

Looking Forward from *A Common Faith*

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A Common Faith is arguably one of John Dewey's least effective books. In it, he tries to persuade readers that the best of two epistemologically different worlds can be reconciled in a common faith—one that employs the methods of science with a generously religious attitude. Possibly most of us today believe this cannot be done; that is, the two worlds will remain unreconciled. But perhaps, without reconciling the two worlds, we can find causes and tasks that will induce common commitment for the benefit of human survival and well-being.

John Dewey begins *A Common Faith* with these words: “Never before in history has mankind been so much of two minds, so divided into two camps, as it is today.”¹ In the first camp, Dewey places all those who believe in a supernatural being; in the second, he locates those who believe that science has “discredited the supernatural and with it all religions that were allied with belief in it.”² But he resists “extremists” in the latter group who seemed to believe that everything religious must be abandoned. Dewey wanted to get rid of religion, but not the “religious.”

Today, it might be said that the population is of three minds. There are still those who believe in a supernatural being and retain affiliation with an institution that supports their belief, and there are those—increasingly outspoken—who reject the supernatural entirely. But, in addition, there are people who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.”³ Some of these people are agnostic but avowedly on a spiritual quest, seeking spiritual truth. Some believe in God but reject institutional religion. As we'll see in a bit, they seem to “believe in belief” but have no commitment to a specific set of beliefs.

It seems to me, looking back on *A Common Faith* from the current state of affairs, that Dewey makes several moves that actually undermine the position he wanted to defend. First, his contention that “there is no such thing as religion in the singular”⁴ is a claim rejected by most sociologists and historians. Dewey says that we can speak of *a* religion, that there are many religions, but “the differences among them are so great and so shocking that any common element that can be

extracted is meaningless.”⁵ But other students of religion locate a common feature, namely inclusion of the supernatural—the very idea Dewey is interested in criticizing. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer used that and other similarities he documented to support the notion that religions are human inventions—transmitting, revising, retelling the same stories again and again.⁶ Agreeing with Frazer on the similarities, the sociologist Rodney Stark draws a different conclusion; he sees the remarkable similarities as a possible sign that God has actually revealed himself to a significant number of listeners in a wide variety of cultures.⁷

In an earlier work, Stark and Bainbridge discussed the problem at some length and decided that, in the interests of coherent programs of study, *religion* should refer only to systems that incorporate belief in the supernatural: “Throughout this book, we demonstrate that the differences between supernatural and nonsupernatural (or naturalistic) systems are so profound that it makes no more sense to equate them than to equate totem poles and telephone poles.”⁸

Belief in the supernatural is the main characteristic shared by religions, but other candidates are sometimes suggested. Some years ago, a student in one of my classes argued strongly that Marxism should be regarded as a religion because it embraces an eschatology, a predicted end state. Others have made the same suggestion, but it seems odd to include an ideology that explicitly rejects God in the collection of religions. Most lay believers would be shocked and disgusted at the idea. Dewey himself recognized the longstanding identification of the religious with the supernatural but wanted to rescue it from that association. There is something in the religious, Dewey believed, that should be part of all good lives.

This something that characterizes the religious is not easy to understand from Dewey’s writing. The common faith of which Dewey speaks is “the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices.”⁹ But surely this sort of allegiance to ideal ends may be found in fanatics and ideologues whose morality we might question. Dewey says nothing about this possibility. We are not helped much when Dewey goes on to suggest that, “It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name ‘God.’” He suggests the name but does not insist “that the name *must* be given.”¹⁰

Why did Dewey use language that was sure to create confusion for both those who hold to supernaturalism and those who reject it? Some reviewers (and other readers) of *A Common Faith* expressed delight that Dewey had at last shown himself to be a theist; others interpreted his words (rightly) to mean that—in the traditional sense, at least—he was an atheist. Martin Gardner says that Dewey was guilty of semantic dishonesty in his use of *religious* and *God*. Dewey, he writes, used “a rhetorical dodge, often practiced by philosophers who like to play language games and send up verbal smoke screens, purloining an enemy’s terminology and redefining its important words.”¹¹ Gardner goes on to quote Dewey’s disciple, Sidney Hook, as saying: “By taking over the word ‘God’ as the religious humanists do, the waters of thought, feeling, and faith are muddied, the issues blurred, the ‘word’

itself becomes the object of interest and not what it signifies."¹² Nor, as Mackie and others have argued, do we gain anything when we append the label *God* to an ideal imagined in the natural world.

