

Common Ground With *A Common Faith*: Dewey's Idea of the "Religious"

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Abstract

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey rejects organized religion and belief in the supernatural, instead arguing for an authentically "religious" attitude which this interpretive essay analyzes in terms of four propositions: 1) Knowledge is unified. 2) Knowledge is democratic. 3) The pursuit of moral ideals requires moral faith. 4) The authority for moral ideals is experience as explored via inquiry. The author responds from the perspective of his own religious faith and outlines conceptual relationships with modern spirituality in education writers. The common ground is that the "religious" must be seen as a significant way of being and becoming in education.

American philosopher John Dewey (1897), articulating his beliefs about education in "My Pedagogic Creed," concludes with these words:

I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life.

I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.

I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God. (p. 95)

Given that Dewey moved steadily away from organized religion during his life, what does he mean by this rather dramatic closing statement? Who is the "true God"? What is the "true kingdom of God"? And what does it mean for a teacher to be a "prophet"?

The answers to these questions are found in his work, *A Common Faith* (1934). Though this book has been criticized, mostly in passing, its ideas and arguments have only rarely been analyzed. Scholars tend to summarize *A Common Faith* and Dewey's thoughts on religion briefly on their way elsewhere. Only a handful of articles in the past fifteen years or so have expended significant effort on *A Common Faith* (including Noddings, 2009), and I would argue that none of them have made explicating the specifics of Dewey's positions and arguments a top priority. One of the intended contributions of this essay is thus a more substantial exploration of the details of Dewey's thinking in this area.

In this slim volume, Dewey (1934) works to set up a middle way through what he sees as an oppositional gulf between traditional organized religion and modern advances in science (p. 28). This middle way he calls "religious"—some today might call it "spiritual." The religious is characterized by a rejection of creeds, doctrines, rituals, and other elements of organized religion. Instead, an authentically religious attitude or orientation is existential and humanist. Moral faith rests not upon a divine Supreme Being or divinely revealed truths, but upon the dynamic potential of inquiry to discover knowledge and pursue ideals, that is, to act on experiential knowledge in order to improve life. In education, such issues are marginalized within current educational policy discussions, which emphasize more quantifiable matters such as achievement gaps in standardized test scores and the value of college degrees as socioeconomic credentials. Even so, many view a generalized spirituality—which I will describe as akin though not identical to Dewey's idea of the religious—as a neglected but essential element of learning in schools. This can be seen, for example, in a recent special theme section (six articles in all) in *Teachers College Record* entitled "Present to Possibility: The Classroom as a Spiritual Space" (Miller, 2009), as well as in the work of several writers mentioned later in this essay.

With regard to terminology, it must be noted that Dewey (1934) himself used the word "spiritual" only a handful of times in *A Common Faith*, never prominently. In context, his uses of spiritual suggest a variety of nontechnical meanings and associations, including "immaterial," "moral," "aesthetic," and "sacred." Nonetheless, as will be seen, current use of the term spiritual, especially by some spirituality in education writers, interrelates well with key elements of Dewey's idea of the religious as discussed here. So while this essay does not assume religious and spiritual mean the same, a strong conceptual connection is outlined between Dewey's idea of the religious and modern descriptions of the spiritual in education.

There is discontinuity as well, however. With regard to both spirituality and religion in education, it is worth returning to Dewey's ideas and arguments because he identifies key issues and takes a stand on them, even or especially if they are controversial. Current spirituality in education writers, on the other hand, tend to avoid such bold encounters, preferring a more ecumenical or inclusive approach. For example, as will be seen, Dewey rejects belief in the supernatural, and his rejection is accompanied by reasons, illustrations, analysis, and consequences.

Whether or not a supernatural world exists is obviously a significant issue, yet one rarely finds modern spirituality in education writers taking a definite position regarding it, much less discussing such a position in depth. From my perspective, one of the effects of such opacity is to mask diversity and blunt the meaningfulness of potential dialogue.

The central purpose of this essay, then, is to analyze Dewey's understudied *A Common Faith* and from it to take the measure of his arguments regarding the religious. The importance of doing so is found primarily but not only in the concepts themselves. In addition, several critical responses to Dewey are made from my own perspective as a religious (specifically, evangelical Christian) believer, and these movements toward dialogue also hold value. Finally, both the exposition and the critiques are significant in light of the relative absence of Deweyan religious or spiritual priorities from current mainstream discourse on education. Conceptual relationships are outlined between Dewey's description of the religious and current descriptions of spirituality in education in order to highlight the ongoing significance of these issues. The foundational argument is that Dewey is working with important insights, chief among them the belief that human beings are moral and spiritual beings, and consequently, that learning and education are best pursued in ways that seek to understand and respect these qualities and dimensions of human nature and experience. Given that the religious or spiritual currently hovers at the fringes of education policy and practice (as opposed to being widely understood or respected), this essay is a timely call to reinvigorate education with these important and meaningful themes.

