

The Legacy of A Common Faith in the Thought of Philip H. Phenix

CAMPBELL SCRIBNER
University of Maryland

The following article traces the legacy of John Dewey's A Common Faith (1934) and Dewey's concept of "the religious" in the thought of Philip H. Phenix, a prominent philosopher of education during the 1950s and 1960s. Phenix frequently cited A Common Faith and echoed Dewey's commitments to naturalism, creativity, and ethical commitment, all of which he associated with transcendent sources of meaning. In this respect, Phenix's position was almost identical to Victor Kestenbaum's subsequent interpretation of Dewey in The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal (2002). Unlike Kestenbaum, however, Phenix found no trace of transcendence in A Common Faith and repeatedly criticized Dewey on the point. This article ascribes Phenix's attachment to the transcendent and his interpretation of A Common Faith to contemporary changes in science and religion, particularly the intellectual influence of theoretical physics and existentialist theology, with implications for our understanding of religious and educational thought at midcentury.

Introduction

One way to assess John Dewey's impact on American education is to examine the uptake, rejection, and modification of Deweyan ideas by subsequent generations of thinkers. The following paper will consider the concept of "the religious" put forward in Dewey's book *A Common Faith* (1934), and its influence on the thought of Philip H. Phenix, a prominent philosopher of education during the 1950s and 1960s. Although it is probably unwise to characterize any thinker as "typical" of their era, there is much to recommend Phenix as an interpreter of *A Common Faith*. He taught philosophy at Teachers College from 1954 to 1981, served as a member of the National Academy of Education and as president of the Philosophy of Education Society, and wrote seven books about science, religion, and education. He was also a liberal Protestant, with degrees from Union Theological Seminary, where he studied with the theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, and Columbia University, where he worked with Herbert W. Schneider, a scholar of American religion and a student of Dewey's. Phenix was well acquainted with Dewey's metaphysics as applied to religion and education (Phenix, 1969), and *A Common Faith* remained an intellectual touchstone throughout his career, with favourable references in almost all of his books. For just these reasons, any differences between the two men may offer insights into the reception of Dewey's religious thought during the twentieth century.

And differences there were. Although Phenix adopted many of the arguments in *A Common Faith*, he became a pointed critic of Deweyan pragmatism, which he found insufficiently oriented toward transcendence and ultimate meaning. One can trace his objections to at least two sources:

1. evolving scientific paradigms, from the Darwinian biology of Dewey's era to the more abstract and foundational claims of relativity and quantum physics, captured in the "process philosophy" of Alfred North Whitehead; and

2. a shift in theological debates, from the conflicts between fundamentalists and modernists during the early twentieth century to questions of existential meaning and the problem of evil following the world wars.

Between 1941 and 1954, these changes pushed Phenix beyond Dewey's immanent conceptions of "the ideal." Instead, Phenix integrated elements of Deweyan thought into more familiar forms of idealism, into traditional religious practice, and even into the disciplinary curriculum. The following paper will trace these changes through Phenix's published work, as well as referencing notes and personal correspondence in Phenix's private papers.

Making Sense of *A Common Faith*

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey (1934) outlines a middle course between organized religion and "militant atheism" (pp. 1–2), both of which, he argues, falsely associate "the religious" with the supernatural and thus perpetuate "outgrown traits" of the past (p. 6). Dewey instead proposes a reassessment of religion, asking, "What would be the idea of the unseen, of the manner of its control over us and the ways in which reverence and obedience would be manifested, if whatever is basically religious in experience had the opportunity to express itself free from all historic encumbrances?" (p. 6). *A Common Faith* approaches this task from an instrumental perspective, judging the religious by "the effect produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production," and consequently focuses on religious experience rather than religious institutions (p. 14). Instead of dogmatic closure or predetermined ends, for Dewey faith demands openness, experimentation, and imagination – not in "fictive" or "fantastical" but in "creative" thought (p. 23) – through which it yields individual wholeness and social progress. As Dewey writes, "The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal idea. The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the Universe only through imaginative extension. It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection. ... Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through imagination" (pp. 18–19).

These arguments rest on several interlocking tenets that should be familiar to any reader of Dewey. First is a thoroughgoing naturalism, in which religious feeling is a "sense of awe and reverence" directed not toward a supernatural deity but toward "human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole," whereas the "unreligious attitude is that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature" (Dewey, 1934, p. 25). With naturalism comes a certain form of discipline and limitation. As Billy Cowart (1967) notes, "Aims and ideals that move man are generated through imagination, but they are not made out of imaginary 'stuff.' They consist of the hard 'stuff' of the world of physical and social experience" (p. 86). A second tenet is the affinity between religious experience, intelligence, and scientific inquiry (the latter interpreted "in its most general and generous sense"): a unification of all forms of knowledge in human experience, which is "open and public" in contrast to the "limited and private" forms of doctrinal religion (Dewey, 1934, pp. 33, 39). A third tenet is the ethical impact of religious belief. Following William James (1903) and anticipating the existentialists, Dewey equates faith with a willingness to act on one's ideals (Ferree, 1960). Last is the embrace of change and human ingenuity as the highest goods. For Dewey (1934), it is the notion of a transcendent deity and inflexible laws that are in fact "non-ideal" (p. 42), and the commitment to worthy goals of "human association, of art and knowledge" that marked true ideality (p. 48). This inversion essentially sacralizes creativity and social progress. Bradley Baurain (2011) offers a helpful summary:

Just as the religious needs a democratic process of inquiry in order to be freed from the trap of institutional religion, so also does democracy itself need religious experience, attitudes, and values in order to flourish. ... People are truly religious if they pursue higher purposes which are inherently worthy and compelling enough to unify their identities and govern their actions. Such purposes lie

beyond what the intellect alone can grasp and belong instead to the moral imagination, which might be seen as an amalgamation of vision, conscience, and empathy. (p. 81)

In both respects, Dewey's is a faith in democracy.

Scholars have been divided on the significance of *A Common Faith*, often along the very lines that Dewey hoped to transcend. Dewey's figurative use of the word "God" has bothered some religious readers, who worry that it diminishes divinity (Rosenow, 1997). Many readers likewise find Dewey's description of religious experience shallow, and point to the book's glaring omission of the roles of ritual and community in religious faith (Alexander, 2013a; Westbrook, 2003; Baurain, 2011). The book has also troubled some secular readers, who find it mystical, soft-headed, and marginal to Dewey's broader thought, an unhelpful reversion to his early Hegelianism, with its "talk about organic wholes, noncognitive experience, and the nature of ideals" (Alexander, 2013a, 348).¹ Nel Noddings (2009) describes it as "one of John Dewey's least effective books" – complaining that he "[used] language that was sure to create confusion for both those who hold to supernaturalism and those who reject it" (pp. 13–14).

Probably the most interesting treatment of *A Common Faith*, however, and certainly the most relevant for our understanding of Phenix, is found in Victor Kestenbaum's *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal* (2002). Rather than providing a purely naturalistic, symbolic, or therapeutic interpretation of "the religious" (Ralston, 2007; Anderson, 1999; Alexander, 2013a), Kestenbaum makes a spirited case for Dewey's orientation toward a (very particular) type of transcendental idealism, and thus for the centrality of his writings on religion and aesthetics. As Kestenbaum (2002) puts it, Dewey's ideal is "situated at the intersection of the tangible and the intangible, the natural and the transcendent," and "may be a loftier thing than responses of organisms to their environments" (p. 5). Whether or not one finds that argument convincing, it hardly pushes Kestenbaum's interpretation of Dewey to "an astonishing extreme," as some critics have claimed (Alexander, 2013a, p. 349). Kestenbaum (2002) is certainly correct to say that Dewey pursues "the union of the actual and the ideal," and that he tries to make room for the "supersensible" rather than the supernatural, an "anticipatory vision of things that are now invisible" (pp. 175–176, 183). The real question is whether Dewey's commitments to human striving and faith-based ethical commitments are sufficiently "naturalistic" on one hand or sufficiently "transcendent" on the other. To whatever degree Dewey meets both demands, however, it would be hard to find a closer fit to Phenix's brand of philosophy. Indeed, one could say that Phenix *was* Kestenbaum's version of Dewey. He just did not know it.

Philip H. Phenix's Reading of *A Common Faith*

Phenix seems to have read *A Common Faith* while a student at Union Theological Seminary. The book certainly influenced his doctoral dissertation, although he did not cite it directly, and it would appear in almost all of his subsequent work. A few quick references should suffice to establish the book's influence on Phenix's thought.

At Columbia, Phenix's (1950) dissertation explored the theological implications of the "new physics" and did so from a distinctly Deweyan perspective. Phenix argued for the "infinite" of scientific inquiry, which was not a "fixed system of truth" but a "never completed, inexhaustible, meaningful aspect of existence ... [which] forms the foundation of religious feeling" (p. 25). Whereas faith "in the past connoted the static aspects of existence ... [and] adherence to fixed patterns and unchanging goals," he urged a revised, "dynamic" understanding of science and religion, which both strived for "the realm of possibility" and encouraged the exercise of "imagination" (pp. 158–161). Like Dewey, Phenix understood the religious not as a supernatural phenomenon or an organized institution but as a "value-experience – a power issuing in a sense of worth and meaning" (p. 67). He stressed that

¹ Please note that this quote is not representative of Alexander's own interpretation of *A Common Faith*, which is largely positive. (See also Alexander, 2013b, pp. 352–391).

such meaning could not be dismissed as “mere human subjectivity” because “man belongs to nature, and his ideals, his visions, his hopes, [and] his faith are grounded in nature” (p. 190). The “ideal,” he wrote, was an awareness of one’s interconnectedness with the natural world: “[When] the infinite reach of an act ... comes home to us, the meaning of the present act is seen to be vast, immeasurable, unthinkable ... encompassing infinity of connections” (p. 170). Thus, “infinite in human life is revealed in an unending succession of idealizations. When ideals are absolutized or regarded as ultimate, man becomes their tool and the dimension of infinitude is obliterated” (p. 170).

