfair criticism of philosophy that it is not concerned with practical matters, but as a result of methodology, the relationship between philosophical analysis and everyday concerns is not always apparent (see Claudia Ruitenberg and Robin Collingwood for considerations of this point).[21] This is not a feature exclusive to philosophy; for example, Anthony Thiselton, Christopher Wright, and others have the same problems in theology,[22] and more theoretical expositions in sociology and psychology equally seem to be "divorced from reality."[23]

Consider Davis's comments on "God is a person." It is possible that Davis might claim that his concern is not what people mean or really believe about the person and personhood of God, but

what they *ought to mean* given the nature of language, grammar, and what it means to "reference" something or someone. This is philosophically defensible, and it is not unreasonable to hold that this is the limit of philosophical analysis. The *philosophical rigor* of the argument will be maintained, but at a cost of reducing its policy impact. Given Davis's commitment to informing educational practice, I do not think this is an argument that he would wish to make. Rather, he has in mind a real group of "modest pluralist" religious believers who are, as a matter of fact, correct. Further, he (I think) believes that other reasonable thinking religious believers will, when probed, ascribe to a modest pluralism. I am of the opinion, like Barnes, that this is not the case and that religious adherents tend to be religious exclusivists (though this is largely a matter to be explored by sociologists). I also hold — and I think this is a theological issue — that modest pluralism *is* religiously exclusive: a group of believers united under one banner that affirms the truth of diversity of religious beliefs and the legitimacy of a variety of different forms of religious practice. If Davis's criticisms of religious exclusivism hold, then some seem to apply in principle to a religion of modest pluralism as well.

As I have noted, Alexander's account begins in narratives and pursues a number of claims about people, their commitments, and the ways they can and ought to be allowed to live their lives. The educational thesis can be reduced to two *foundational* claims. The first is that liberal democratic states should not prioritize one conception of the good over others, and this is precisely the effect of marginalizing religion in public schools. The second is that the human experience of (some, perhaps many, but not all) religions is significant and important to adherents and ought to be positively embraced by schools. Now, it is no doubt true that, as a feature of the world, there are many people for whom religious beliefs are important, but normatively how *ought* this to inform the development of educational policy? It is relatively easy to claim that it is a feature of liberal states that religions ought not to be marginalized relative to other conceptions the good. The way Alexander narrates the experience of religious persons illuminates the critique he offers. The social realities of religious believers and their sense of exclusion come to the fore.

Alexander's argument for reintegrating people's religious commitments into public life brings with it two dangers, however. The first is that this reintegration approach also excludes. In part this is done by presenting liberals, and ethical liberals in particular, in the form of academic arguments rather than as people. The difficulty in public policy is the same as in educational

practice: that of managing real disagreement regarding the "social realities" of a shared world. This is evident, I think, in my earlier questions about the distinctive role *religion* itself plays in Alexander's argument, as opposed to a broader concern with diverse *religious and secula*r conceptions of the good. Reimagining education is a task that requires managing different and essentially contradictory beliefs about the world. Just as religion needs to be contextualized in concrete situations and lives, it would be interesting to consider liberalism so personified, perhaps in the form of normative case studies.[24] The second danger is the movement toward a particular individualistic, though logically defensible, account of the reintegration of religion into the public sphere. There are other more community-based and *pragmatic* means by which religion and religious beliefs have entered the public sphere. I think particularly of Francis Fukuyama's account of the significance of Jewish intellectuals in the development of neoconservativism in the United States,[25] and the distinctively religious narratives that informed debates about the "Big Society" in the UK, such as in Phillip Blond's book *Red Tory* or the "Citizens UK" movement.[26] In each case it is not merely the involvement of persons of faith, or that their faith motivated their involvement, but that many of the ideas underpinning community narratives are drawn from the religious traditions of which the individuals are a part. Yet, in each case there is cooperation between those of different faiths, as well as those of no faith, with shared commitments to a range of social goods.

