

The Hermeneutics of Religious Understanding in a Postsecular Age

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Introduction

This article draws upon philosophical hermeneutics to indicate the rich interpretive possibilities that exist within religious traditions themselves. This is in contrast to the reductive views of what it means to be religious often associated with more fundamentalist religious orientations, which tend to boil down to competing and irreconcilable truth claims. What has come to be known as the *postsecular* age offers an opportunity to reexamine the significance of religion in public life by engaging with more nuanced interpretive traditions. This hermeneutical (re)turn gives religious perspectives opportunities to demonstrate creative relationships with modernity that are not predicated on the assumption that religion is an uncritical commitment to be separated from public life. I argue, in fact, that religious commitments must be opened up to deliberative culture if either religions or public life are to flourish.

There are several implications for education. First, the problem of indoctrination that characterizes much educational theory presupposes the kind of non-deliberative and hermeneutically naïve religiosity that I am keen to question. If the terms of the debate can be shifted, then we can move beyond problems of indoctrination. Second, religious education can operate as a space in which deliberative culture can be nourished. By this I mean that religious educators need to take seriously that the different views of students are not simply private preferences in a plural world, but bear upon the lived experience of meaning. To disregard the claims to ‘truth’, as some phenomenological approaches do, is not simply a mark of tolerance and inclusion. Third, faith schools demonstrate just how much distance there is between a

narrow 'propositionalist' conception of religion, where orthodoxy is expected, and a more embedded religiosity in which religious identity is as much orthopraxy as orthodoxy. But religious identity in schools in fact undercuts the very conception of correctness contained in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Finally, and more broadly, the postsecular indicates a relation between religion and education that rejects any lingering progressivism in which secularization, disenchantment, and criticality are aligned with good modern education.

Understanding Religion

Political promiscuity has become popular in the UK in recent years as political gaming has reached new levels not only of idealism but also of cynicism. For some this offers opportunities to make opponents less electable. For others there is a serious possibility that one should simultaneously be part of multiple political parties, or at least that political engagement should be seen well beyond party politics. Whether being part of multiple political parties breaks certain social norms or party rules, it seems at least a practical possibility, and, for the purposes of what follows, suggests interesting parallels for religious identity. Commitment to multiple political communities can be justified in terms of fostering deliberative culture, learning, engaging, and belonging as widely as possible. It seems at least partly possible to view religious engagement and belonging in similar ways. The postsecular age can define the space in which many people find themselves: between the confessional commitment to a single religious community and the rejection of religion *tout court*. This could be characterized as a theoretical case developed between confessionalism and atheism. I argue that being religious is more than just a set of beliefs to which one subscribes. I want to argue for understanding religions deliberatively: as discursive communities that both express but also form ultimate concerns. From this point of view, it is less of an issue to commit to at least some dimensions of multiple religious lifeworlds. Just as one can enact multiple political principles through a

wide engagement with political institutions, so one can engage in religious understanding through participation in a range of different religious lifeworlds. This requires a certain shift in understanding what it means to be religious, since religious commitments appear to involve exclusive and absolute claims, a view that has a rather provincial history and context.

This may seem controversial. It is widely believed that religious people make exclusive and absolute claims, and that many religious people understand their own position in just such terms. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the one and only incarnation of the word of God. For Muslims, the Qu'ran is God's final and unsurpassable revelation. Devout Jews would begin morning prayers thanking God for not having been made heathen. And this exclusivism applies also to forms of poly-theism and a-theism: the eternal Dharma of Vedic Hinduism pronounces that the almighty power of the Supreme Divinities is only One: Brahman. Buddhists take the eightfold path to be the only way to enlightenment. Then there is the atheist belief in the non-existence of God or gods.

The impression that religions entail absolute and exclusive claims leads to the secularizing idea that religion should be a private concern that must not inform public life. In this sense, many religious people are secularists: not that they necessarily exclude all other religious views as false, but they regard their religious commitments as a private matter that need not infringe upon public life. The history of secularism shows that it has traditionally been understood as a key protection of religious rights where minority religious groups might otherwise be threatened by a majority. However, it is also true that many people (religious and otherwise) recognize that religion cannot be contained within the private sphere, as it is intrinsically public-facing. Acknowledging that religion and public life are never entirely separable, even if we would prefer that they were, the emergent interest in the 'postsecular' offers one approach to come to terms with the ongoing influence of religion on public life. Religion cannot be separated from public life partly because it goes far deeper than the level