Brief Background

Dewey scholars have chronicled a shift in his thinking about religion, namely, Christianity—as the religion with which he was by far most familiar—during the late 1880s and early 1890s (Wirth, 1965; Rockefeller, 1991). While at the University of Michigan, he joined a liberal Congregationalist church (the denomination in which he had been raised), worked actively with the Student Christian Association, and taught Bible classes at his church. During this time, he attempted to keep his ideas within the fold of organized religion, for example, by interpreting Hegel as parallel in meaning with Christian theology. Over the years, however, Dewey moved away from traditional Christianity toward a more secular humanistic viewpoint—variously referred to as scientific humanism (Wirth, 1965), democratic humanism, religious humanism (Rockefeller, 1991), pragmatic humanism, or existential humanism (Noddings, 1993).

Even as he gradually abandoned organized religion, however, Dewey did not reject the idea of the religious but instead worked to extract such an idea from what he saw as the outdated burdens of ritual and dogma: “While he relinquished an orthodox religious orientation, he [continued] to insist on the prime importance of the spiritual and religious quality of experience” (Wirth, 1965, p. 267). As he says

in a letter, one of his main purposes in writing *A Common Faith* was to reach out to people who felt attracted to the spirit of religion but not to organized religion itself: "My book was written for the people who feel inarticulately that they have the essence of the religious with them and yet are repelled by the religions" (quoted in Webster, 2009, p. 622).

Dewey's Rejection of Belief in the Supernatural

Dewey's (1934) first and perhaps most significant move in defining religious is a rejection of the supernatural. He aims to keep religious values while getting rid of the untenable baggage of supernatural beliefs. To him, as to many others before and since, it is simply obvious that belief in the supernatural is not credible in the modern world (p. 30). It is in fact an "encumbrance" and the "genuinely religious" needs "purification" or "emancipation" (p. 8) from it in order to grow and develop in ways benefiting humanity (p. 2). He appears to argue for the discarding of this belief in two ways: First, because religions around the world vary considerably in their conception of a supernatural realm and people's relationship to it, he concludes that the "supernatural" must be a socially generated concept rather than actual fact (pp. 3-6). If the supernatural were real, he reasons, there would be more similarities and cohesiveness in how religions conceive and describe it. The bottom line is that "there is no such thing as religion in the singular. There is only a multitude of religions" (p. 7).

Second, Dewey (1934) suggests that belief in the supernatural, as a socially generated concept, stems from past human inability to understand or explain natural phenomena (pp. 13, 56-57). Given the modern discoveries of science and the tools of scientific inquiry, humanity no longer needs recourse to the supernatural for explanatory purposes. This is not to say that everything has been explained or that humanity will ever reach a state in which everything has been explained, but that we now know enough to put our faith in the ability of scientific inquiry to bring about a growing comprehension of presently mysterious phenomena.

Dewey remained committed to these views in later years (Rockefeller, 1991). In his contribution to a symposium on "Religion and the Intellectuals" in *The Partisan Review* (Dewey, 1950), for example, he repeats several points from *A Common Faith*, prominently including rejection of belief in the supernatural. Concluding his essay, he asks: "Assuming that in the past religions nourished certain vital human values, can these values now be maintained without a widespread belief in the supernatural?" (p. 394). Answering in the affirmative, he argues that insofar as religious beliefs in the supernatural have been "the source of violent conflict, and destructive of basic human values," such beliefs must now be abandoned if more humanistic "religious values" are to grow and flourish: "Freedom from it [belief in the supernatural] will provide an opportunity for a religious experience to develop that is deeply and pervasively human and humane" (p. 394).

How persuasive are Dewey's arguments for rejecting belief in the supernatural? We perhaps find a hint in Noddings's (2009) description of *A Common Faith*

as “arguably one of John Dewey’s least effective books” (p. 12). In Dewey’s first argument above, it is curious that he takes diversity to be evidence against a belief, since elsewhere in his philosophy he finds multiplicity and diversity to be in general positive and productive (Meinhart, 2002). Furthermore, although he contends that inconsistencies and contradictions are all that world religions have in common—“the differences among them are so great and so shocking that any common element that can be extracted is meaningless” (Dewey, 1934, p. 8)—he nonetheless goes on to distill the meaning of religious out of the domain of organized religion. Noting this apparent contradiction, Noddings (2009) points out that sociologists and other scholars generally reject this claim and feel quite confident in identifying certain elements of religion in general, including but not limited to belief in the supernatural (pp. 12-13).