The third issue, regarding what work philosophers must do to play a more direct role in educational policymaking and practice, draws together comments made above. It is good to see colleagues not only do things well, but do things that are also useful. This is the case with all three arguments. Whether or not one agrees with them, they all call for a need to reconsider educational policy and practice. Yet bringing philosophy to bear on educational policy and practice is not without risks. It highlights the public role and influence of the philosopher; this is now a political imperative for academics through research assessment processes. Steve Fuller identifies a number of distinctions between the philosopher and the public intellectual.[27] Here, it is worth noting three points that can inform the role of the public philosopher concerned with informing policy and practice. The first is that public intellectuals maintain a clear focus on statecraft, that the purposes of their arguments are not simply knowledge production, or a hopeful attempt to inform policy, but rather to take seriously the features of the world that are informing the policymaking process.

While these features are not to be treated uncritically, neither can they be ignored. The second is that public intellectuals do not stand on their academic authority, but on the insight and practical utility of their arguments. The third is that public intellectuals are less concerned with expressing the details of their research than with sharing ideas, accepting that this leaves open questions and issues that would trouble their peers. Fuller notes that natural scientists who have taken center stage as public intellectuals do not display "principled hesitation" when expressing their ideas in different media and to a public audience.[28]

Alexander, Barnes, and Davis in different ways set out their arguments in terms of one of the most critical social difficulties on the political landscape — how *teachers* are to deal with the issues of diversity, tolerance, and respect in ways that support liberal democratic societies. As I noted in the introduction, this is a matter of practical significance, and one that schools would seem institutionally well placed to address. The difficulty is one of direction. The desired social and political outcomes are clear, as are the many failures to develop the appropriate civic virtues evident in, for example, "overseas" and "home-grown" terrorism, school shootings, and the like. Many examples are less obvious as individuals and communities feel disconnected from the broader society due to the failure to adequately address the issue of religion.[29] The available evidence is problematic and often absent altogether. We do not know what will work, only that educators, politicians, and policymakers are concerned that our current attempts are not working. The academic approach risks focusing on the detail of the argument and seeking to minimize possible counterarguments (however implausible). Alexander's call to rethink educational research is a response to a broader difficulty, the slow distortion of the academic disciplines. Without a conception of the good that is shared, however tenuously, the disciplines are ill-equipped to address social problems. The contemporary shift to inter- and transdisciplinary models of academic practice seems equally ill-equipped for the task. Alexander's defense of approaches that reincorporate the good as a central feature of scholarly activity is welcome. It is one that requires shifts in methodology and also in *purpose*. Scholars need to be concerned not only with knowledge creation, but also with their role as "intellectuals on a public stage."

Finally, a word on what I take to be a positive contribution that Barnes's and Davis's arguments can make to Alexander's project. I indicated earlier that I was left unconvinced about the shift from religion to "transcendental imagination." The UK has a long tradition of schools teaching a

phenomenologically based account of religions as essentially all the same, but with different traditions and rituals. Both Barnes and Davis argue that this approach is problematic; their arguments apply equally to the shift from religion to transcendental imagination. Although Alexander's argument makes clear that religious narratives are critically important to education, it also disguises the very legitimate differences among those narratives, for example, in relation to the implications for gender identities. Alexander's distinction between moral and amoral ideologies does not address this point. The practical implication, from a UK perspective, is that this artificial collapsing of religion, however respectfully done, is ineffective in developing tolerance, community coherence, and integration. Barnes and Davis disagree over whether in addressing this collapsing one needs to accept religious exclusivity or whether modest pluralism is possible. We might note with an eye to *statecraft*, however, that the policy in both the UK and the United States seems to be a concerned not with all religions, but with the three Abrahamic religions (noted in the policy concerns of Christian fundamentalism, Islamic terrorism, Israel–Palestine conflicts, Survivalist cults, and so on). It may be sufficient for the policy and practical aspirations of Alexander's thesis to reconstruct the transcendent imagination in the image of those Abrahamic faiths, which experience the same spiritual object with similar conceptions of what constitutes a moral life narrative. Although this does not do justice to religions in a way that Alexander or Barnes might like, it may be a sufficient position for the public intellectual.

1. Alexander's *Reimagining Liberal Education* and Barnes and Davis's *Religious Education* will be cited in the text as *RLE* and *RE*, respectively.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), 72.

3. George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President Upon Arrival," September 16, 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html.