of an individual conscious commitment to a set of truth claims (that may or may not be exclusive and absolute). Religion is much less a set of personal beliefs as it is a social bond, inevitably influencing public life and education. This influence may be regarded with less suspicion if we understand religion less in terms of the confessional framings of particular religious traditions and see it more in terms of the ultimate concerns that express the human search for that which exceeds the finite. The reduction of religions to sets of beliefs or worldviews is one that reflects our post-enlightenment conception of what religion, and particularly religious language, is about (Smith 1987). Indeed, one might wonder whether the prominent nature of religious conflict in present geopolitics is itself (at least in part) a product of a secular framing of religion, a discourse that clothes itself in a veil of objective neutrality. This is because the fundamentalism of contemporary geopolitics, and the associated violent religious ideologies that we see around the world, are partly a result of a kind of reactionary religiosity derived from the identification of religion with propositional truth claims that inevitably come into conflict.

So I want to approach this problem partly through recognizing that religious life is less to do with belief and worldview than is often assumed. The propositional view of religion, in which religions are identified with particular truth claims or worldviews, is generally unhelpful when it comes to understanding the religious lives of many, perhaps most, religious communities today.

One response to reductive views of being religious within modern educational discourse is to shift the emphasis from belief to practice, evident in the shift from orthodoxy to orthopraxy. Fundamentally, this shift raises similar questions of exclusivism and absolutism, which will be addressed later. There is a middle ground that I find somewhat more appealing: fusing understanding and practice, such that understanding has to be practiced rather than assented to. This could be called *practising doctrine* rather than replacing an emphasis on

doctrine with an emphasis on practice. Rowan Williams seems inclined to something like this when he says:

All the major historic faiths, even Islam, which is closest to the propositional model at first sight, assume in their classical forms an interaction between forms of self-imaging and self-interpreting, through prayer and action, and the formal language of belief; that language works not simply to describe an external reality, but to modify over time the way self and world are *sensed*. (Williams 2012, 16)

Here Williams suggests how the educational idea of formation (*Bildung* - educational formation through what Williams calls self-imaging) has a rich theological history, and that religions offer vital resources for *Bildung*. Moreover, Williams is arguing that doctrinal propositions do not simply stand for truths; we should not employ doctrines to enact the binary of belief/non-belief. In addition to expressing doctrinal content, religious propositions might be said to operate poetically upon the souls of religious people and communities. In other words, the classical propositions and creeds of religious traditions seem to involve 'practice' more than cognitive assent. From this point of view, the Christian creeds are less statements of belief about how the world is, than a performance of the heart, mind, and soul in relation to a living tradition. The lingering cognitivism that stands behind the Protestant idea of a commitment to religious statements as being true or false suggests also a conception of subjectivity and decision that Wendy Brown characterizes as follows:

The conceit of religion as a matter of individual choice . . . is already a distinct (and distinctly Protestant) way of conceiving religion, one that is woefully inapt for Islam and, I might add, Judaism, which is why neither comports easily with

the privatized individual religious subject presumed by the formulations of religious freedom and tolerance governing Euro-Atlantic modernity. (Brown 2013, 17)

Although I believe these challenges to the popular conceptions of religion are important, they also generate other problems. The argument should move towards the recognition of the hermeneutical traditions immanent within religious traditions themselves. I would like to argue for a deliberative religiosity in which religious attitudes are not assumed to be inviolable and irreconcilable, where religious views are in dialogue with their own (and perhaps other) traditions, such that religious positions and attitudes are open to *critical* encounter. But such a deliberative model of religious culture seems to entail something akin to the propositional framing of religion and a conception of a reasoning subject. Habermas' model of communicative rationality appears wedded to a rather narrow kind of discursive reason. For religious positions to be meaningfully explored in relation to each other, do we not depend on something like the propositional frame?