With reference to Dewey’s second argument against belief in the supernatural, his historical account of such beliefs as necessitated by ignorance concerning natural phenomena seems disingenuous. It implies that the sole or primary social function of organized religion is to explain the presently unexplainable. This is by no means a given, not even from an anthropological or sociological standpoint, much less from the insider perspectives of religions themselves. Beyond the idea of religion’s potential explanatory power, religious believers have provided and continue to provide a variety of grounds for belief in a supernatural world (for contemporary examples, see Craig, 2008). Furthermore, there is nothing about scientific understanding that would necessarily displace the idea of the supernatural. That is, unless belief in the supernatural consists only in belief in certain explanations of natural phenomena, which it does not, or unless the “natural” is posited to encompass all of existence, which begs the question, no amount of scientific knowledge or explanation would logically require disbelief in a supernatural realm. So it appears that Dewey, in saying that new knowledge has superseded old beliefs and thus that belief in the supernatural is no longer credible, is working from *prima facie* assumptions rather than crafting arguments as such. In addition, it must be noted that his rejection of the supernatural was neither original nor, from an academic perspective, extreme. Even so, Dewey’s identification of this issue as essential in his extraction of the religious from religion is important, as it remains to the present day at the heart of many religious-secular worldview differences.

Dewey’s Idea of the “Religious”

From this starting point, then, what does Dewey mean by “religious”? Once the religious has been freed from supernatural beliefs and their stultifying baggage, what remains? More than a decade before writing *A Common Faith*, Dewey (1922) had, in *Human Nature and Conduct*, already begun to outline his later answers to these questions:

Religion has lost itself in cults, dogmas and myths. Consequently the office of religion as sense of community and one’s place in it has been lost . . .

Religion as a sense of the whole is the most individualized of all things, the most spontaneous, undefinable and varied. For individuality signifies unique connections in the whole. Yet it has been perverted into something uniform and immutable. It has been formulated into fixed and defined beliefs expressed in required acts and ceremonies. Instead of marking the freedom and peace of the individual as a member of an infinite whole, it has been petrified into a slavery of thought and sentiment. (pp. 330-331)

In other words, organized religion as a social institution is missing the point and has become bogged down in creeds, doctrines, and scriptures. Rather than "cults, dogmas and myths . . . acts and ceremonies," the genuinely "religious" is about a "sense of the whole" and especially "the individual as a member of an infinite whole." That is to say, the real point of religion is or should be the relationships among people (both as individuals and in community) and the universe, including the proper ends of such relationships.

This emphasis emerges more clearly and in more developed form in *A Common Faith*. Dewey (1934) here conceives of the religious as signifying and embodying harmony and wholeness within and among individuals, communities, and the universe in general (pp. 18-20). It is both an inner and an outer reality: "The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe" (p. 19). The universe is in turn "the embodiment for sense and thought of that encompassing scope of existence the intellect cannot grasp. It is the matrix within which our ideal aspirations are born and bred. It is the source of the values that the moral imagination projects as directive criteria and as shaping purposes" (p. 85). From this vantage point, authentic religious faith is understood to be morally purposeful, nothing less than "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" (p. 33). To paraphrase, 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. "Such a faith," concludes Dewey, "has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind" (p. 87).

Dewey's conception of the religious is certainly "not easy to understand" (Noddings, 2009, p. 13). Perhaps this is why little extended analysis of it has been done. Unpacking Dewey's idea of the religious in this section of the essay, I suggest that it can be portrayed as having four main characteristics or requiring agreement with four main propositions. These four propositions underlie his concept of the religious and constitute an interpretive analysis of the main ideas in *A Common Faith* (Dewey, 1934), occasionally enhanced by references to other of Dewey's works. First, *knowledge is unified*. Ideally, knowledge can be and should be one

body. Forms of knowledge should not be separated from one another (pp. 34-35). The scientific and the religious should not be regarded as divided—as, to take but one recent example, within Stephen Jay Gould’s widely known framework of “non-overlapping magisteria” (NOMA) (Ecklund, 2011)—but rather as joined or overlapping areas for inquiry and understanding. For example, some religious mystical experiences are susceptible to scientific (that is, physical and material) explanations (pp. 35-38). The wholeness and oneness of all forms of knowledge are to be apprehended through experience. From Dewey’s perspective, the authentically religious holds the potential to unify the natural, scientific, moral, and social dimensions of experience. Once properly understood, “religion would then be found to have its natural place in every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization. All that is significant in human experience falls within this frame” (p. 57).