Phenix’s first books advanced similar claims. In *Intelligible Religion* (1954a), he argued that religion is only salutary when it promotes “community” and when it “deals with the whole range of man’s experience,” leading “from immediate and particular concerns to questions about ever wider meanings, more extensive connections, and deeper implications” (pp. 10–11). “The trouble with traditional religious doctrines,” he continued, “[is that] they are burdened with ideas which have lost their reference to actual human experience” (pp. 19–21). In *Religious Concerns in Contemporary Education* (1959), he likewise insisted that religion “is not a closed and sacrosanct domain, but a living, growing complex of experience” (p. 2), which education nurtures “through participation in a *universe* of interconnected experiences” (p. 86). These arguments hewed closely to those of *A Common Faith*, often using the same language of interconnected social experience and ongoing, imaginative forms of inquiry.

Yet, too, subtle differences were present from the outset. In undated reading notes on *A Common Faith*, Phenix (n.d.) worried that Dewey did not recognize “that science can become a rigid orthodoxy too,” with methods or findings that could erroneously close off those realms of human experience, particularly those traditionally associated with religious revelation. He suggested that the shift from “religion” to “the religious” should be accompanied by a corresponding shift from “science” to “the scientific”; that is, a focus on both the religious and the scientific *spirit*, which would return attention to “*the person* as the clue to all meaning.” Phenix’s attention to personal meaning and the infinite character of inquiry yielded quintessentially Deweyan claims (such as the scientist’s “religious commitment” to truth), but it also led him to transcendent values that Phenix believed moved beyond Dewey’s: as when he wrote, “What one believes is not a matter of indifference, but of the greatest moment. ... it is a transcendent aim, forever beyond full realization, but present by intention in every partial fulfillment of knowledge” (Phenix, 1966, p. 66); or when he described “the character of beyondness – of an unattained ideal surpassing the attained actuality” as “the transcendence of God” (Phenix, 1954a, p. 88).

Perceived differences around the issue of transcendence grew more pronounced during the 1960s. In *Education and the Common Good*, Phenix (1961a) praised Dewey’s commitment to “democracy as a comprehensive way of life” and “education as a moral enterprise,” but he argued that Dewey’s focus on “satisfaction, adjustment, problem solving, growth, and harmonious interaction [did] not provide a sufficient basis for judgments of worth” (p. 11–12). Because “pragmatists hold that man is the measure of truth and goodness, that ultimately something is worthy because intelligent human beings want it,” they endorsed what Phenix called a “democracy of desire” (p. 12). Pragmatists were “so determined to banish fixed traditional codes of value and so absorbed with the methods of reconstructing them, that the transcendent ground and goal of the moral enterprise are obscured, if not explicitly denied.” Phenix offered a different vision, a “democracy of worth,” in which “man is himself judged and measured by an antecedently conceived goodness,” and in which teaching and learning required “a firm commitment to truth and goodness which men and their processes subserve but do not create” (p. 12). In *Education and the Worship of God*, Phenix (1966) reaffirmed distinctions between the sacred and the secular, noting that “some objects, acts, and events prove to be more powerful than others in evoking a sense of reverence for the infinite ... [including] the symbols of the great traditional religions” (p. 19). He conceded that religious symbols, like all cultural affordances, were “tools” and “instruments of human purpose,” but he insisted that symbols “succeed in the fulfillment of human aims only insofar as they truly symbolize the real nature of being” (pp. 41–42); that they were “a gift to be received with thankful reverence,” without which they would lose their sacred qualities, “[telling] nothing of God, but only of man” (p. 42). In “The Religious Element in Education,” Phenix (1970) echoed Dewey’s call for a “democratic faith,” but anchored it in transcendent ideals. “Prior to all other commitments,” he wrote, “is the common vocation to love and serve truth, excellence, and justice.” He continues: “The world,

man, and his culture are neither self-sufficient nor self-explanatory, but derived from given sources of being, meaning, and value. ... The supremely worthwhile is not finite or limited, but transcends all human comprehension and every human achievement. ... The struggle for autonomy, acquisition, and success, and attachment to finite goods lead in the end to misery, conflict, guilt, despair, boredom, and frustration” (pp. 316–317). Finally, in “Transcendence and the Curriculum,” Phenix (1971) argued that “judgments of [the] relative worth of concrete actualizations” depended on the “limitless possibility of going beyond,” “the perennial protest of the prophetic conscience against the absolutizing of limited goods” (p. 274).