If we try and shift the discussion from propositions to practices, the problem of irreconcilability is not overcome. Indeed, practices can be seen as even more irreconcilable than worldviews. Consider, for instance, practices around food. Halal and Kosher meat have recently been particularly controversial among some secular states, resulting in the banning of the religious slaughter of animals. Whether the industrial slaughter of the secular meat industry can be justified is another story, but the point here is that religious practices appear even less open to the kinds of deliberative cultures that I might propose. The real concern seems more to do with drawing out the hermeneutic traditions that are immanent to religions themselves. Clearly, foregrounding the hermeneutic traditions that characterize religions involves some kind of shift of the propositional framing of religion. But it is not an appeal to orthopraxy over

orthodoxy. It may be the prefix *ortho* that needs to be critically interpreted. The root *ortho* refers to being *straight, upright, rectangular, regular; true, correct, proper*. Has this come to mean something rather too fixed and inflexible, either to be enforced by theocracy or, in liberal states, to be placed in the private sphere? We are left with an unpalatable choice: either religion is enforced by the state, or states situate – and therefore distort – religion. Is the way out of this double-bind hermeneutical: that traditions explore transformative interpretations of themselves? Does this idea of what it means to be religious do violence to those religions less inclined to hermeneutic complexity, for whom unalloyed revelation has no hermeneutical conditions?

Hermeneutics

Paul Ricoeur summarized his hermeneutical relation to understanding as follows: “there is no self-understanding that is not mediated through signs, symbols and texts; in the last resort understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms” (1986, 15). For Ricoeur, along with Gadamer and Heidegger, the hermeneutical relation refers not primarily to textual interpretation, but to interpretations of the self, the other, and the world. What he calls the long route to the self, and to interpretation in general, by way of the mediating other, entails an acknowledgement of a constructed moment in (self) understanding. This is an ancient paradox: we need the self to see the self. For Ricoeur, there is no direct route to understanding, no unmediated experience of the self, world, or, it would seem, God. This is the foundation of the hermeneutical condition: we cannot not interpret the world in human terms. This might be read as an outrageous denial of religious insight by a philosopher who sailed too close to the theological wind but who also emphatically wished to remain a philosopher rather than a theologian. A central claim of most religious traditions and practitioners would, at first sight, be opposed to Ricoeur’s mediation of religious experience. Revelation is the unmediated

experience of God, rendering mediation not a universal phenomenon, but a problem to be overcome by contact with the unalloyed truth. The idea that religious experience is constructed gave lethal ammunition to many of the great atheists, who, like Feuerbach, claimed that God is *nothing more* than a construction, or projection, of human nature. How can a philosopher like Ricoeur justify such an apparently postmodern reduction of religion to experiences mediated through signs, symbols, and texts?

In response to atheist confrontations, but also as a consequence of larger shifts within modernity, many philosophers of religion have come to terms with the projected nature of religious experience without thereby denying the significance, even the revelatory possibility, of that experience (Dupré 1998). One can - indeed today one must - acknowledge the projected aspects of human experience without thereby asserting that (religious) experience is *only* a human projection. Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology allows for a mediation between the projected and the revealed or, as Ricoeur frames it, between the manifestation of truth and the historical proclamation that follows (Ricoeur 1995). This hermeneutical account recognizes the constructed moment within religious understanding and experience. Most of us are familiar with the atheist critique that God is a projection of the religious subject. Perhaps we don't realise that this idea (or a form of it) is also a central insight of Christian theology (and a part of all the great religions). The difference is that, for the theologian, God is not 'just' the projection, but the projection is the vehicle by which something can be encountered. In other words, the ways in which we 'figure the sacred' (Ricoeur 1995) are attempts to open the religious subject, to make the religious subject sensitive to (or able to think) that which exceeds thought. This entails a theological dialectic between the lightness and darkness of God, between knowing and unknowing. As Henri Duméry has put it:

Consciousness is projective, because it is expressive, because its objective intentionality cannot fail to express itself, to project itself on various levels of representation. This does not mean that these representations themselves become projected upon the objective essence, or upon the reality which this essence constitutes. When contemporary phenomenologists write that the thing itself becomes invested with anthropological predicates and becomes known through those predicates, they merely allude to the need to represent the object in order to grasp its intrinsic meaning with all the faculties of the incarnated consciousness. But they do not deny that the object, the objective meaning, the “thing itself,” orders, directs, rules the course of these representations. (Duméry quoted in Dupré 1998, 10-11)

The constructed moment of religious experience is here used to deconstruct the idol of absolute revelation upon which absolutist and exclusivist claims are built. Thus revelation of God always entails the interpretive instruments of the religious subject, whether that is through texts, dialogues, feelings, or other experiences.

