Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism

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Born in 1859 in Burlington, Vermont, John Dewey was already seventy-five years old in 1934 when he published his lectures on religious experience under the title *A Common Faith*. Although this is Dewey’s only book-length treatment of the subject, it would be a mistake to conclude that he had demonstrated little interest in religion up to that point in time. The religious influences on the young Dewey were in fact quite varied. Dewey’s mother was a conservative evangelical; his pastor at the local Congregational church was a liberal evangelical; his grandparents were Universalists; and his teachers were liberal-progressives. During Dewey’s first decade of teaching, from 1884 to 1894 at the University of Michigan, he taught Bible classes and was an active member of a local church. Of particular note is the fact that during this period he used Christian terms to defend his notions of science and democracy.

When Dewey accepted a position at the new University of Chicago in 1894, however, he did not renew his church membership. Instead,
he refocused his energies in two areas. One was the work of Jane Addams’s Hull House, which ministered to tens of thousands of immigrants as they sought to establish homes in the predatory environment of industrial Chicago. He also turned his attention with renewed energy to the problems and prospects of education. He founded an elementary school designed to serve as an experimental laboratory for pedagogy as experimental laboratories served chemistry, physics, and other sciences.

Was this forty-year period between 1894 and 1934, then, one in which Dewey sidestepped matters related to religious experience, or stopped thinking about them altogether? It appears so. Yet if we dig deeper, we find a different picture. During those forty years, the terms “religious” and its cognates were used thousands of times in his works. The Quest for Certainty (1929), for example, contains an extended treatment of religious experience.

A careful reader of Dewey’s work cannot avoid the conclusion that from beginning to end he devoted painstaking attention to religious themes as he characterized them in A Common Faith. Moreover, if we look closely at the arguments that Dewey advances in that little book we will see that they restate some of the core themes of his Pragmatism. These were the very themes that Dewey had been developing and refining, constructing and reconstructing, for more than four decades.

What are these themes, and how does Dewey relate them specifically to religious experience? The first theme is that the actual experiences of human beings, if they are allowed to develop freely on their own account, are capable of generating the aims and methods by which further experience can grow in ordered richness. Now this may seem like a fairly simple point, but there is in fact a great deal packed into it that is of special importance for understanding the connections between religious experience and education.

If our experience of physical and social relations is to develop freely on its own account, if it will follow the thread of truth wherever it leads, then it must be freed from norms, ideals, and other constraints that are commonly used to regulate experience from “outside” of experience. This may seem an uncontroversial point, but
powerful forces are arrayed against the free development of experience: ideologies, theologies, party platforms, prejudices, and even putative “oughts” are just a few of them.

More specifically, Dewey’s Pragmatism turned the old Platonic formula upside down. Our experience does not have to conform to putative supernatural, ideological, or transcendental ideals or norms; experience itself—our experience in and of our cultural and historical contexts—is capable of generating the norms and ideals that allow it to grow and develop. Dewey’s argument in *A Common Faith* is that this idea pertains to religious experiences no less than other ones. Dewey thought it crucial that religious experience be allowed to develop without external constraints.

Michael Eldridge has expressed this matter very clearly. “Ideals, then, are action-guiding possibilities. They arise, guide action, and are revised in an ongoing reconstructive process. Over time, some ideals, such as democracy, gain considerable stability. But as generalized *ends-in-view* they never escape their origins in temporal conditions. They are not outside of experience.”

To understand what this means for the matters under discussion, it is important to note that Dewey distinguished religion, a religion, and the religious. Regarding the first of these, he asked us to note the obvious fact that there is no such thing as religion in general or religion per se. Dewey’s language here foreshadows Wittgenstein’s a dozen or so years later in his discussion of “family resemblances.” Wittgenstein noted the futility of looking for a common property shared by all games. For his part, Dewey told us that try as we might, we will find no one single element, no single universal property, that is common to all religions and at the same time distinguishes them as religions. It is now safe to say that the testimony of anthropologists and the research of scholars in the field of comparative religion provide unambiguous confirmation of Dewey’s conclusion.

