

## Teaching Religion in Public Schools: A Critical Appraisal of Dewey's Ideas on Religion and Education

Walter Feinberg

*The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

### DEWEY ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

Believing that organized religion was largely a divisive force, John Dewey was categorical in his rejection of religious education in the public schools. He expressed his view on religious education early in his career:

Our [public] schools, in bringing together those of different nationalities, languages, traditions, and creeds, in assimilating them together upon the basis of what is common and public in endeavour and achievement, are performing an infinitely significant religious work. They are promoting the social unit out of which in the end genuine religious unit must grow. Shall we interfere with this work? Shall we run the risk of undoing it by introducing into education a subject which can be taught only by segregating pupils? This would be deliberately to adopt a scheme which is predicated upon the maintenance of social divisions in just the matter, religion, which is empty and futile save as it expresses the basic unities of life.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, the public schools had a religious mission. In Dewey's terms it was to create social unity out of the diversity of ethnic and religious groups that comprised the new American.

Dewey's major statement on religion is to be found in his 1934 book *A Common Faith*. Here, Dewey expressed his view that science needs to replace religion as the guide by which people governed their lives. The implication that he drew from this was to reject the supernatural as a way of knowing and put in its place a thoroughgoing naturalism. Nevertheless, while Dewey rejects the supernatural claims of religions, he did not reject the reality of religious experience and in *A Common Faith* Dewey seeks to disconnect the religious from specific religions.

The religious is a quality of experience that, as Dewey puts it: "Is morality touched by emotion[s]...that are supported by ends so inclusive that they unify the self."<sup>2</sup> It is the power of an ideal that exists first in imagination but then in thought and action that provides "perspective into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence" (*CF*, 24). He seeks to promote a faith that is not shielded by claims about the supernatural and that is open to intelligent inquiry. As Manuel Chambrouy nicely puts it, the religious "doesn't require any institutionalized entity, because any daily human attitude can be 'religious' in the way he's defining."<sup>3</sup> This description needs only a modest modification. The religious does not require any institutionalized entity *other than the public schools*.

Throughout *A Common Faith* Dewey writes of the religious quality of experience in conflict with religions, and sets his task to freeing the former from the latter. He speaks in dramatic terms about the need to "emancipate" or "to liberate" the religious through the "surrender" of religion.

Dewey rejects the view that God exists *as a being* and proposes instead that "God" serve as an aspirational term, an ideal that communicated an imagined,

projected harmony that we should strive to achieve. In this sense he is questioning God as an active, transcendent Being, that is, God as understood by most Christians, Jews, and Muslims. He believed that science needed to replace religion as the guide by which people governed their lives.

The marvelous advance in natural science has come about because of the breaking down of the wall existing in ancient and medieval institutions between “higher” things of a purely intellectual and “spiritual” nature, and the lower things of a “practical” and “material” nature.<sup>4</sup>

He singled out the Catholic Church for its divisive potential and antiscientific bias, and members of the Church often responded in kind, criticizing Dewey for failing to accept the falleness of man or for rejecting the supernatural claims of religion. His anti-Catholic attitudes could be quite overt. I have written previously about how Dewey worried about the influence of conservative Catholic priests on the Polish American community during the First World War.<sup>5</sup> He praised the 1949 anti-Catholic book by Paul Blanchard as “exemplary scholarship.” Blanchard called for a resistance movement to counter the antidemocratic, intolerant and un-American policies of the Catholic hierarchy.<sup>6</sup>

In *A Common Faith* Dewey rejected the idea of original sin and proposed that much of organized religion, and especially the Catholic Church, was a rigidified response to old problems. In addressing the difference in value between Protestant and Catholic ideas he writes: “It is better that change be accompanied by the sum total of efforts of men and women who are imbued with personal faith, than they be effected by any wholesale institutional effort that subordinates the individual to an external and ultimately a worldly authority” (*CF*, 68). For Dewey, it was a deep seated and pervasive change in attitude that defines a religious experience and organized religion, he thought, was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for bringing it about. And, more importantly, much of religion he believed was truly harmful.