Second, *knowledge is democratic*. That is, knowledge is public and inquiry is a public process (pp. 39-41). Anyone may call any truth into question at any time and seek to verify or disprove it. The “supreme loyalty” is not to a fixed body of immutable truths but rather to “the method by which truth is obtained” (p. 39)—that is, the method of scientific (i.e., rational or intelligent) inquiry. By contrast, Dewey describes organized religion as resting on “limited and private” knowledge (divine revelation, mystical experiences) and maintaining power by suppressing democracy and inquiry and promoting fear (divine punishment) (p. 39). A democratic ideal is subverted by the circular nature of traditional religion’s reasoning (pp. 40-41): religious experiences must yield results which fit into previously known religious truths (creeds, doctrines, scriptures). If they do not, they are rejected as not genuinely religious. So such experiences are either confirmatory or thrown out as evidence, meaning that they are not testable or verifiable and that the meanings of such experiences are foreordained and fixed. From Dewey’s perspective, this is simply wrong. Religious experience must abandon fossilized creedal commitments and become democratically open to processes of inquiry (like all forms of experience). Only via open inquiry can the deeper, more vital meanings of truly religious experience be envisioned and discovered.

Tröhler (2000) sees Dewey’s idea of the religious as outlined in *A Common Faith* as key to how he viewed democracy working: It addresses key issues of moral values and individual-community relationships without which democratic societies could not cohere or move in morally purposeful directions. So 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.

Third, *the pursuit of moral ideals requires moral faith*. “Moral faith” is a pragmatic trust in inquiry, process, and experience, as opposed to the “intellectual assent” to creeds and customs required by traditional religions (pp. 21-23). As Dewey

explains: "Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation" (p. 26). Such faith is also a commitment to moral principles and ideals that promote the betterment of self and society. It can and should be sacrificial in the sense formerly reserved for organized religion: "Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality" (p. 27). In fact, if only people were "actuated throughout the length and breadth of human relations with the faith and ardor that have at times marked historic religions the consequences [i.e., social benefits] would be incalculable" (pp. 80-81). One implication of this is that the religious is not a permanent possession but an evolving process or journey. In organized religion, according to Dewey (1930), "'morals' were conceived as a code of laws, the same everywhere and at all times. The good life was one lived in fixed adherence to fixed principles. In contrast with all such beliefs, the outstanding fact in all branches of natural science is that to exist is to be in process, in change" (p. 271). Webster (2009) aptly summarizes: "Religion was not to be regarded as something a person could *have* but rather as something that a person *becomes* as a way of living . . . Religious faith is therefore significant not because it is embedded in knowledge statements which are 'true' but rather they are personally important end-purposes which determine our conduct and way-of-being in *all* of our experiences" (p. 624).

Fourth, as previously implied, *the authority for moral ideals is experience as explored via inquiry*. As elsewhere in Dewey, the term "experience" in *A Common Faith* (1934) is a shorthand reference for the various dimensions of interactions among people and their contexts (e.g., pp. 3, 9, 19). As he explains in *Democracy and Education* (1916), experience "primarily consists of the *active* relations subsisting between a human being and his natural and social surroundings" (pp. 319-320). Experience is what gives meaning to existence: "In just the degree in which connections are established between what happens to a person and what he does in response, and between what he does to his environment and what it does in response to him, his acts and the things about him acquire meaning" (p. 320). This meaning is authoritative in the sense that experience can provide worthy and compelling purposes and ideals by which to live. It does so, however, in a way that is more democratic and open-ended than the authority wielded by organized religion. As Dewey elaborates in "What I Believe" (1930): "Adherence to any body of doctrines and dogmas based upon a specific authority signifies distrust in the power of experience to provide, in its own ongoing movement, the needed principles of belief and action. Faith in its newer sense signifies that experience itself is the sole ultimate authority" (p. 267).

For Dewey, the reason for the qualitative differences between the authority of organized religion and the authority of experience is the process of scientific inquiry. Such inquiry is the ground of truth. The true loyalty of a religious orientation is thus to a method of inquiry rather than to a set body of revealed truths (Dewey, 1934, p. 39). Dewey explains: "new methods of inquiry and reflection have become

for the educated man today the final arbiter of all questions of fact, existence, and intellectual assent . . . There is but one sure road of access to truth—the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection” (pp. 31-32). Dewey is confident that this road leads to moral values that do not need the support of organized religion: “The validity of justice, affection, and that intellectual correspondence of our ideas with realities that we call truth, is so assured in its hold upon humanity that it is unnecessary for the religious attitude to encumber itself with the apparatus of dogma and doctrine” (p. 44). The progress of humanity would, in fact, be better served by severing altogether the connection between moral ideals and organized religion: “The opposition between religious values as I conceive them and religions is not to be bridged. Just because the release of these values is so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religions must be dissolved” (p. 28; see also pp. 77-81). In short, humanity no longer needs faith in gods or God to make sense of experience or to envision and pursue knowledge and moral ideals. Dewey (1930) thus predicts that “the future of religion is connected with the possibility of developing a faith in the possibilities of human experience and human relationships that will create a vital sense of the solidarity of human interests and inspire action to make that sense a reality” (pp. 273-274; see also Rockefeller, 1991, pp. 489-490).