It is important to emphasize that Phenix was not a garden-variety idealist any more than Dewey was a reductive naturalist, and that the intellectual affinity that Phenix felt for Dewey was real. These criticisms present us with a historical puzzle, then. While there is no reason to think that Phenix should have intuited an argument like Kestenbaum’s, which appeared the year of his death, insofar as both he and Dewey tried to bridge the gap between the natural and the ideal, why did Phenix draw such sharp distinctions between them? If Kestenbaum could find a Dewey that was “friendlier to ‘metaphysics’” than other scholars had (Ryan, 2004), why did Phenix have to lament a Dewey who was “not metaphysical enough” (Roger. Phenix, personal communication, January 19, 2022)? Why was the idealism of *A Common Faith* so much harder for Phenix to conceive during the 1950s than it was for Kestenbaum during the 1990s? To answer these questions, one must understand Phenix’s personal and historical context, particularly in the years before he became a professor, and for that a fuller biographical sketch is in order.

From Biology to Physics

One source of Phenix’s transcendent ideals was his own scientific background. Phenix had developed fairly sophisticated understandings of both science and religion by the time he was twelve. He conducted advanced experiments in chemistry and electrical engineering in his bedroom and devoured books on theoretical physics. His adolescent religious beliefs were theologically liberal and fundamentally cerebral, aimed at an intellectual communion with the divine and a “simple unhampered, undistorted life for SCIENCE, THOUGHT, and the advancement of KNOWLEDGE and RELIGION” (Phenix, 1929). In a typical diary entry, written when he was fourteen, he expressed “remarkable sympathy with idealism in science. After all, science is the voice of God in Nature and Nature and God are ideal and spiritual” (Phenix, 1930a). In another entry, he wrote, “My soul responds to science just as it does to metaphysical realms. They are of one origin, I am certain” (Phenix, 1930b).

The same themes would recur four years later, when, at nineteen, Phenix graduated first in his class from Princeton University, with a major in mathematical physics. His senior thesis argued that rotational movement depended on a type of absolute space that could not be accounted for in the theory of general relativity (Phenix, 1934). Albert Einstein was sufficiently impressed to meet with Phenix personally, telling the department chair that the thesis was “amazing” but “by no means correct” (quoted in Mathieu, 1956, p. 44). Relevant here is that Phenix revived an explicitly Kantian theory of space, adapted from the mathematician Hermann Weyl, which relied on the existence of a Euclidean metric (three-dimensional space separable from one-dimensional time) at infinitely large or small distances (Ryckman, 2005). Although it is not clear how well Phenix understood the philosophical implications of his thesis, he was essentially probing the relationship between physical and metaphysical infinitude in Kantian philosophy, summarized by Kant’s famous meditation on “the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me” (quoted in Moore, 1988, p. 208). As Weyl (2009) put it, where it was undisturbed by matter, in the stillness of the infinite, the structure of space elicited “a feeling of deep reverence” or “cosmic worship,” a form of the Kantian sublime (pp. 41, 44–45). It was exactly this sort of transcendence – grounded in moral freedom and the exercise of reason – that had fascinated Phenix since childhood, and that would define the ontology of both science and religion in his adult philosophy.

One finds traces of physics throughout Phenix’s later work, always with the same idealist overtones. For instance, like Dewey, Phenix (1954a) wrote that human values emerge in the context of

relationships, just as velocity depends on relative frames of reference. But rather than accepting total relativism, he noted that the speed of light remains the same regardless of one's state of motion, which (by analogy) suggested the possibility of similarly universal values. "The problem of the ultimate relativity of values hinges on the question as to whether or not there is any universal value by which all other values may be arranged," he wrote. "This depends upon whether there is some sovereign principle by which certain values are actually confirmed or enhanced in comparison with others, leading to a condition of increasing stability, permanence, and comprehensiveness" (p. 70–71; see also Phenix, 1964a, p. 29). Elsewhere, he observed that "the world of experience is not given just *anyhow*. It comes to us in *particular forms*. These forms confront us at each moment of our awareness. Existence has a deterministic *structure*" (Phenix, 1954a, 54). Here again, one detects the influence of Kant's transcendental aesthetic and the writing of Weyl. As Ryckman (2005) notes, Weyl approached Kant through the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, for whom reality exists as "being *for* consciousness" (p. 8), so that "the world does not exist in itself but is merely encountered by us as an object in the correlative variance of subject and object" (Weyl, 2009, p. 83). Thus, for Weyl, the mind was a "sphere of vision, of meaning, of image," which delimited abstract formalism but stood above empirical observation. "The real world is not a thing founded in itself, that can in a significant manner be established as an independent existence," Weyl (2009) concluded. Rather, it is in "the transition from consciousness to reality," accessible through Kantian intuition and the "symbolical construction" of mathematics, that "the ego, the thou and the world rise into existence indissolubly connected and, as it were, at one stroke" (pp. 34, 49–50). It was in this transcendent union that Phenix, too, located the structure of existence.

Even where he foregrounded the role of evolutionary change, Phenix anchored it in cosmic realities, and was as likely to gesture to the "process philosophy" of Alfred North Whitehead (1929), with its grounding in relativistic physics, as he was to Dewey's organismic pragmatism. A frequent touchstone was Whitehead's category of "creativity," "the ceaseless change in which all existence is inevitably involved" (Phenix, 1954a, p. 29). "The awareness of change provides the ground for one of the fundamental forms of religious experience," wrote Phenix (1954a), "[since] the most solid and durable of substances is simply a relatively stable arrangement of changing electric fields and elementary particles" (p. 30). Likewise, glossing Whitehead, he compared social interactions to modern field theories. "An electron, a magnet, a chunk of matter, or a person is never an isolated, separate entity, but exists in a context ... [of] field relationships. ... Every being is a being-in-relation, and is what it is and behaves as it does by virtue of its participation with other beings" (Phenix, 1971, p. 274). In one article, Phenix (1971) wrote that "consciousness of infinitude entails a sense of the manifold powers and possibilities of the reality in which one's existence is embedded," yet he went out of his way to *contrast* that statement with Dewey, whose concept of problem-solving he equated with "the blocking of organic drives" and consequently found "too narrowly biological" (p. 278). "A sounder, more positive, and more distinctly human formulation," Phenix wrote, "would be that thought grows out of wonder, which in turn is rooted in the spiritual act of projecting ideal possibilities. Thus, instead of regarding human learning primarily as a means of biological adaptation, it may be thought of as a response to the lure of transcendence. Indeed, the very notion of adaptation appears to be meaningful only in terms of the process of creative invention for the purpose of realizing specific ideal harmonies" (p. 278).

From Kestenbaum's perspective, the latter quotation merely begs the question. After all, it is Phenix (not Dewey) who contrasts biology with the projection of "ideal possibilities" and who subordinates immanent adaptations to transcendent structures of meaning, distinctions he bases on exogenous disciplinary differences rather than any specific reference to ideality in Dewey's writing. Kestenbaum could rightly claim that Phenix misconstrued Dewey in the process. It is understandable, however, why a turn to physics and the foundational conditions of reality would push Phenix from an adaptive to a truly transcendent naturalism, and perhaps to seek a higher basis for "the religious" than that provided in *A Common Faith*.

From the Social Gospel to Existentialism

As a young man, Phenix was, like Dewey, sympathetic with the social gospel movement, which sought to achieve Christian ideals through social reform. He was raised in mainline Protestant churches and active in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). After graduating from Princeton and working briefly as an insurance actuary, Phenix moved to the Union Settlement House, in New York City, where he taught English to European refugees, and in 1939 he enrolled at Union Theological seminary.² At the time, he was reading the books of Toyohiko Kagawa (1931), the Japanese pacifist and labour activist, and Henry Drummond (1900), the Scottish clergyman, from whom he learned that “the City [was] the starting point for bringing the Kingdom of God” (Phenix, 1939a).³ Most importantly, he was reading Harry Emerson Fosdick, who was on the faculty at Union and preached across the street at Riverside Church. Phenix would take several courses with Fosdick and, as late as 1940, described him as a “modern saint” (Phenix, 1940a).⁴ He also admired liberal theologians such as Eugene William Lyman and Henry Van Dusen, with whom he took courses as well. For the first year of seminary, Phenix’s only criticism was reserved for Professor Reinhold Niebuhr, who, following a tour of Nazi Germany, had moved away from social reconstruction, toward realism and a focus on original sin. “Men like Reinhold Niebuhr ... twist the Kingdom of God out of the sphere of actuality and make it something unattainable,” he complained. “Perhaps it can never come in fulness, but I believe it can come partly here now. And I believe in living the Kingdom way” (Phenix, 1940b).

For all the bluff talk, however, Phenix was starting to doubt elements of the social gospel, which seemed to lose sight of transcendent revelation in the pursuit of material improvement. Advocates had lost something “by not recognizing the value of a certain amount of symbolism and definiteness in religion,” he wrote to his mother. “The Socialist Commonwealth is not the Kingdom of God” (Phenix, 1939b). He admitted a “feeling of estrangement” from Quakerism as well, in no small part because Meetings were unprogrammed with no clergy, while he hoped to pursue a career in the ministry, and because pacifism seemed increasingly irresponsible in the face of Nazi aggression (Phenix, 1939c). All of this left him feeling adrift.

By 1941, Phenix had completely changed. Like many seminarians at the time, he was reading Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Emil Brunner, all of whom focused on the otherness of God and the superiority of faith over applied reason, and (in Brunner’s case) who criticized preachers like Fosdick for abandoning the truth of the gospel message for ethical platitudes. Perhaps that was why Phenix (1941) suddenly complained that Fosdick was “lacking in any ultimate message for the soul.” In a sermon on divided personalities, the preacher contended that the only way to achieve unity was to be “drawn together by some purpose bigger than ourselves – like human love, or idealism in social construction, or artistic passion, or best of all religion,” a humanistic perspective that Phenix pointedly connected to Dewey. “That is all very fine,” he wrote, “but not Christian” (Phenix, 1941). He was also taking classes with Niebuhr, his former nemesis, and with the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich, both of whom would later contribute to his doctoral study and influence his philosophical writing.