In contrast to organized religion, *the religious* is about imagination and the effort involved in seeking wholeness. It is not about faith as a belief in a body of propositions advanced by particular religions, or as connected to a set of religiously sanctioned moral beliefs. For Dewey, the religious involves the recognition of the cooperative relationship between man (sic) and nature and an understanding that human nature is “a cooperation part of a larger whole” (*CF*, 23). His faith in the public schools was in inverse proportion to his fear that religion encourages blind loyalty to a religious leader, and their claim to “possess a monopoly of ideals and of the supernatural means by which alone...they can be furthered. These stand in the way of the realization of distinctly religious values inherent in natural experience” as best comprehended through the scientific method (*CF*, 27–28). He would substitute for the dogma and doctrine of religion the method of intelligence, and science, which he viewed as available to all.

The concept of god refers then not to a certain being but to an imagined union of the actual and the ideal along with the cooperative engagement required to move closer to the latter. “It selects those factors in existence that generate and support our

idea of the good as an end to be striven for” (CF, 53). Indeed, if anything Dewey held that religions largely served to get in the way of the religious. As he wrote:

If I have said anything about religions and religion that seems harsh, I have said those things because of a firm belief that the claims on the part of religions to possess a monopoly of ideals and of the supernatural means by which alone, it is alleged, they can be furthered, stand in the way of the realization of distinctively religious values inherent in natural experience...Just because the release of these values is so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religion must be dissolved. (CF, 27–28)

Dewey’s ideas on religion are a response to the situation of his time, and it would be a mistake to read the above description of his view without factoring in the larger historical context. Indeed a close reading of the quote advocating education as a religious free zone allows that his view might change, given a changing historical context.

#### DEWEY’S VIEWS IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dewey’s criticism of religion was written in reaction to the rigidity and antimodernism of a pre-Vatican II Church, a Church that was still in the grip of Pius IX (1846–1878) antidemocratic, totalistic authoritarian views. It was for this reason, for example, that Dewey expressed alarm about the influence of the Catholic clergy on the Polish community in Philadelphia during the First World War and it was also for this reason that he could praise without reservation the anti Catholic book of the theorist Paul Blanchard written shortly after the conclusion of the Second World War. Yet, had Dewey emphasized his other values, such as community and pluralism, had he explored the possibilities for pluralism within a tradition, he might have been more hopeful about possibilities for openness and tolerance within Catholicism and other religious traditions. He might have also enriched his own understanding of the values of religion by recognizing, as he does elsewhere, the limits of discursive propositional speech and the role religion serves in marking the incoherent and unspeakable — the inexpressible grief of great tragedy and the silent awe of great joy.

Nevertheless, given his moment in history, Dewey was understandably concerned about the divisive influence of religion on a nation of growing immigration, and he saw the school as the major instrument for establishing unity. Moreover, by separating the religious from religion Dewey anticipated the modern concern with spirituality, and thus is in line with a significant aspect of contemporary ideas about the human condition.

Yet, had his concerns been seen as historically conditioned by a particular historical period, Dewey might not have been so seemingly categorical in his advocacy of public schools as religious free zones. However, where as Dewey’s response may or may not have been appropriate for his times, categorical thinking about religion and public education today blocks the consideration of productive alternatives for public education. Ironically, while for the most part Dewey valued plurality united through a democratic nation, he largely failed to understand the possible plurality within a given religious tradition. While it is not surprising that he failed to anticipate the influence that Catholic dissenters, such as John Courtney

Murray and Jacques Maritain would have on a later Church, challenges like theirs, arising within a tradition, mark the initial stage of what we now view as the postmodern condition. A condition where difference is acknowledged and the possibility of incommensurable conceptions of reason is taken seriously.

#### RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN POST MODERN TIMES

One of the surprising things that has occurred in the United States recently is the rise of fundamentalism and Evangelical Christianity, along with a growing intensity of religious expression among Muslims and Jews. One of the effects of this turn toward religion is a dramatic increase in the number of students enrolled in private denominational religious schools, especially fundamentalist and evangelical Christian ones and a similar increase in the number of religious parents who are home schooling their children. Many of these parents blame what they see as “the Godlessness” of the public schools for their decision to exit. In addition, the Supreme Court in a recent decision has declared it Constitutional for parents to use publicly financed vouchers to send their children to private and religious schools.