Alan Ryan suggests that Dewey, in employing the language of God, may have been reacting to Bertrand Russell's hostility to Christianity.¹³ But if so, the suggestion is not supported by Dewey's objections to militant atheism. Dewey criticizes militant atheism for its concentration on "man in isolation" and its "lack of natural piety."¹⁴ This criticism cannot be fairly directed at Russell who was deeply concerned about social issues throughout his life and who respectfully declined to join a humanist society because he was unwilling to depose God and to put humans at the center of the universe. It is true that Russell spoke scathingly about all religions, especially Christianity, but Dewey makes no attempt to defend religion. He wants to emancipate the religious, and many would describe Russell's views as doing exactly that. Certainly it cannot be said of Russell that he gave no positive direction to the human mind. Thus it is doubtful that Dewey wrote simply out of exasperation with Russell. More likely, Dewey was reacting to the dangerous rise of communism in a world afflicted by deep economic problems.

Possibly the greatest disappointment for many of us in reading *A Common Faith* is that Dewey says nothing about a major reason that religion was rejected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rejection centered on doubts about the morality or goodness of God and religion. Many of the epistemological objections raised against various features of the supernatural have been shared by thinkers both within and outside institutional religion. Theologians have vigorously challenged beliefs held thoughtlessly by droves of ordinary believers. One can disbelieve many of the doctrines taught by religious institutions and still retain affiliation. If, however, people come to believe that the church and God lack goodness they are unlikely to continue their association, and they may become openly critical. Dewey does mention the futility of "ingenious apologetics" in the effort to overcome the problems of theodicy,¹⁵ but he says nothing about powerful writings that accused God and religion of actual harm, even evil, and there were many such writings in Dewey's time.¹⁶

Objections to the claim of God's goodness have taken several forms, and Dewey must have been aware of them. First, there is the appalling suffering evident in the natural world. What sort of God would deliberately create a world in which its creatures have to eat one another to stay alive? Russell's answer was that such a God must be a fiend or, at least, capable of fiendish purposes and acts.¹⁷ Theologians have tried to acquit God of this charge by suggesting that the world was not this way originally, but even C. S. Lewis had to admit that—since we now know that animal life preceded human life by many centuries—the Fall of Man could not be blamed for animal suffering.¹⁸ And Descartes's contention that animals are mere insensate machines was long ago disproved. Darwin himself was appalled by the harshness of natural selection but, although he gave up on Christianity, he was reluctant to call himself an atheist and preferred Huxley's word, *agnostic*. Indeed, Dewey might

have been consciously or unconsciously following Darwin when he worried about “aggressive atheism.” In a letter to Edward Aveling, Darwin said that the atheistic portions of Aveling’s book took his (Darwin’s) agnostic views “to a greater length than seems to me safe.”¹⁹ Darwin held back from “aggressive atheism” in part out of sensitivity for his wife’s views.

A second moral reason for rejecting religion is the character of God as depicted in sacred texts. Today’s atheist writers are more outspoken on this than those of Dewey’s time.²⁰ Richard Dawkins, for example, writes: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction.”²¹ And although God does not directly and deliberately inflict horrible punishments in the New Testament, it is vividly predicted that he will do so. (See Elizabeth Anderson for several pages pointing readers to biblical passages documenting God’s tendency to cruel vengeance in both Old and New Testaments.²²) Jack Miles, in a beautiful, carefully documented biography of God, shows a God torn between his two personalities—loving father and egotistical wielder of power.²³ To many careful readers of the Bible, claims for God’s goodness are falsified again and again. I’ll return to this topic toward the end of this paper in a brief discussion of education.

A third moral consideration in the rejection of theism points not to God as a person or character but to the beliefs engendered by religion. In the Western world, the objections are directed mainly at Christianity. Chief among them is the belief in hell. Darwin condemned it as both cruel and irrational: “I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother, and almost all my best friends, will be ever-lastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.”²⁴

As early as 1782, a Boston minister, Charles Chauncy, denounced the doctrine of hell and advocated belief in universal salvation,²⁵ and Russell found belief in hell to be a serious flaw in the character of Jesus.²⁶ An increase in humanitarianism in the last half of the nineteenth century brought with it further challenges to the goodness of God and to beliefs such as the Atonement and Original Sin. But the challenge to traditional beliefs arose among theologians as well as lay persons. In the former, such challenges led to changed emphases and new interpretations but rarely to the abandonment of religious affiliation; in the latter, they often did so.