In the meantime, Phenix’s spiritual crisis continued. He struggled for several years as a minister and chaplain, taking pastoral assignments only to find his parishioners too literal or anti-intellectual. He briefly reverted to exactly the humanism that he had criticized in Fosdick: he tried to secure a pulpit in the Unitarian church and was offered an editorial position at *The Humanist* magazine. However, he turned that job down as well. “While I place a high value on empirical method and on intelligibility and am critical of traditional supernaturalism,” he wrote, “I think there are also serious limitations on scientific naturalism as a total philosophy.” Moreover, he continued to “recognize profound insights in many if not most of the traditional religious doctrines,” and consequently found himself unable “to take the stump for Humanism as such” (Phenix, 1954b). Where did that leave him vis-à-vis Dewey and *A Common Faith*?

² Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix, June 25, 1939, Phenix Papers.

³ Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix, July 11, 1939, Phenix Papers.

⁴ Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix, June 27, 1940.

By 1960, when he permanently joined the faculty at Teachers College, Phenix had formulated an answer to that question, which he articulated in a critique of the educational theorist William H. Kilpatrick. Like Dewey (Kilpatrick's mentor and colleague), Kilpatrick argued that the basis of religion was "the spirit with which one holds supreme value ... plus the outworking of this attitude appropriately in life," "a unifying of one's self and one's life on the basis of some supreme and inclusive outlook and consequent program of action," and Phenix agreed with those propositions (Phenix 1961b, p. 216). But their views diverged on at least three points.

First, Phenix doubted that the "denial of any eternal Ground and Goal of being" could provide the basis for true spiritual commitment (p. 218). An outlook like Kilpatrick's or Dewey's was

opposed to the life of faith when (as in pragmatism) the idea of radical openness is interpreted as requiring the rejection of any ontology of the eternal. The basic question for religion is whether or not the Supreme Value which one affirms is of such a nature as to invite, inspire, and sustain one's theoretical and practical loyalty. ... The religion of scientific naturalism, for all its high promises ... provides no object worthy of our worship, no answer to the deepest hungers of the human spirit. It must eventually result in impiety; for under it man has no higher authority than his own intentions and preferences and no allegiance beyond that of his own interests. ... Such a conception is religiously powerful only if the "higher and finer levels" have some basis in an antecedent Goodness which both motivates and executes judgment on the human endeavor. Without that basis, education can excite no reverence and can promise no relief from the self-centeredness which is the course of mankind. (pp. 218–219)

Again, it was simply transcendence that differentiated Phenix's religious interpretation from Dewey's. But even here there were similarities. For just as *A Common Faith* made an instrumental argument – that democracy requires experimental or imaginative belief – so did Phenix. It was not necessarily that "Supreme Value" exists of itself, he argued, but that one could not achieve democracy ("allegiance beyond that of [one's] own interests") without *believing* in its existence. In some respects, this argument combined Phenix's Kantian foundations, in which the transcendent "invites, inspires, and sustains" reason and morality, with a quintessentially pragmatist critique – namely, that Dewey's religion did not "work" in achieving democratic goals.

A second point of difference was a chastened view of social progress after the Second World War, which seemed to call for sturdier moral guardrails than progressive reformers had envisioned. Echoing Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), Phenix (1961b) wrote, "While optimistic practical idealism is in many ways attractive, it wholly fails to come to terms with the tragic aspects of human existence – aspects which have been the special concern of most of the historic religions of man." "Man cannot by his own efforts rebuild himself to ever higher and finer levels (of his own deciding)," he continued. "Deliverance from thralldom to self is possible only by a vivid sense of the Other to whom one owes one's being and by whom one's becoming should be directed" (p. 219). One finds similar sentiments elsewhere in his writing. For example, "The scientific outlook generally rests upon the conviction that uncorrupted reason will eventually triumph over passion, selfishness, and violence, but such hope is not consistent with the doctrine of sin found in some versions of the Christian faith ... [and] modern history would seem to support this more pessimistic view" (Phenix, 1966, p. 72). This perspective, too, put him in a delicate dance with Dewey. Although Phenix remained committed to applying science to social problems, he pointed out that, "from a scientific viewpoint, the only hope worth having is that which comes from openness to the truth, including any facts, no matter how unpleasant, regarding human perversity" (p. 73). Democracy did not need perfectionist ideals but instead "the element of real risk and of tragedy which life actually involves," just as the threat of nuclear war necessarily checked "any hope of immortality through participation in the ongoing life of a community" (Phenix, 1950, p. 152). In the atomic age, it was difficult to maintain a faith in scientific progress as such.

Finally, Phenix recognized the educational implications of changing theological debates. Whereas Dewey and Kilpatrick wrote in a period of conflict between modernists and fundamentalists (typified by the Scopes "monkey trial" in 1925), Phenix (1961b) argued that the threat was no longer the religious authoritarianism or superstition against which the pragmatists had pitched their democratic faith, but

instead “the meanings, relationships, and limitations of language systems” (pp. 217–218). That is, religious infinitude in the 1960s was less about undermining inflexible orthodoxies than restoring meaning in the face of alienation and senselessness. It was the latter concerns that inspired Phenix’s most famous book, *Realms of Meaning* (1964b), a call for revived disciplinary study. If the “religious” aspects of *A Common Faith* paralleled Dewey’s rationale for democratic classrooms and interdisciplinary approaches to learning, for Phenix a religious education “[counteracted] destructive skepticism, depersonalization and fragmentation, overabundance, and transience” (p. 5) by imparting ways of knowing that pointed beyond themselves. As Phenix later wrote, “When [disciplinary] studies are pursued with religious insight and commitment, the realization of the divine nature in human persons is fostered. ... As the student in reverence and devotion acquires the powers of speaking, knowing, making, judging, and planning, he becomes increasingly an exemplar of the divine nature” (Phenix, 1966, p. 165).

It is unsurprising that Phenix’s search for meaning would lead to the existentialists. Just as Dewey (1934) identified the religious with “any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction” (p. 27), Phenix framed it in terms of one’s “ultimate concern,” drawing from his mentor, Paul Tillich. Citing Tillich, Phenix (1966) wrote, “Education cannot be concerned only with finite affairs. Every teacher, student, and administrator has some perspective from which he judges the meaning of his whole life, including education” (p. 24). Ultimacy had the benefit of personal conviction but also a (sometimes ambiguous) orientation toward transcendent sources of knowledge (O’Meara, 1968). Rather than grounding knowledge in autonomous reason, Phenix praised Tillich’s concept of “theonomy,” in which “the divine ground of being shines through the finite conditions of historical existence and ... man sees the orders of truth and right as the law of his own being.” In contrast to the “the self-sufficient finitude of autonomous man” (Phenix, 1961a, pp. 14–15), Tillich helped Phenix specify the transcendent, eternal source of human ideals. Because existence is finite, oriented toward anxiety and death, Tillich (1967), echoing Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, wrote:

the process of self-transcendence carries a double meaning in each of its moments. ... In order to experience his finitude, man must look at himself from the point of view of a potential infinity. In order to be aware of moving toward death, man must look out over his finite being as a whole; he must in some way be beyond it. He must also be able to imagine infinity. ... All the structures of finitude force finite being to transcend itself and, just for this reason, to become aware of itself as finite. (p. 190)

In this sense, the infinite became a source of dynamic freedom and ontological awareness “from the inside” (p. 195).

For all of these reasons, it was Tillich (rather than Dewey) to whom Phenix (1971) attributed “the refusal to accord supreme worth to any and every realization of nature or humanity,” and in such a refusal to find “an inexhaustible ideality that renders a judgment of partiality and insufficiency on whatever exists” (p. 274). It was Tillich for whom “the radical questioning of any and every alleged finality is only possible to one who is grasped by a transcendent faith ... that wells up from the creative grounds of being and does not rest on any objectified security structures” (p. 277). It was Tillich who taught that “Being or existence grasped as a final end-in-itself ... is self-nullifying,” and that the individual must “remain open to the wider opportunities to establish other persons in meaningful existence and thus participate in life that is eternally made new” (Phenix, 1964a, p. 113). In short, for Phenix, it was Tillich who realized the naturalistic/transcendent duality of the ideal, and fulfilled the “religious” promise that Dewey introduced.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that, in the decades after its publication, Dewey’s humanistic view of religion failed to convince not only supernaturalists and atheists but in this case the very type of liberal Protestant that

one would have expected to champion it. Philip Phenix loved *A Common Faith*, but he agreed with most of his contemporaries that the book was entirely naturalistic, lacking any transcendent sense of the ideal, and thus (for him) failed to achieve the depth of true religion. That is not to say that Phenix's reading of Dewey was correct. Rising generations are often guilty of (inadvertently) misinterpreting their elders in order to advance their own ideas, and changing times invariably foreground new perspectives and concerns. Thus, it is entirely possible that Dewey's language of imagination and conviction did encompass a form of ideality or infinitude, as Kestenbaum claims. But Phenix simply did not see it.

The irony, of course, is that Phenix advanced arguments almost identical to Kestenbaum's. Drawing from Dewey's tenets of inquiry, democracy, and humanism, Phenix idealized the infinite creativity of the human spirit, which played out in various avenues of aesthetic creation and disciplinary study. Phenix saw transcendence as a natural and essentially human undertaking. By his own lights, however, his orientation toward physics (rather than biology) and existentialism (rather than the social gospel) oriented him more deeply toward the absolute and unseen elements of nature. While Phenix paid homage to Dewey's philosophy, he grounded his own on a passage from Whitehead's *Aims of Education* (1967):

The essence of education is that it be religious. ... A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. ... And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity (p. 14).