From a Deweyian perspective, there is a sad irony to this. As public schools have increasingly shed any connection to religion — such as the elimination of school sponsored prayer and devotional Bible reading — more parents are choosing to exit the public schools and to send their children to religious ones. Fundamentalist Christian schools have been the fastest growing sector of American education. Hence, as schools became religious free zone more parents opt to provide a full time religious education for their children.

The turn to religious schools is, to a large extent, the result of decisions by parents who are unhappy with public schools that fail to acknowledge the significance of religion in people’s lives. This dissatisfaction with religion-free schools is one reason to pause and reconsider Dewey’s view in a historically different context, and it is also reason to consider whether public schools need to take a more active role in acknowledging the significance of religious belief. Certainly his hope, expressed in *A Common Faith* that religions would fade as the religious was liberated has proven a hard sell, as the rise of religious-based education has indicated.

*A Common Faith*, by itself, appears to be more compatible with classical individualism than most of Dewey’s other writings. To say this is not to argue that it is compatible with only classical liberalism but it is to say that taken in isolation and abstracted from his concern with community and plurality, it provides a limited understanding of the phenomena under consideration. It seems to be an appeal to *individuals* to reconstruct experience outside of a historically rooted community. As Dewey writes, action “is a matter of personal choice and resolution on the part of individuals, not of the very nature of social organizations”(CF, 66). While traditional Deweyian themes of community are not completely absent, they serve as a very muted subtext and largely appear toward the end of the book. Yet much of religion functions to shape communities and to bring people together in common endeavors around life’s inexplicable experiences.

To many religious people the world is an essentially tragic place that cannot be endured without the help of faith. I take it that this is at least a part of the meaning of original sin. Science may of course help us to live longer, more comfortable lives, but it cannot help us confront the inescapable fact of suffering or death. It can help relieve suffering, but cannot help us to comprehend a world in which innocent people do suffer. If the outsider insists on understanding some of the otherwise “absurd” religious narratives — Moses spoke to God, Jesus is God’s only son, Joseph Smith misplaced the Angel’s tablets — simply as truth claims, then Dewey would be correct in insisting that religion must give way to science. However, taking these stories as true serves an important function from the inside. Like circumcision, it signals membership in a certain faith community.<sup>7</sup>

A pragmatic understanding would need also to see the function that founding doctrine serves in constructing a shared identity. Publicly holding the belief that Joseph Smith was visited by an Angel and then misplaced the sacred plates he was given is a condition of holding membership in the Latter Day Saints. Similarly holding that wine and wafer are transformed in the act of communion to blood and body of Christ is a condition for being Catholic.

These expanded identities provide individuals ways to transcend their solitary selves and participate in a larger set of meanings. It is no accident that founders, when viewed from outside their own traditions, are seen as morally flawed, perhaps even ridiculous. From the inside, whatever the flaw, Moses a murderer, Paul a torturer, Luther and Calvin intolerant zealots, Joseph Smith a jealous prevaricator, is contextualized and minimized, often as part of a miraculous conversion. From the outside, and one religion is always outside from the point of view of another, the conversion may likely be rejected, especially if the other is a more recent religion. It is not surprising, for example, that the Baltimore Catechism depicted Mohamed as a plunder and thief. Looked at from the inside, these “flaws” are much like the grain of sand out of which pearls grow. They are necessary if individuals are to understand themselves and those who share their beliefs as potentially redeemable. Looked at from the outside they are just flaws.

From the outside many religious beliefs are incomprehensible as truth claims about the world, but from the inside the belief serves, much like circumcision, as a condition of identity and growth within a tradition. They are not to be challenged or brought before the harsh light of reason and judged by the standards of Dewey’s “warranted assertability.” Yes they are assertable, but they are not “warranted,” at least not by the light of propositional reasoning. But that is the point: only the light of faith warrants them. To insist that all of them pass some disembodied test of reason or to hold them up to standards set by science is to place reason over faith and commitment, and hence is to miss the point. To understand them fully is to understand their function; they serve to bring together and to create conditions for a truth constructing assembly — truth as practice, not proposition.