A question arises even today how important belief is to most Christians. Congregations regularly and easily say in unison, “I believe . . .” but do they really believe what they are reciting? In the United States, it is widely held (and probably true) that an atheist or agnostic could not be elected president. Apparently, there is something reassuring in a profession of belief. Early in the twentieth century, Emma Goldman wrote, “It is characteristic of theistic ‘tolerance’ that no one really cares what people believe in, just so they believe or pretend to believe.”²⁷ Daniel Dennett devotes an entire chapter to the topic “Belief in Belief,” and at the end of it, he writes, “*We still* have not seriously addressed the question of whether religions—some religions, one religion, any religion—are social phenomena that do more good than harm.”²⁸

That brings us to the fourth moral reason for abandoning religion—the conviction that religion has, historically, done more harm than good. Beliefs, truly held or used as propaganda, have furnished excuses for wars, pogroms, and persecution. Even when a belief has been set aside or become inactive, it often lies dormant, just awaiting revival. In a recent conversation with a devout colleague, I mentioned the humanist aversion to the concept of hell. “Oh,” he said, “we don’t talk about that any more.” I didn’t press it, but we should note that the concept has not been definitively rejected. Hell and many other ideas no longer emphasized remain in sacred texts. They lie there, subject to revival by extremists.

Charles Kimball advises us to consider that the harm done in the name of religion is usually caused by misinterpretation or distortion of original texts and teachings.²⁹ To avoid this turn to evil, he counsels, we should return to original teachings. This is questionable. So long as harmful concepts—hell, original sin, the subordination of women, the condemnation of homosexuality—remain in the body of religious teaching, they are instruments of potential violence. Most of these harmful doctrines are present from the start. Recently, *The New York Times Magazine* published a feature story on a foul-mouthed, macho pastor in Seattle.³⁰ The man has attracted more than 7000 visitors to seven campuses each Sunday, many of them hyper-masculine types who like his view of Christ as a fighting he-man. He preaches a form of Calvinism, hellfire, and the doctrine that wives should submit to their husbands, and he finds the passages he needs in the Bible itself.

Dewey could have said more along these lines. He comments astutely on how supernaturalism impedes social progress: “The objection to supernaturalism is that it stands in the way of an effective realization of the sweep and depth of the implications of natural human relations. It stands in the way of using the means that are in our power to make radical changes in these relations.”³¹

But the supernaturalism of religion stands in its own way, too, by looking constantly backward instead of forward. Even when it looks forward, it uses past revelation to predict a pre-ordained future. Science often finds it difficult to free itself from traditional paradigms, but it eventually does so and, when a new paradigm emerges, scientists do not waste time trying to justify or enthrone concepts shown to be plain wrong. In contrast, theologians have been occupied for centuries in trying to remove contradictions in sacred texts, in endless interpretation and re-interpretation. Instead of seeking discovery and new applications, they seem devoted to maintaining eternal truths that require renewed commitment, not verification. When a scientific program becomes bogged down in defending its basic concepts, plugging holes in its predictions, and explaining away refuting evidence, we call it a degenerating paradigm. That, it seems to me, is a greater problem for religion than its devotion to the supernatural, although the problems are, of course, related.

Dewey spoke more clearly on this problem in *The Quest for Certainty*. There, he wrote:

An idealism of action that is devoted to creation of a future, instead of to staking itself upon propositions about the past, is invincible. The claims

of the beautiful to be admired and cherished do not depend upon ability to demonstrate statements about the past history of art. The demand of righteousness for reverence does not depend upon ability to prove the existence of an antecedent Being who is righteous.³²

Dewey said little, however, about the enormous power that has accumulated through centuries of theological writing. Backward-looking volumes have fed on themselves and created something close to invincibility. Studies on and about religion have pervaded our cultures and continue to affect everyday lives. More than a few atheists have become professors of religion because the study is so fascinating.