References

- Alexander, T. M. (2013a). John Dewey's uncommon faith: Understanding "religious experience." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 87(2), 347–362.
- Alexander, T. M. (2013b). *The human eros: Eco-ontology and the aesthetics of existence*. Fordham University Press.
- Anderson, D. (1999). Theology as healing: A meditation on *A common faith*. In C. Haskins and D. Seiple (Eds.), *Dewey reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan pragmatism* (pp. 85–95). SUNY Press.
- Baurain, B. (2011). Common ground with *A common faith*: Dewey's idea of the 'religious.' *Education & Culture*, 27(2), 74–91.
- Cowart, B. F. (1967). John Dewey's conception of God. *Educational Theory*, 17(1), 83–90.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *A common faith*. Yale University Press.
- Drummond, H. (1900). *Addresses by Henry Drummond*. Moody Publishers.
- Ferree, G. (1960). The development and substance of John Dewey's religious thought. *Educational Theory*, 10(1), 50–56.
- James, W. (1903). *The will to believe: And other essays in popular philosophy*. Longmans, Green, & Company.
- Kagawa, T. (1931). *The religion of Jesus and love, the law of life*. John C. Winston Company.
- Kestenbaum, V. (2002). *The grace and the severity of the ideal: John Dewey and the transcendent*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mathieu, G. (1956). *Brieflich erzählt*. W. W. Norton.
- Moore, A. W. (1988). Aspects of the infinite in Kant. *Mind*, 97(386), 205–223.
- Niebuhr, R. (1944). *The children of light and the children of darkness*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Noddings, N. (2009). Looking forward from *A common faith*. *Education & Culture*, 25(2), 12–20.
- O'Meara, T. (1968). Tillich and Heidegger: A structural relationship. *Harvard Theological Review*, 61(2), 249–261.
- Phenix, P. H. (n. d.) Notes on *A common faith*. Manuscript. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1929, August 25). Diary entry. Manuscript. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1930a, February 25). Diary entry. Manuscript. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1930b, March 9). Diary Entry. Manuscript. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1934). *On the absolute significance of rotation* [Thesis]. Princeton University.

- Phenix, P. H. (1939a, July 11). Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix. Letter. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1939b, June 22). Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix. Letter. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1939c, September 6). Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix. Letter. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1940a, June 27). Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix. Letter. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1940b, June 11). Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix. Letter. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1941, November 3). Philip H. Phenix to Bessie Phenix. Letter. Phenix Family Papers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1950). *Infinitude: A study of science, theology, and the scientific spirit with special reference to the "new physics"* [Doctoral dissertation]. Columbia University.
- Phenix, P. H. (1954a). *Intelligible religion*. Harper & Brothers.
- Phenix, P. H. (1954b, July 25). Philip H. Phenix to Edwin Wilson. Letter. Southern Illinois University Archives (Edwin Wilson Papers, Mss 255, Box 90, Folder 17). Carbondale, IL.
- Phenix, P. H. (1959). *Religious concerns in contemporary education*. Teachers College Press.
- Phenix, P. H. (1961a). *Education and the common good*. Harper & Row.
- Phenix, P. H. (1961b). Religion in the thought of Kilpatrick. *Studies in Philosophy & Education*, 1(4/5), 212–220.
- Phenix, P. H. (1964a). *Man and his becoming*. Rutgers University Press.
- Phenix, P. H. (1964b). *Realms of meaning*. McGraw Hill.
- Phenix, P. H. (1966). *Education and the worship of God*. Westminster Press.
- Phenix, P. H. (1969). John Dewey's war on dualism – it's bearing on today's educational problems. In R. D. Archambault (Ed.), *Dewey on education: Appraisals* (pp. 39–51). Random House.
- Phenix, P. H. (1970). The religious element in education. In A. Dupuis (Ed.), *Nature, aims, and policy* (pp. 313–319). University of Illinois Press.
- Phenix, P. H. (1971). Transcendence and the curriculum. *Teachers College Record*, 73(1), 273–283.
- Ralston, S. (2007). John Dewey "on the side of the angels": a critique of Kestenbaum's phenomenological reading of *A common faith*. *Education & Culture*, 23(2), 63–75.
- Rosenow, E. (1997). The teacher as prophet of the true God: Dewey's religious faith and its problems. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 31(3), 427–437.
- Ryan, A. (2004). Review of *Grace and the severity of the ideal*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 5(1). <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-grace-and-the-severity-of-the-ideal>
- Ryckman, T. (2005). *The reign of relativity*. Oxford University Press.
- Tillich, P. (1967). *Systematic theology* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.
- Westbrook, R. (2003). An uncommon faith: Pragmatism and religious experience. In S. E. Rosenbaum (Ed.), *Pragmatism and religion: Classical sources and original essays*. University of Illinois Press.
- Weyl, H. (2009). *Mind and nature: Selected writing on philosophy, mathematics, and physics*. Princeton University Press.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology*. MacMillan Company.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1967). *The aims of education and other essays*. Free Press.

About the Author

Campbell F. Scribner is an associate professor of education at the University of Maryland, and the author (most recently) of *A Is for Arson: A History of Vandalism in American Education*. He is now working on a biography of Philip H. Phenix.