Given the value Dewey placed elsewhere on the importance of community in enhancing the lives of individuals and of plurality in enhancing the social fabric, one

might have expected a more nuanced understanding of religion. Instead when Dewey proposes the need to emancipate the religious from religion, suggesting that religion imprisons the religious, he fails to acknowledge the potential for growth within individual religions (*CF*, 33).

#### TEACHING RELIGION IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

In recent years, a few American secondary schools have begun to teach academically oriented courses about religion. Some of these courses are explicitly devoted to studying the Bible, while others study different religions in a comparative vein. Some of the Bible courses are problematic from a Deweyian standpoint, often simply reinforcing the orthodoxy of the dominant community. Nevertheless, As long as schools do not explicitly advocate one religion over another or promote belief or nonbelief, the courses are Constitutionally acceptable in the US, whatever their educational value. However, there is often a thin line between “informing” and “advocating” in these courses. In the comparative religion courses teachers can sometimes promote an unreflective tolerance where students are told that beneath their differences, all religions are the same. A view that sounds consistent with *A Common Faith*. Yet, the implicit message is that because there are no significant differences between religions, an uncritical tolerance is the correct response. There are other courses that are more promising. In these courses teachers encourage students to draw on their own beliefs in reflective ways and to probe critically other beliefs.

A colleague in religious studies, Professor Richard Layton and I, together with the help of our graduate assistant Sara Shrader, have been observing some of these efforts. Here I want to report on the work of one teacher in one of our schools. In contrast to Dewey, this teacher prefers his classroom to be a religious-full zone rather than a religious free one, and he uses the student’s beliefs to teach them how to discourse across religious differences.

The school is unusual in that it has separate semester long electives in both “Eastern” and “Western” religions. The latter covers Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and this is the class I describe. Most of the students in the class are Christian, both Catholic and Protestant, including Fundamentalist Christians, although there are Jewish and Muslim students represented in the school. The ostensive goal of the course is to provide students with a basic understanding of the beliefs and practices of each religion as well as to inform them of the diversity that can be found within a single religious tradition. In addition, there is a consensus among the teachers that while they do not aim to convert students, they do want to provide them with a basic appreciation of religious traditions other than their own, and to make them more knowledgeable about their own faith tradition. To paraphrase one teacher, while we do not challenge their beliefs, we would like them to understand why others could find inspiration in a set of religious practices and beliefs different from their own.

Increased knowledge rather than increased tolerance might be seen as the primary goal of the course, and such knowledge develops first through reflection on

the stereotypes students bring with them to class. During one of the first sessions the teacher shows the student pictures of different people and has them match the picture with a description of the person's role. The mismatches are quite astounding. The well-dressed white supremacist is identified as a college professor. An African American jurist is seen as a street person and so forth. This then leads to a discussion about religious stereotypes and where they come from. Another goal of the course is to teach students how to express their objections to religious views of other students. In the following, the teacher explains to us how this works.

I don't think that if an Evangelical Christian says that if you don't accept Christ then you're going to hell is disrespectful. In the academic environment, you are allowed to come and express your views, and if somebody else's view is offensive to you, then you have a right to respond. I've had students say that, "I disagree with that because for you to say to me that I'm going to hell is both irrational to me and judgmental." That's allowed, that's respectful. That's what the academic environment is about. That is not disrespectful. Now if somebody said, "you know that idea is crazy, I don't even understand how you can think that" and I've had students maybe say that, I'll say "rephrase. Rephrase." And we actually teach them this before we get in, rephrase, and they'll gather themselves and they'll rephrase. And that's a great exercise.

In my class we talk about emotionally charged words and words that have a more neutral charge to them. I'll say stick to academic words; crazy is not an academic word because it's open to too many different interpretations. Offensive is a good academic word. Irrational is a good academic word. Vague is a good academic word. So they choose these words, we're able to have this open discussion without people getting too upset.

I believe that these teachers, although never mentioning Dewey, are drawing on a fuller range of Dewey's pragmatism than we find in *A Common Faith*. They are both recognizing the plurality of religious and nonreligious views that are found in their classroom and they are acknowledging the value of pluralism. Dewey's shortcoming in his treatment of religion — I hesitate to call it a mistake given the different social concerns — is that in stressing the importance of an enriched, unified experience, he neglected some of the other values that his pragmatism promoted, namely the importance of a plurality of communities. I also think that he failed to sufficiently interrogate the role that religion plays in individual lives in connecting people to intergenerational communities that celebrate, suffer, mourn, and remember together.