4. Rahul Mahajan, *The New Crusade: America's War on Terrorism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), 7.

5. John Wolffe, ed., *Protestant–Catholic Conflict from the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century: The Dynamics of Religious Difference* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and John

Wolffe, ed., *Irish Religious Conflict in Comparative Perspective: Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

6. For a summary of his analysis, see John Wolffe, "Reassessing the Role of Religion in Northern Ireland Community Divisions," *Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series* (2013): http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/knowledge_exchange/briefing_papers/series3/wolffe241013.pdf.

7. The Prevent Agenda places a legal duty on public bodies, including schools and youth agencies, to "have due regard to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism." For more on the agenda, see Department for Education, "Preventing Extremism in Schools and Children's Services (2015)," https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-extremism-in-schools-and-childrens-services. It should be noted that there have been ongoing concerns that this policy gives rise to inappropriate action by schools and the police.

8. It is worth reminding readers that religious education is a compulsory subject in UK schools, although questions have been raised about the extent of noncompliance (see National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), https://www.natre.org.uk/about-re/legal-requirements/, 2017).

9. Full Fact , 'How did young people vote in the Brexit referendum?' https://fullfact.org/europe/how-did-young-people-vote-brexit-referendum/ (2018)10. Richard Davies, "Education, Virtues, and the Good Life: An Investigation into the Ability of Schools to Inform and Motivate Students' Moral Activity" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2003); and Richard Davies, "After Higgins and Dunne: Imagining School Teaching as a Multi-Practice Activity," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47, no. 3 (2013): 475–490.

11. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

12. See, for example, Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010); Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics* (Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press, 2010); and Maurice Glasman, Jonathan Rutherford, Marc Stears, and Stuart White, eds., *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2011), https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-book/Labour_tradition_and_the_politics_of_paradox.pdf.

13. Stephen Carden, *Virtue Ethics: Dewey and MacIntyre* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

14. This claim seems to be amendable to empirical verification, and it is not clear that the international scene does bear witness. The difficulty lies in establishing that the lack of respect is grounded in differences of religious belief. I shall develop this point later.

15. Richard Davies, "Common Sense and the Craft of Teaching," in *Education, Ethics, and Experience: Essays in Honour of Richard Pring*, ed. Michael Hand and Richard Davies (London: Routledge, 2015).

16. Davis also claims that the fact that God is worshipped makes Her necessarily transcendent. This seems unnecessarily limited. I can say that I worship the ground on which she walks, and in some versions of the Church of England marriage rites, the Groom will promise to worship his wife. These declarations do not seem to require transcendence in the love object, but instead are meant to express to the object of love their worth.

17. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*, 3.2.77–78; in Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, eds., *Henry IV, Part I* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed April 22, 2018, www.folderfigitaltexts.org.

18. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Idea of an Educated Public," in *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures,* ed. Graham Haydon (London: Institute of Education, 1987).

19. Richard Davies, "Inter-professional Education and the Idea of an Educated Public," *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 65, no. 2 (2013): 291–302.

20. See Davies, "Common Sense and the Craft of Teaching."

21. Claudia Ruitenberg, ed., *What Do Philosophers of Education Do (And How Do They Do It)?* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and Robin George Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

22. See, for example, Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980); and Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

23. Anecdotally, I remember a distinguished professor of social psychology giving a presentation to teachers and youth workers on evidence about "self-esteem." The room of practitioners were unanimous in observing that he was not talking about what they understood as "self-esteem." Social psychology's operationalization of the term, while useful for research, made the work practically useless to the audience.

24. Meira Levinson and Jacob Fay, eds., *Dilemmas of Educational Ethics: Cases and Commentaries* (Boston: Harvard Education Press, 2016).

25. Francis Fukuyama, *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads* (London: Profile Books, 2006).

26. Blond, *Red Tory*. For information about the Citizens UK movement, visit the website www.citizensuk.org.

27. Steve Fuller, *The Intellectual* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2005). For a critique of the book, see Douglas Kellner, "The Intellectual," *Canadian Journal of Sociology Online* (September–October 2005). The same issue includes Fuller's response to this critique: "Pro Machiavelli: Response to Kellner."

28. Fuller, "Pro Machiavelli."

29. Dame Louise Casey, *The Casey Review: A Review into Opportunity and Integration* (London: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575973/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf.