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# Democracy & Education

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## Religion, Christian Nationalism, and Conservative Christian Schools

A Response to *Democratic Education in Conservative Christian Schools*

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### Abstract

This response essay complicates Alexander's analysis about the tension between aim of separation and Christian nationalism present in conservative Christian schools, by expanding the concept of religion upon which analysis is founded. Using Bellah's three-part model of religion, the response argues that a religious founding myth—that America is the Kingdom of God—grounds the connection between the aim of separation and Christian nationalism in the curriculum of these schools.

### This article is in response to

Alexander, J. (2022). Democratic Education in Conservative Christian Schools. *Democracy and Education*, 30(1), Article 2.

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JEREMY ALEXANDER'S (2022) essay "Democratic Education in Conservative Christian Schools" is a strong and important analysis of a particular subgroup of Christian schools in the USA. He uses the lens of liberal democracy for his analysis, highlighting the rights of the individual, the autonomy of individuals to live (their versions of) the good life, and the valuing of pluralism (including personally interacting with others who might be different) (p. 3). These lead him to posit three principles of democratic education: cultivating democratic skills, values, and dispositions; valuing pluralism; and developing individual autonomy. Using this lens, he finds that the Christian schools in his analysis—identified using the National Center for Education Statistics' categorization scheme—have four troublesome features that impede their ability to undertake robust democratic education: "separation from the world, the importance of authority and control, a lack of diversity, and the presence of a politically conservative ideology," which form "an interrelated web of ideas" that frame the ethos of those schools (p. 5). His measured conclusion is "that the arrangement and ethos of conservative Christian schools are not fully consistent with the principles of

democratic education" (p. 8). Alexander sets up the issue clearly, bases his analysis on solid textual evidence, and reaches sound conclusions that stay within the bounds of the analysis. This essay is a worthwhile and important contribution to discussions about civic education in the USA.

There might be various objections to the essay. Some might protest that his target group is only part of the fabric of Christian schools in the USA—missing from the list, for example, are Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite, Reformed, and Seventh-day Adventist schools; however, as Alexander (2022) points out, not only are the conservative Christian schools he considered a substantive group but they are also strategically important today, given the current political dynamics of the USA. Others might

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complain that a critique of the separatist aim of these schools is no longer valid, as the boundaries with society have become increasingly porous because of social media; however, this misses Alexander's point because the aim of separation is different from simple isolation, for separation is a particular stance towards the society within which they find themselves inevitably embedded. A third might doubt Alexander's conclusion about Christian nationalism creeping into the curriculum of these schools because Christian nationalism is taken to be a radical fringe movement; however, this misses Alexander's careful suggestion that there are other forms of Christian nationalism besides the radical fringe type, and more moderate types are present in these schools. Others will have to pursue these sorts of objections; I do not find them compelling.

I pursue a different line of response. I mean it as a friendly supplement, one that develops further his conclusions, although in ways that Alexander (2022) might not have intended. In the process, I try to bring out an unstated assumption he seems to be making, with an eye to developing his conversation further.

The assumption I'd like to probe is about Alexander's (2022) concept of religion. Early on, Alexander (2022) states that "religion, specifically Protestant Christianity, has always played a role in American political and social life" (p. 2). However, he offers no explicit concept of religion; he just assumes his reader knows what 'religion' is. He does give a helpful brief sketch of the Christianity of the target schools: "They ascribe to the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, humanity's need for salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus, and the idea that Christianity represents 'the truth' about the world & humanity;" he also notes features such as an "evangelical theology," "faith," "dualism between the secular world and religious life," and "authority of God" (pp. 4, 6). I take him to view these as features of (this variety of) religion: a sacred book, a set of basic beliefs (propositions) taken to be true, a differentiation between a religious and secular realm, and an authoritative deity. From this we might (somewhat speculatively) discern what are distinctive if not essential features of religion: a separate private realm delineated by a set of beliefs (and attendant practices) about God, immortality, and personal living (morality). On this view, the religious realm is different in kind from social realms such as literature, arts, economics, politics, sports, and the public sphere because the latter are part of society as public (this worldly), secular realms, whereas religion is a private (otherworldly), sacred realm. The religious and secular realms are taken to be ontologically distinct: Religion is in essence about something beyond history, politics, and culture.