In summary, Dewey believed that the authentically religious consists in a belief in the wholeness or oneness of knowledge; a commitment to democracy rather than hierarchy or authority with regard to determining what counts as knowledge and truth; a moral faith that is governed not by the socially generated, outdated dogma and rituals of traditional religion, but rather by a process-driven sense of the harmony and mystery of the universe and our place in it, and an engagement with experience and inquiry as the surest foundations for rational thinking and social progress toward moral ideals.

What Liberating the “Religious” from “Religion” Changes

While rejecting the supernatural and doctrinal content of the vocabulary of organized religion, Dewey does attempt to co-opt or reconstruct this vocabulary in *A Common Faith* (1934) and elsewhere. “God” is suggested to mean not a personal, supernatural, Supreme Being but “the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity” (p. 42). In the terms of my previous paraphrase, God is a shorthand way of naming the higher purposes which experience and inquiry reveal—by virtue of their unifying and morally admirable effects—as worthy of our allegiance. Put another way, God is “a relationship between the actual and the ideal . . . the ongoing creation of human effort as ideals are acted on in pursuit of desires” (Meinhart, 2002, p. 346). Dewey (1934) persistently reminds us that ideals require action: “there are forces in nature and society that generate and support the ideals. They are further unified by

the action that gives them coherence and solidity. It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God'" (p. 51). Thus, God is created in our image rather than we in his. I agree with McCarthy's (2002) analysis on this point: "The traditional 'God' concept, the supreme and supernaturally powerful Being, is eliminated, entirely, from Dewey's position. What we have, instead, under the name 'God,' turns out to be simply human beings, working intelligently and cooperatively in the context of natural conditions, to bring cherished ideals into actuality" (p. 354). Historically speaking, posits Dewey, we have projected onto a supernatural being all the best qualities in human nature and experience in order to give them weight and authority. The actual sources of these moral ideals, however, are not divine but thoroughly human. The fact is that (Dewey, 1934):

all significant ends and all securities for stability and peace have grown up in the matrix of human relations, and that the values given a supernatural locus are in fact products of an idealizing imagination that has laid hold of natural goods . . . [G]oods actually experienced in the concrete relations of family, neighborhood, citizenship, pursuit of art and science, are what men actually depend upon for guidance and support, and that their reference to a supernatural and other-worldly locus has obscured their real nature and has weakened their force. (pp. 70-71)

According to Dewey, the time has now come when such projections are no longer useful and ethics that are truly religious can and should be liberated from organized religion (pp. 72-74).

Other traditional religious vocabulary receives similar treatment. "Revelation" is not supernatural or scriptural but instead signifies the ongoing process of human inquiry. The revelation of truth is thus necessarily ongoing, unfinished, and partial (Wirth, 1965, p. 266). "Freedom in Christ" is not a consequence of divine redemption but instead means freedom to pursue such inquiry (Webster, 2009, p. 625). The "kingdom of God" highlighted at the conclusion of Dewey's "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897, p. 95) is not about divine sovereignty or power but instead signifies the moral ideals motivating a social struggle for human betterment (Webster, 2009, p. 627). One of Dewey's motivations for co-opting or reconstructing religious terms in this way seems to have been to reach out via familiar language to the religious-but-wary-of-religion group he perceived as growing more numerous among the American population (Webster, 2009). He does not actually argue in favor of use of the term "God," for example, but only outlines the conception he does in order to assist those who might find it helpful or less threatening to retain the word: "Use of the words 'God' or 'divine' to convey the union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance" (Dewey, 1934, p. 53).

Dewey's co-opted or reconstructed use of the language of organized religion has spurred controversy. Rosenow (1997), for example, accuses Dewey of hijacking religious language or of forcibly hammering round pegs of secular meaning into square holes of religious terminology. McCarthy (2002) calls Dewey's strat-

egy “a dangerous process of attempting to put the new wine of scientific thought into the old bottles of religious rhetoric” (p. 353). Webster (2009) defends Dewey as not intending to camouflage or deceive, but rather as attempting to convey honest understandings of the deeper meanings of religious terms (p. 618). By extracting genuinely religious content from the tradition-encrusted terminology of organized religion, Dewey aimed to challenge the monopoly he perceived as being claimed by traditional religions upon religious experience (p. 622).