There are, of course, significant problems with stating this. Primarily, this account appears to deny the experience of the religious subject herself which seems, at least from her perspective, to be undeconstructable. It would seem implausible to imagine that the religious subject would listen to the philosopher of religion, that their experience is not what they think it is. As Morimoto has said: “[c]alling to them from the outside to abandon those absolutist claims will not achieve what it intends, even with a goodwill appeal to mutual respect and world peace” (Morimoto 2005, 180). If this is true for the philosopher of religion, how much more true is it for the secularist who is sceptical of many kinds of religiosity. Morimoto’s argument is correct; the effort to question the absolutist claim from a philosophical analysis

imposed from without is likely to be less effective than the recognition of the hermeneutical context of religious experience from within the religious tradition itself. In essence, my argument is that religious traditions have exactly those deconstructive or, better, deliberative resources within them and so do not rely upon the philosophical analysis from without to recognize the dialectical nature of their own experiences and traditions. It rather depends on what we mean when we refer to something as sacred.

Must the sacred be *sacred*

Many secularists, atheists, and religious people share a propositional framing of religion, leading to the interpretation of plural religious views as necessarily irreconcilable. The sacred is marked off from the secular or profane by virtue of its sanctity. That sanctity cannot be determined by the religious subject but imposes itself, or makes a claim, upon that subject. As revelation, the religious subject has no choice but to receive religious insight, which interrupts his or her own projective capacities. This makes the insight or revelation of religion inviolable, opposes revelation and human reason, and thereby seals off revelation from deliberative inquiry. If religious views are inviolable in this way, then the only logical possibility seems to be the separation of private and public, whereby the public is free of any religious influence.

Despite long and complex histories of mediation between reason and revelation, the story of the strong separation of reason and revelation is a relatively recent one, reflecting the secular framing of religion (Milbank 1990; Smith 2014). The attempt to create a *neutral zone* or “zone of absence” (Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun 2013, 8) for the protection of legal, political, and educational independence, free of religious influence, requires us to adopt an extremely limited account of religion. This division reinforces the tendency to reduce education to schooling, since ‘private’ forms of upbringing (home, informal education etc.) tend to be left

out of the debates about public education, which too easily becomes synonymous with schooling.

So if the straightforward secularist division between private and public is unsatisfying, what are our options? Whatever forms of secularism/postsecularism seem reasonable, the requirements of political life press upon us the need for some kind of shared understanding. So I suggest a need for some practical, if not fully theoretical (or theological), consensus. In this respect I share Ricoeur's preference for philosophical rather than theological methodology. This consensus acknowledges something of the historical dialectic of the postsecular that I have just outlined. It cannot be denied that something profound is at stake in how we bring children and young people into the world: a set of commitments is implied that cannot be bracketed out. This calls not for the choice between indoctrination into an inviolable worldview, versus a neutral education where value-laden formation is excluded. We cannot opt out of indoctrination insofar as it is an essential aspect of upbringing, since any formative process entails decisions about what we take to be of significance. Rather it calls first for the recognition that something profound is at stake, and an understanding that our formative context will always already be imbued with a 'decision' or orientation concerning what matters. So rather than see the educator as taking a position, it is better to recognize that an orientation to the world is already *undertaken* in the processes of education.

Rowan Williams offers a helpful account of procedural secularism, in which religious views are taken up alongside other perspectives (humanist; atheist) to inform a properly deliberative public sphere (Williams 2012). Williams rightly rejects the more extreme programmatic secularism of a pure French Republic in which no reference to religion can enter the public domain.¹ So Williams' proceduralist account seems to move in the direction of a Habermasian communicative rationality in support of meaningful pluralism. But the pluralism of Williams' account seems to me not fully deliberative, in the sense that his discussion does

not give attention to the important process of finding the theological and practical limitations of 'given' religious views. We must, in other words, be able to open discursive channels to aspects of religions that might appear beyond the realms of public debate. The framing of inviolability and irreconcilability with its singular, logical, secular outcome encourages us to look past the possibility that religious views need not be antagonistic to deliberative culture. Faith positions and religious lives need not be treated as 'sacred' and unquestionable, outside the realm of deliberative debate. Indeed, respect for religious views must entail a capacity for deliberation. For example, if someone simply grants me my private religious view on the basis that it is my personal religious right and nothing to do with them, then the actual message is not one of respect, but that there is nothing really at stake; that religion is a personal preference, a lifestyle choice. Barnes is concerned about the educational relativism that fails to take commitment seriously, arguing that many adherents of religion feel that:

...their religious beliefs and values are misrepresented by educational aims and methods that imply the equal truth of all religions. They conclude that there is no true respect for religious difference, for true respect acknowledges the right of religious believers and traditions to define themselves and not to have imposed on them the kind of fluid relativist identities that follow from liberal theological commitments. (Barnes 2009, 13)