At least, this way of conceiving of religion predominates in the USA (see, for example, Feinberg, 2006; Greenawalt, 2005). However, this model wasn't always in the social imaginary, as its configuration was "invented" in the modern era (Peterson & Walhof, 2002). Whereas in medieval Europe 'the public' was imagined as the visible institutional Church ('body of Christ') and religion was experienced as something public and collective, in the modern period, that public space was reimagined, identified now as "the social" (Asad, 1999, p. 185). This was taken as something distinct from the institutional church. In turn, the vantage point of

'the social' paved the way for a new understanding of religion: a separate private realm of beliefs (and practices) about God, immortality, worship, and personal living. According to Asad, reimagining the public as "social" gave rise to a new "political doctrine" centering on citizenship, the name given to the participants in the newly imagined public (i.e., the collectively imagined community); this not only eclipsed but undermined the religious communal identities as the essential markers of public collectives (Asad, 2003, p. 5). Asad's point is that the emerging liberal democratic state reassigned religion to a private realm in order to create the space for society to unify in a new way, as citizens of a nation (see also Peterson & Walhof, 2002). Religious identity was recast as something private, an otherworldly realm centering on beliefs about God, immortality, worship, and personal living. It is this understanding of religion, invented in the early modern era, that is ubiquitous in the USA. And, I think, this understanding tacitly frames Alexander's (2022) analysis.

But, to echo Latour, perhaps we've never (quite) been modern in the USA. Bellah (2011) suggests that religion isn't only about (theoretical, propositional) beliefs. It is a three-layered phenomenon, one that also includes rituals that bond people into cohesive groups and founding myths (narratives) that articulate a group's common identity and coherence. Even though in the modern era we might model religion as a private realm of beliefs (theology—Bellah's tier 3), it remains the case that core social actions (ritual—tier 1) and narrative meanings (myths—tier 2) remain central to current religions. The problem with our modern era's reenvisioning of religion as sets of beliefs in a private realm is that we don't take into consideration the ongoing roles of collective ritual and public narrative meaning in the social life of religious adherents.

It is in this context that I want to return more directly to Alexander's (2022) analysis, specifically his conclusions about the aim of separation and the presence of Christian nationalism in conservative Christian schools. I want to reexamine them using the analytic lens of Bellah's public narrative layer of religion (tier 2). Alexander's conclusion is that conservative Christian schools "desire separation from the world, and therefore, secular civic and democratic goals are often not central to the mission of these schools" (p. 6). But then he adds that the aim of separation "can lead students to unknowingly embracing Christian nationalism that argues to preserve or return to a mythical past where Christian values were central to American life" (p. 6). This Alexander sees is a tension, as in doing so "these schools would be aligning themselves more with a specific political ideology than helping form religious community engaging in the practice of Christianity" (p. 6). I'd like to complicate this conclusion, questioning that there's a tension here.

Alexander's (2022) conclusion about this being a tension shows his own approach is tacitly framed by the modernist view of religion, that is, as a separate private realm. Alexander evidently takes "religious community" to be the private, otherworldly realm of religion, whereas he takes nationalism (i.e., "political ideology") as part of the secular political-social realm: then the private/public (sacred/secular) binary produces a tension. Yet Alexander

insightfully sees that Christian schools actually do make a connection between the separation aim and Christian nationalism, despite this purported tension. Explaining why this might be a tension for conservative Christian schools requires expanding what constitutes ‘the religious’ here. In Bellah’s model, religious meaning comes not only (or perhaps even primarily) from sets of beliefs about God, immortality, and personal living (tier 3) but also (and perhaps more deeply) from founding public narratives (tier 2) and collective rituals (tier 1): If we include a narrative dimension (leaving aside for the moment the ritual dimension) in our understanding of conservative Christians’ sense of religiosity, the tension Alexander identifies begins to dissipate, for it connects a ‘this worldly’ political realm with a public collective religious identity (tier 2). This means that the aim of separation and Christian nationalism can more easily coexist in a religion.

I want to start by arguing that the variant of Christian nationalism Alexander (2022) insightfully sees in the conservative Christian school curriculum draws its meaning and allure from a long-standing public narrative in the USA that “America was the kingdom of God” (Tröhler, 2006, p. 94). Early white settlers on Turtle Island believed that their presence as group of faithful Christians in this newly acquired land would be instrumental in establishing God’s long-promised Kingdom on earth at this location and at this time. This narrative—known theologically as millennialism, that Christ’s reign on earth would start in America—shaped early American nationalism (Lienesch, 1983). Although not void of propositional content, its religious power derives from its public narrative character, namely, its status as a founding myth (tier 2). If a group takes their collective religious identity from the founding narrative that America is Christ’s Kingdom, there is little tension between religious community and Christian nationalism—in fact, it would seem that one’s nationalism is naturally Christian and one’s Christianity is naturally nationalistic.

Built into the idea of the Kingdom of God is a narrative structure known as creation-fall-redemption: a golden age when things were great, a time of social disorder, and a potential to reverse the decline and return to the original greatness. Drawing on the name and style of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, this narrative is typically called a Jeremiad (Murphy, 2008). The “American Jeremiad” is not a story about a private otherworldly realm but a public religio-political narrative about the trajectory of the society within which American Christians live. The story typically identifies a golden age when American society was flourishing as well as a turbulent period of decline that is damaging society, typically caused by immoral social behavior and social fabric destroying political decisions. The American Jeremiad then pivots toward a call to “mobilize Americans and to bring state power to intervene on one side of a divisive cultural or political issue” (Murphy, 2009, p. 127). This American Jeremiad is central to many conservative Christians’ sense of religious identity because their sense of nationalism is closely connected to the idea that America is Christ’s Kingdom on earth. Rather than an aberration from American Christianity, Christian nationalism is its abiding public undercurrent. In the form of a Jeremiad, it suggests a

faithful remnant of Christ followers have been chosen to call America back to its Christian roots, “that the United States had some role to play in the unfolding of God’s plans for the end times . . .” (Murphy, 2009, p. 127). Precisely in its connection to the public narrative dimension of religion, Christian nationalism plays a central role in creating religious meaning for conservative Christians. It’s not surprising to see this in the curriculum Alexander analyzed—in fact, it would be more surprising not to see it there, in some form or other, given the continuing presence of founding myths (tier 2) in religious identity.

The aim of separation that Alexander (2022) rightly sees in conservative Christian schools can be (re)interpreted in this light. Rather than (merely) a straightforward attempt to separate from secular society—as the modernist model of religion might interpret it—the aim of separation can be considered through the lens of the narrative (tier 2) layer. In the millennialist founding myth, separation is a way that Christ’s faithful remnant can live collectively in current society, much like the ancient (exiled) Israelites did in Babylon. Part of returning America to its status as God’s Kingdom involves a faithful few living as if they were already in that fully realized Kingdom on earth, here and now.