Richard Dawkins, opposed to conventional religious education, nevertheless recommends biblical literacy for all students on the grounds that they cannot understand their culture and its literature without some knowledge of biblical stories and vocabulary.³³ I think he is right on this, but the reading of biblical stories should be accompanied by some critical discussion. This is a difficult task and will require intellectually well-prepared and open-minded teachers.³⁴ A text such as *The Bible and its Influence* is rich in stories, literary connections, art, and music, but it soft-pedals much of the cruelty and immorality in the actual biblical writings.³⁵ It does suggest some direct reading of Bible passages in its marginal “Look It Up” columns, but it does not mention the sort of questions that might arise from direct reading of troublesome passages. In doing that reading, students might well raise questions as to why a good God would do some of the things recorded. Why, for example, would God, in helping the Israelites, kill all Egyptian firstborns? What would we say of a human being who behaved this way?

Dennett, too, recommends that world religions and their histories—positive and negative—“be part of the mandated curriculum for both public schools and home-schooling.”³⁶ Possibly there is nothing more likely to get students thinking about the oddity of their own beliefs than to study the “silly things” others believe. This well known effect of studying other religions may be a reason that the recommendation is still widely resisted.

Many of today’s atheists are not lacking in “natural piety”; Dewey’s reservations on that score can be set aside. Their views fit well into the natural piety embraced by Darwin, Spinoza, and Einstein. Sam Harris, for example, writes:

Man is manifestly *not* the measure of all things. This universe is shot through with mystery. The very fact of its being, and of our own, is a mystery absolute, and the only miracle worthy of the name. . . . No myths need be embraced for us to commune with the profundity of our circumstance. No personal God need be worshiped for us to live in awe at the beauty and immensity of creation.³⁷

The militant or aggressive tone detected by Dewey is, however, still present and perhaps even more shrill. Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens all heap scorn on believers and the God depicted in the Bible and the Koran.³⁸ Thus, the question remains

for us how to get people to think, reflect, and analyze without insulting them or the traditions they treasure. One of the best examples we have today comes from E. O. Wilson. In his lovely book, *The Creation*, written as a letter to a southern Baptist pastor, Wilson explicitly recognizes the deep differences between the pastor's beliefs and his own as a secular humanist: "For you, the glory of an unseen divinity; for me, the glory of the universe revealed at last. For you, the belief in God made flesh to save mankind; for me, the belief in Promethean fire seized to set men free. You have found your final truth; I am still searching. I may be wrong, you may be wrong. We may both be partly right."³⁹

Wilson then proceeds on a project of which Dewey would surely approve. He invites the pastor to join forces with him in "saving the creation." Here is a powerful ideal both can share, and it provides a task that calls for both a unification of values and a commitment to the application of cooperative minds. Notice that it does not necessarily emancipate the "religious" from religion. Rather, it appeals to an attitude we might call religious wherever it is dedicated to the preservation of the earth and the moral goodness of humanity.

Notes

1. LW 9: 3.
2. Ibid.
3. Smith, *Soul Searching*.
4. LW 9: 7.
5. Ibid.
6. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*.
7. Stark, *Discovering God*.
8. Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 3.
9. LW 9: 23.
10. LW 9: 34.
11. Gardner, *The Whys*, 177.
12. Qtd. in Gardner, *The Whys*, 178.
13. See Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide*.
14. LW 9: 36.
15. LW 9: 31.
16. See Jacoby, *Freethinkers*.
17. Jack Miles discusses Russell's contention that such a God must be a fiend. See *God: A Biography*.
18. See Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.
19. Qtd. in Browne, *Charles Darwin*, 484.
20. See Noddings, "The New Outspoken Atheism and Education."
21. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31.
22. Anderson, "If God is Dead, is Everything Permitted?"
23. See Miles, *God: A Biography*.
24. Qtd. in Browne, *Charles Darwin*, 432.
25. See Turner, *Without God, Without Creed*.
26. Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*.
27. Goldman, "The Philosophy of Atheism."

28. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 246.
29. Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*.
30. Greenfield, "Who Would Jesus Smack Down?"
31. LW 9: 53.
32. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*.
33. See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.
34. See my discussion in *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*.
35. Schippe and Stetson, *The Bible and its Influence*.
36. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 327.
37. Harris, *The End of Faith*, 227.
38. Hitchens, *God is not Great*.
39. Wilson, *The Creation*, 4.

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