Barnes' view is fairly conventional. It retains the liberal notion that belief should not be imposed upon. However, it does not go far enough since it does not imply the deliberative encounter that places those commitments in creative tension that might produce fruitful dialogue. I would rather have my own attitude and orientation scrutinized and challenged so as to better understand its grounding in reality. This would entail an encounter with other people

that does not bracket out the most important aspect of human identity: the meaning of things; what matters. Nor does this kind of deliberative attitude require us to import alien ideas and practices to traditions that are defensive, conservative, or resistant to dialogue. This is because, in fact, many histories of religious interpretation and practice reveal a living tradition in dialogue with itself, as the rich and rather neglected history of semiotics shows (Stables & Semetsky 2015). The Christian church, for example, entails a complex history between schism, reform, tradition, and transformation. Islam, often framed as particularly antithetical to modernity, has similar deliberative and interpretive histories and possibilities (Radwan 2015). None of this is to deny the tensions and violence that often attend tradition, change, reform, and revolution within religious institutions, nor that there are tensions here between religion and modernity. But generally, tension and violence are dimensions of wider social pressures and changes, too easily solely or primarily attributed to religious histories. The capacity for reflection and renewal is an important aspect of any religion. Of course, this account might underestimate the complexities of managing dialogue between opposing and conflicting positions within the classroom. The argument, that hermeneutical subtlety and deconstructing the propositional nature of religion will facilitate a better appreciation of the interpretive context of the student, is not, of course, intended as the final word, but as progressing a complex theoretical case that is largely absent. My argument should suggest, though, that the very idea of people standing for faith positions that may or may not be opposed already concedes so much to an unhelpful framing of the debate.

So if religion cannot be pressed out of public life, are we authorized to question the inviolability of particular religious positions? Who is authorized to do so? Who am I to suggest to any religious person that their view may be partial: partially constructed by the projecting subject? Is it not a public responsibility to do just this? No doubt there are more and less sensitive ways of engaging in such public deliberation around religious identity. But generally

speaking, those with some religious literacy (and they may or may not be religious themselves), will understand that capacity for deliberation is not just a possibility, but is a vital necessity, now more than ever. At their best, Religious Education classes in schools can provide not just an affirmation of different traditions or irreconcilable positions, or reinforcement of a cultural narrative that binds a community to its past and future, but spaces for reflection on one's own and each other's religious upbringing and assumptions. Students might expect less to justify their own belief in the existence of God than to explain the meaning of some religious doctrines or to explore the significance of symbols. Dialogue within and beyond the classroom should then not be about justifying answers, as examination questions will often require (Strhan 2010, 23-25), but coming to a mutual understanding that explores the scope and limits of the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of tradition. One could say, with Ricoeur, that one's self understanding is only really possible in encounter with another, that, as we saw with the opening quotation, the self is constituted through and by the other (Ricoeur 1990).

Deliberative religiosity

To illustrate the deliberative model, I will briefly draw upon Gert Biesta's analysis of democratic processes in education.² For Biesta, educational theory and practice does not generally reflect a deliberative democratic culture, but is increasingly under the sway of a representative democratic model. The representative model takes each individual's view into account through an aggregating process; typically, in democracies, through a system of voting, with the majority view forming the general will. This common sense view of democracy has some problematic features.

Representative democracy 'respects' the individual preferences of its citizens by leaving them intact, and aggregates those preferences to form a general will. This process assumes that each citizen's preferences are inviolable and inalienable. A problem with this

model is that politicians develop policies and ideas in accordance with majority preferences, caricatured as policy derived through focus group. The political role is then conceived not as one of forming, engaging, and shaping public opinion, but rather of following the majority view. There are, no doubt, many problems with supposing that politicians should form public opinion, rather than respond to it, not least the implied paternalism. But it is generally unproblematic to presume that some views are more considered than others, and that some authority is legitimately conferred upon those with more considered and principled views. Clearly, it is easy and tempting to overdraw this binary: in reality, politics cannot exist without principle, any more than it can entirely ignore public opinion. This simplified view of democratic representation throws light when applied to education.