#### CONCLUSION

I find a great deal of appeal in Dewey's understanding of the religious as a unifying force that liberates potential, and sometimes I feel as if I am writing this essay against my own grain. Nevertheless, my view about involving religion in the public schools is changing, partly as a result of our research. Still, I suspect it is easier today to distinguish between teaching about religion and teaching children to be religious than it was in Dewey's time, and that this distinction can help us to take another look at religion within public schools. What I believe we need and what our research hopes to provide is clear guidelines for teaching religion courses in public schools.

Nevertheless, in today's context Dewey's promotion of the religious mission of public schools has problems of its own. Dewey did advocate pluralism elsewhere and he did draw a distinction between unity and uniformity. However, his view on

religious-free schools can be criticized today as G.W.F. Hegel criticizes Friedrich Schelling's absolute as "the night where all the cows are black."

A PERSONAL FOOTNOTE

It might be instructive to end by saying a word about my personal change, which I assure those who know me well does not entail a stroke of lightning, or a sudden encounter with a burning bush, or a wrestling match with an angel. My personal change is not very dramatic, but it is the consequence of both a personal and a larger history.

When I was a youngster, my father had a small store in Cambridge, Massachusetts and whenever I took the bus to work there I would have to walk passed Father Feeny's headquarters on the outskirts of Harvard Square. Feeny was a notorious anti-Semite whose ranting radio broadcasts about rich Jews and Christ killers were unsettling to a thirteen-year-old son of a Russian immigrant, small shop owner, and my family strongly felt that the Church did not do enough to condemn him. I might add that this was also the time of Senator McCarthy's heyday and the two movements reinforced one another.

Feeny was eventually excommunicated and sometime later, when I was a young adult, his headquarters was abandoned and then transformed into a pleasant coffee shop. In the meantime, Vatican II exonerated Jews and no longer singled us out as Christ killers. The Baltimore Catechism that preached to every young parochial school student that Jews had murdered Jesus was retired and replaced by a new one in which everyone is now seen as responsible for Jesus' death.

Later I saw religious leaders, Catholic, Jews, and Protestants, coming together in support of civil rights and opposing the war in Vietnam. In light of all of this, Dewey's view on religion in the schools seems dated and in need of amending. Religions to me now seems not like the monistic forces that Dewey understood them to be, but like streams from which many fountains can flow. While acknowledging the many practical and pedagogical problems that teaching religion presents for public schools, I no longer believe that religion-free schools are the ideal. I now believe that in a world in which religions play so many important and sometimes conflicting roles, citizens need to understand both their own religion and the appeal of other religions. And, perhaps most of all, they need to learn to discourse across boundaries of both belief and nonbelief.

None of this is easy and our research also shows well meaning public school teachers who have little perspective on their own beliefs and who blindly advance highly contentious and questionable interpretations of religious texts and histories. The solution I think is not to insist that public schools remain religion-free zones, but that schools staff their courses with teachers who are both knowledgeable about religious texts and traditions, and who are also trained to recognize and bracket their own religious views. Easier said than done of course.

---

1. John Dewey, "Religion and Our Schools," *Hibbert Journal* 6 (1908): 807.



2. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (1934) (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), 22. This work will be cited as *CF* in the text for all subsequent references.
3. Manuel Chambrouty, "A *Common Faith*, by John Dewey, A Great American Liberal Progressive," *World Religion Watch* (March 2009), [http://www.world-religion-watch.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=228&Itemid=66](http://www.world-religion-watch.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=228&Itemid=66).
4. John Dewey, "Challenge to Liberal Thought," *Fortune* 30 (1944): 154–57.
5. Walter Feinberg, *Reason and Rhetoric: The Intellectual Foundations of Twentieth Century Liberal Educational Reform* (New York: John Wiley, 1974).
6. Paul Blanchard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1949).
7. For an extended examination of the way these claims work and how they respond to scientific challenges see Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 153–72.

---

My appreciation to the Spencer Foundation for supporting this research.