Once a living religious ideal has been extracted from the dead weight of organized religion, it will be free, Dewey (1934) argues, to grow and develop and improve human life. As he describes matters, within the framework of traditional religion, believers rely on God to act instead of acting themselves, and wait for a future heaven instead of embracing and working to improve present life and experience: “Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing” (p. 46; see also Dewey, 1930, p. 268). If God and heaven were removed from consideration, there would be enough “justice, kindness, and order so that if it were mobilized for action, not expecting abrupt and complete transformation to occur, the disorder, cruelty, and oppression that exist would be reduced” (p. 47). That is, if humanity stopped blaming sin, relying on God, and looking forward to heaven, we would struggle more passionately and effectively to build a better world in the here and now (pp. 76-78). We would not settle for less in the present life or focus on the hope of a better life after death, but instead we would be fully committed in thought, word, and deed to the pursuit or accomplishment of moral ideals in our daily lives and relationships. Dewey’s argument has thus circled back to the original rejection of belief in the supernatural. According to Dewey: “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” (p. 80). In other words, traditional religion’s belief in a supernatural world blocks the road to moral progress and human betterment in this world.

Responding to Dewey’s Portrayal of Christianity

How fair or accurate is Dewey’s portrayal of organized religion, especially, given his personal and cultural background, Christianity? This question is significant in part because of Dewey’s prominence in philosophy and education—when a thinker this consequential argues such major points, responses are called for. In addition, evaluating and responding to Dewey’s arguments in *A Common Faith* is important because to do so has implications for ongoing debates about such issues as appropriate religious content (if any) in educational curricula, the role (if any) of religion in the public sphere, and the extent of religious and other freedoms in relation to concepts such as citizenship and democracy (Noddings, 1993, 2008; Nord, 2010).

From my perspective as an evangelical Christian, his descriptions or claims regarding organized religion are too often inaccurate or unsatisfactory. While I do not claim to speak for evangelicals or Christians in general, neither is it true that my comments in this brief critique are idiosyncratic. My disagreements with Dewey's rather monolithic depictions can for the purposes of this essay be discussed under two headings: the Christian believer's orientations toward present social life and toward truth.

First, with regard to the orientation toward present social life, Dewey represents religious believers as putting their hope in a future heaven and being uncommitted to the present. They blame sin for the evils and sufferings of this life and wait for God to do something about it rather than engaging in the present struggle for human betterment. Such pie-in-the-sky charges of escapism are not new and unfortunately there are and have been Christians who match this description. Yet much of the tide of church doctrine and history runs in the opposite direction. It is not simply that there are exceptions to the generalization, but that the generalization itself does not appear valid. One need look no further than one of the opening lines of the Lord's Prayer, with its appeal that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). Admired thinkers and activists from Augustine to William Wilberforce to Martin Luther King, Jr.—not to mention more divisive and controversial figures such as Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson—have, for better or worse, engaged in the social issues of their day on the basis of their Christian faith. Believers, despite Dewey's portrayal, do not in fact tend to treat this present life as an irrelevant preface to heaven. Why is this not the case? A life of genuine faith mandates that believers are never to be satisfied with "intellectual assent" to creeds and doctrines, but rather understand their faith as something to be lived out day by day. Sin is indeed a moral and spiritual factor at work in human experience, yet responses of faith include not only "waiting upon God" to act in the future but also actively struggling for goodness and justice in the here and now. This is not to say that all that is done in the name of religion or faith accomplishes such ideals, nor that Christian believers always agree on specific social issues. The point here is that Dewey's depiction of Christianity and the behavior of Christian believers is often curiously blind to both doctrine and history. The Christian motif of journey or pilgrimage suggests that believers are or should be energetically engaged with present realities. Christian religious faith, like the moral faith described by Dewey, is not passive pie-in-the-sky but vitally involves the present pursuit of moral and spiritual ideals in relationships with others and with the created world.

Second, with regard to the issue of orientation toward truth, Dewey represents religious believers as blindly or passively receiving a fixed body of divinely revealed dogma. As pointed out in the previous paragraph, the receiving of divine revelation is hardly passive. Intellectual assent is insufficient—active agreement of the heart and will are also called for in ways that are intended to transform individuals and communities in both the present and the future. Furthermore,

revelation is not exhaustive, that is, religious believers do not see it as covering all possible knowledge. Reason and inquiry thus have key parts to play in relation to learning and knowledge. While faith and reason might exist in tension or paradox, there is no intention for them to part company. Apologists from the Apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17) to philosopher William Lane Craig (2008) have argued rational grounds for religious belief. In addition, while Christianity does indeed rest on a foundation of authoritative divine revelation, that revelation is not above inquiry or investigation. To take just one example, canonization of Scripture is an area of Christian religious scholarship within which historical, cultural, theological, and textual concerns surrounding how we got our Bible are studied and debated. Within the fold of organized Christianity, there is room for process, experience, interpretation, contextualization, and even doubt—it has been said that doubt is faith with the courage to ask difficult questions. (This is not to say that all Christians are comfortable talking this way.)

In the end, if Dewey argued that the religious must be extracted or liberated from traditional religion, then I am suggesting that the two should be, as it were, put back together. Dewey rests his faith upon inquiry and experience, but inquiry and experience can tell different and perhaps irreconcilable tales, depending on who is doing the telling, how, when, where, why, to whom, and what assumptions and interpretive lenses are brought to bear. For Dewey to argue that inquiry and experience are sufficient in themselves to lead humanity on a journey of moral and social progress is from my perspective at best a leap of faith.

Common Ground: Spirituality in Education

At the beginning of this essay, I framed its central purpose as analyzing *A Common Faith*—thus my efforts to develop a nuanced exposition of Dewey’s idea of the religious. I also indicated that my responses to Dewey’s positions would in some regards be critical, given that I remain committed to the sorts of traditional religious beliefs he rejects. Yet it is my hope that the final emphasis of this essay may be found in the “common ground” of the title. While my critiques might help set an agenda for meaningful discussion and debate, what is vitally important is that despite everything, common ground does exist between Dewey and religious believers. Genuine conversations need common ground.

One major dimension of the common ground is that human beings are moral and spiritual beings, and we ignore these dimensions at our peril, especially in processes of learning and education. Being religious or spiritual is a valid and significant way of being and becoming both in and out of the classroom, and spiritual aspects of experience are sure to be present, whether acknowledged or not, in all learning endeavors. A second key aspect of the common ground is that knowledge is unified. To build walls between sacred and secular or between religious and scientific or even between natural and supernatural—despite their potential usefulness as cognitive categories—is to set up false and misleading dichotomies. One

practical effect seems to me to be that religion and spirituality are often ghettoized or kept out of mainstream educational discussions. In any case, although I, unlike Dewey, do not see experience as able to bear the weight of faith or as possessing moral authority in and of itself, experience does play a key role in revealing and teaching truth not only to Deweyan humanists but to Christian believers as well: as discussed above, religious beliefs are not truly knowable to believers until they are put into practice in daily life.

These areas of agreement also build common ground with theorists of spirituality in education, at least some of whom appear directly or indirectly to follow in the footsteps of Dewey. Qualitative researchers such as those working in the area of children's spirituality, for example, continue the project of describing the religious in humanist and existential terms rather than from the perspective of organized religion. Schoonmaker (2009)—whose article is in the special issue of *Teachers College Record* referenced earlier (Miller, 2009)—writes that "spirituality refers to a way of being that includes the capacity of humans to see beyond ourselves, to become more than we are, to see mystery and wonder in the world around them, and to experience private and collective moments of awe, wonder, and transcendence" (p. 2714). One can see here emphases on the relationships and interactions among individual, society, and natural world; on the role of the imagination in envisioning "inclusive ideal ends" that can make us "more than we are"; and on the quality of moral faith that is committed to process and inquiry above all. To draw out such conceptual connections is not to argue for a linear philosophical inheritance, much less to provide a complete overview of the spirituality in education literature, but rather to continue the exploration of Dewey's (1934) hypothesis that meaningful "religious" faith 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" (p. 33). Or, in my paraphrase, people are religious if they pursue higher purposes which are inherently worthy and compelling enough to unify their identities and govern their actions.

The affinities among Dewey's idea of the religious and current spirituality in education writers can be seen using examples suggested by three of the four propositions discussed in this essay. First, the idea that *knowledge is unified* is part of what undergirds the work of Palmer (1993, 1998). He argues against divisions in knowledge and sees inquiry and morality as joined: "I have come to see that knowledge contains its own morality, that it begins not in a neutrality but in a place of passion within the human soul. Depending on the nature of that passion, our knowledge will follow certain courses and head toward certain ends" (1993, p. 7). He is also concerned with the relationships and interactions among individuals and their communities, especially their professional communities: "By *spiritual* I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching" (1998, p. 5). In authentic teaching and learning, he argues, there is a wholeness of knowledge.

Second, the idea that *knowledge is democratic* is reflected in the writing of Block (2007, 2009), who explicitly agrees with Dewey about the “symbiotic” links among education, teaching, and the moral and spiritual underpinnings of democracy (2007, p. 87). While current educational reforms emphasize standardized testing and individual proficiency, for instance, “it is to the development of individual potential in the context of social responsibility to which the democratic classroom in a democracy must give voice and not to the progress of the individual at the expense of the welfare and care of others” (2007, p. 49). Again: “Dewey believed that it was not knowledge that the schools must seek to develop, but the capacity for wisdom and responsibility. This effort required the acquisition of knowledge [through inquiry]” (2009, p. 53). In Block’s vision as in Dewey’s, then, education and democracy are essentially religious endeavors for the purpose of human betterment.

Third, the idea that *the authority for moral ideals is experience as explored via inquiry* is seen in Brown (2008). She claims that every teacher brings their religion into their lessons—not in the sense of organized religion, but in a more Deweyan sense:

If one understands religion as it functions—as symbols, stories, institutions, ethics, values, and practices that make life meaningful—then any teacher of the humanities, and to a certain extent the social and natural sciences, brings his or her religion into the classroom. Through what teachers choose to include and emphasize and what we choose to exclude and de-emphasize, we display our view of the world and what we value. Further, through how we interact with students and the qualities of our relationships with them, we not only display our view of the world but also create it. (p. x)

In her narrative, it is clear that the “symbols, stories, institutions, ethics, values, and practices that make life meaningful” are not the fixed creeds and burdensome rituals of organized religion, but rather that they represent a transmutation of such religion into existentially meaningful religious values and ideals. Since “how we interact with our students and the qualities of our relationships with them” are a key dimension of this, she recounts Buddhist parables as frames for her explorations of building community in the classroom. These parables and explorations persistently return to themes of process, inquiry, experience, moral faith, and the relationships and interactions among persons, communities, and the universe or natural world. It is no accident that her book flows from a course entitled Buddhism and the Environment.

A notable exception to these affinities or thematic threads is the fact that few current spirituality in education writers directly reject belief in the supernatural, as Dewey did. An exception is Garrison (2011), who identifies himself as a “Deweyan naturalist” and begins defining spirituality in the same way, by rejecting the supernatural: “I do not believe in the supernatural, simply the natural that we do not yet comprehend and perhaps never will.” The writers cited above, however, write out of, respectively, Christian (namely, Quaker or Friends), Jewish, and Buddhist tradi-

tions. There are also, of course, spirituality in education scholars who work from an avowedly secular or religiously agnostic perspective, such as Nash (2002). His approach to spirituality sounds humanist and existential, akin to Dewey's idea of the religious: "Spirituality is the name I give to the never-ending struggle that for each one of us is inescapable: the need to provide satisfying answers to life's most insistent questions about meaning" (p. 20). He agreed with a graduate student who told him: "Your work as an educator is actually a religious vocation because it gives you a sense of transcendence. Your church is the university. Your sacrament is teaching. Your community of saints is made up of your students. And your prayer is when you carry on intense, revitalizing, give-and-take conversations in the classroom" (p. 5). Or, in Dewey's similarly co-opted words: "The teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God."

Dewey's Idea of the "Religious" in Schools

Though Dewey does not discuss teachers or schools at length in *A Common Faith*, education and a Deweyan spirituality have come to be linked and intertwined in part because schools are an obvious social location in which moral and spiritual issues and ideals might be explored and addressed without promoting one organized religion over another (Noddings, 1993, 2008). Webster (2009) explains that Dewey promoted people's "right to exercise their own intelligence in all of their activities through a new kind of faith which looked to experience rather than institutional authorities as the assumed guardians of entry to another realm. This emancipation is to be fostered by teachers through a democratic approach to education" (p. 625). Noddings (2009) frames this goal as "how to get people to think, reflect, and analyze without insulting them or the traditions they treasure" (p. 18). She does not think religious believers must necessarily give up their creeds and rituals to do this—or to put it in the language of *A Common Faith*, she is unconvinced that the religious must be, though it certainly can be, emancipated from organized religion. As an example, Noddings (2008, 2009) suggests that students might be assigned to read *The Creation* (Wilson, 2006), which is written as a letter from the secular humanist author to a Southern Baptist pastor. Though their perceptions and beliefs regarding the natural world are very different, the writer suggests that perhaps they can agree to work together to preserve it.

The point of raising religious or spiritual issues in schools is to promote reflection and inquiry on significant questions: students must get the message that spiritual ideals and values are important, and they must feel free and equipped to make informed choices concerning them. Teachers would obviously play a key role in this process. Little wonder, then, that Dewey (1897) calls teachers to be "the prophet[s] of the true God and the usherer[s] in of the true kingdom of God" (p. 95). So, what is this "true kingdom"? It is an understanding of what is authentic and necessary, and what is unnecessary and even harmful, about institutional religion as compared to genuinely religious values, actions, and ideals. This includes a commitment

not to religious dogma but to the role of experience and inquiry in individual and social life. And what does it mean to be a “prophet” of such a “kingdom”? It is to invite, summon, and exhort others to heed and participate in this understanding. Finally, who or what is the “true God”? It is not a personal Supreme Being who has revealed truths such as heaven, but higher moral and spiritual purposes which are inherently worthy and compelling enough to unify human identities and govern our actions in this present life. This is Dewey’s idea of the religious and part of his vision for human progress.

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