Along with many educational philosophers, Biesta expresses concerns about the increasingly economic relationship between teachers and students across formal education (Biesta 2006). In the context of his critique of the learning culture, learners are framed as customers, educators as providers, and education the consumable. Put simply, the economic model places the educator in service of the inviolable preferences of the student as consumer. This market model is problematic, argues Biesta, because it fails to distinguish between market approaches and professions. In contrast to the 'student as consumer' model, the professional model (e.g. law, medicine, education) requires the producer to inform and refine the preferences of the consumer. The doctor does not respond to the whims of the patient through prescribing what is requested without question, but informs the patient of their needs following professional consultation and judgment. A profession does not leave the preferences of the consumer intact, but informs and refines them through an educational process. It is obvious that the infant who wants only to eat chocolate and watch cartoons should not have those desires met without hesitation. But the commodification of education structures the educational transaction in such a way that it encourages providers not to challenge or refine consumer

preferences, but to leave them intact, as inviolable and given desires to be satisfied by the market. This market model is clearly inappropriate for framing educational relationships. Teachers have a kind of authority that sales people seldom do. They are there to guide students, not just to satisfy preferences. The culture of student satisfaction in higher education in the UK, for example, has been criticized for enacting this transactional framing of education. The goal of satisfying students is corrosive of the properly educational relationship that ought to exist between students and teachers (White 2013). So Biesta argues for the deliberative culture of education to be recognized, in which desire satisfaction must defer to the more educational concern of desire formation.

Can this kind of deliberative culture be developed within discussions around the place of religion in public life? If we accept that some religious activities and ideas are intrinsically public facing (e.g. wearing religious symbols at work or school; certain Islamic laws around finance), we must also accept that those beliefs and practices, and the particular forms that they take, are not given and inviolable. When we recognize the capacity of religious interpretations to vary and change with time and context, then we open up hermeneutic conversation. The capacity to critically assess beliefs and practices does not mean, of course, that we must privilege a 'neutral' secular authority that can demand that religions reinterpret their own tradition in heteronomous terms. In other words, drawing out the deliberative structures *within* religious traditions is a very different approach to requiring religions to conform to a putatively neutral secular state. I am suggesting that religions have, on the whole, the capacity for deliberative practices within them, and where resistance to that deliberation exists (such as the flat fundamentalisms of modern religious discourse, notably but not exclusively in forms of Christianity and Islam), there are particular and peculiar historical, social, political, and economic circumstances that go beyond (while still inclusive of) 'religion' *per se*. In sum,

religions are not homogenous fixed points whose tenets are simply revealed and therefore unquestionable.

So the idea that we should question the absolutism of a particular religious tradition is something that would best occur from within a religion, rather than being imposed from outside (e.g. by a secular public). That might be taken to mean that the hermeneutical relations that constitute religious life can only really be acknowledged from within a particular church community. The immanent deliberations of a particular community may be the most effective form of hermeneutical recognition. But it may be that a more generalised acknowledged religiosity has some qualities in common with religious others, even when the ‘content’ of belief varies. As Morimoto puts it:

If religion is all about giving assent to these divisive sets of doctrines, there is little chance for us to understand each other well. But if religion is primarily a matter of trust, piety, devotion, loyalty and commitment, then we all are somehow able to perceive what we have in common, regardless of tradition. The content of faith may be different, but its quality is similar; and this awareness of similarity may hopefully cultivate within us a kind of empathy towards each other. (Morimoto 2005, 180)

Conclusion

This article draws attention to a number of problems faced when considering the place of religion in education in a religiously plural world: first, the alignment of education and criticality, which is too often regarded in opposition to religion and credulity; second, the reduction of religious life to doctrinal positions or propositional truth claims; third, the notion that religious claims are, by their very logic, necessarily irreconcilable; and finally, that

therefore religious views are inviolable and should be insulated from deliberative culture, such as can be found in good schools. If we can demonstrate that religions do not operate fundamentally as dogmatic positions, then a key constraint on mutual recognition and dialogue might be removed. This is not to replace a propositional view of religion with an orientation to practices, but rather to excavate the hermeneutical ground that informs both. Fundamentalist revisionist religiosity may be disregarding the hermeneutical complexity that informs religious traditions, and this trend must be examined critically if we are to create a more deliberative culture in which religious literacy can be taken seriously.

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¹ While understandable given contemporary media discourse, this picture of the French Republic as entirely hostile to any public forms of religious expression is as misleading as it is commonplace. For a clear account of the ways in which French public life does not exclude religious influence see Arthur, Gearon, and Sears (2010, Chapter 1).

² For a summary see Biesta (2006, 19-21). The arguments are developed further in Biesta (2010; 2013).