Take, for example, Alexander’s (2022) insight about the American Association of Christian Schools’ accrediting role in carrying out the aim of separation. Alexander quotes AACCS founder A.C. Janney on accreditation: “It is time that we establish God’s standards and leave the world out. Accreditation can be a blessing—if it’s accreditation by God’s people, for God’s people . . . with God’s stamp of approval on it” (quoted in Alexander, 2022, p. 5). Janney holds that God has stamps of approval for mundane, collective, earthly matters such as accreditation of social institutions like day schools—and God’s stamps are superior to those of ‘secular’ organizations. What appears here as an act of separation can be (re)interpreted as aligning an ‘earthly’ social institution—schools—with the larger aim of the American Jeremiad of reestablishing the Kingdom of God. Such accreditation thus follows from the founding myth of America as God’s Kingdom. It’s but a small step to generalize this claim, that God has stamps of (dis)approval for all sorts of social matters, including society’s take on gender identities, gay marriage, climate change, and other religions. These stamps are to be enacted “by God’s people, for God’s people”: the faithful remnant have a job to do in (re)turning America toward the Kingdom of God.

The lens of founding myth (tier 2) allows us to see that the conservative Christian schools Alexander (2022) analyzed are undertaking a form of civic education, precisely through the inclusion of Christian nationalism and the aim of separation in their curriculum. This is not to say they are cultivating what Alexander calls democratic education (democratic skills, values, and dispositions for valuing pluralism and developing individual autonomy) but are still undertaking a form of civic education (skills, values, and dispositions for engaging in social issues, valuing a national identity, and developing public responsibility). Going beyond the liberal democratic model of religion allows us to see that these schools, too, take national citizenship as part of their Christian identity and calling.

I agree with Alexander (2022) that Christian nationalism is a worrisome presence, also in conservative Christian schools. To more effectively address this, I think analysts such as Alexander would do well to broaden their understanding of religion to include the (premodern) narrative layer, where social meaning and cohesion exists through (founding) myths. Engaging conservative Christians—and their schools—about Christian nationalism would be more effective through engaging them at the narrative level, at the level of founding myths. Although merely contesting their founding story might be part of the approach, that by itself won't do: unsettling a religious founding narrative isn't by itself effective, certainly not through rational argument and factual information. Founding stories are not adopted because of factuality or argumentation but because they satisfy religious meaning at a narrative level. Effective engagement might instead involve offering up a different or expanded founding narrative, one that (on the one hand) allows conservative Christians to see continuity with their current narrative identities while (on the other) moving them toward a more democratic and inclusive understanding of the nation with which they identify.

Perhaps this might take the form of a progressive Jeremiad (Murphy, 2008). Rather than viewing the past as a golden age, this religio-political narrative offers the past as an unfulfilled promise. For example, according to Murphy (2008), Martin Luther King Jr “narrated a story of America as based most fundamentally on a founding promise, a birthright of sorts: the ‘check’ written to all Americans by the nation’s founders, ‘a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir,’” which has not yet fulfilled its promise to everyone, but which nevertheless calls on Americans “to reclaim a promise, to fulfill the radical potential of those founding *principles*” (p. 106). For example, African American philosopher and theologian Cornel West’s inclusive democratic vision is rooted in “the good news of Jesus Christ, which lures and links human struggles to the coming of the kingdom” (West, 1999, p. 14). Like the conservative Christian’s narrative, West’s approach is a “moral vision . . . derived from the prophetic Christian tradition,” but his approach, in contrast to the conservative Christians, is that, as he says, “I follow the biblical injunction to look at the world through the eyes of its victims” (West, 1999, p. 370). For West, the Hebrew prophets urge attention to the victims of society, which West suggests takes the Christian narrative of the Kingdom to be the story society moving toward radical inclusion, including (for example) with respect to gender identities, gay marriage, and other religions. West gives us a counter-narrative to the conservative Christian’s golden age story of America: an

equally religious (Christian) narrative but one in which “founding principles” have not yet been realized. This approach might better undermine the Christian nationalist narrative Alexander identifies as embedded in the curriculum of conservative Christian schools.

My hope is that my response essay is not seen as a hostile takedown of Alexander’s (2022) fine analysis. Rather, I’m hoping that my essay functions as friendly albeit perhaps complicating supplement to his solid and important work. Maintaining and enhancing our liberal democracy is important work, especially in these troubling times. I thank Alexander for continuing with that effort.

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