Because one cannot be an adherent to a religion *in general*, one must make a choice among the world’s religions to be a member of one: some particular religion must be chosen from all the rest. At this point in his argument, Dewey makes a move that demonstrates the
extent to which his treatment of religious experience is integrated into his wider philosophy. Since the choice of a religion depends on many things, including cultural background, personal temperament, and so on, and since the world’s religions take us in many different directions, perhaps it would be best, he suggested, if we emancipated the “elements and outlooks that may be called religious” from their traditional institutional moorings, that is, from any particular religion. What does “religious” denote in this context? He tells us it does not denote any specifiable entity, whether institutional or doctrinal. It does not denote anything that can exist by itself, or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It does denote “attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal” (LW 9.8).

Seen from the viewpoint of institutional religions, this might be a very hard and unwelcome conclusion. It might be seen as a move toward a type of empty ecumenism that resorts to the lowest common denominator among religious institutions, or it might even be seen as a call to abolish religious institutions altogether. But clearly Dewey embraced neither position. He thought that truth claims of religious institutions could be tested, and that the effects of their various claims could be adjudicated.

Charlene Haddock Seigfried has offered an account of classical Pragmatism that clearly articulates the background thinking that led to Dewey’s position with respect to religious belief. Pragmatism, she has written, is “a philosophy that stresses the relation of theory to praxis and takes the continuity of experience and nature as revealed through the outcome of directed action as the starting point for reflection.” Moreover, “Since the reality of objects cannot be known prior to experience, truth claims can be justified only as the fulfillment of conditions that are experimentally determined, i.e., the outcome of inquiry.”

Dewey and the other Pragmatists held the view that truth is the result of inquiry into the materials of human experience; it does not spring from any other source. Dreams, insights, revelations, visions, and other such supposed sources of directly communicated truths are
for the Pragmatists not so much final truths, but starting places for determining what is true. They are the raw materials that must be tested in the same way that a geologist would test a sample of ore to determine whether it contains a rare mineral. Despite their appearances, they do not carry their truth on their faces. Their truth must be established experimentally and publically.

Responding to Bertrand Russell in the 1940s, Dewey offered a technical definition of truth that precisely captures what he meant. He defined truth as “warranted assertibility” (LW 14.168–69). According to Dewey’s Pragmatist view of truth, the warrant of a true judgment points backward to propositions affirmed and inferential rules formulated and deployed. That is, the warrant points backward to evidence already marshaled and constructive work already done.

The assertibility of a true judgment points to the future: true judgments point forward in a general way to possible applications. We can, as we say, bank on a true judgment. It affords a reliable basis for things we need to do. True judgments point back to the past and forward to the future, then, but they also do their work in the present. They function as stable and reliable platforms for our actions. Putting the same point somewhat differently, William James wrote that truth is not otiose, but something that happens to an idea as it is constructed and reconstructed within human cognition.

As part my discussion of global citizenship in chapter 2, I pointed out that the Pragmatic method is more or less the same as what has been loosely termed “the scientific method” or “the experimental method.” I also pointed out that what we generally refer to as “the scientific method” is in reality a family of methods that exhibit repeatability, falsifiability, transparency, and objectivity. Unlike other methods, including those sometimes used by religious institutions, experimental methods produce results that are subject to public review and able to meet the demands of concrete, existential affairs.

This set of methods does not depend on correct content for its authority. Its claim instead comes from the fact that it is self-correcting. Ideas and hypotheses are treated not as truths to be defended at
all costs, but as tools that may themselves be altered as they are applied to the materials of concrete experience. It is for this reason that the Pragmatic method rejects “absolute” or “timeless” truths.

The point Dewey wanted to make in all this is that the Pragmatic notion of truth-as-method can embrace a wide variety of viewpoints and activities, including religious outlooks and practices. But the Pragmatist would not just accept any outlook or practice that claims to be religious. Religious beliefs have consequences, so they can be tested.

In my discussion of global citizenship, I recalled the metaphor of the Pragmatic method as a hotel corridor. A number of rooms would open onto it, and inside those rooms there would be a wide variety of persons and activities. Applied to the current discussion, religious people as well as nonbelievers would be there, monotheists and polytheists, and physicists as well as philosophers. There would be many differences of culture, interest, and temperament among the people in the rooms at the Pragmatic hotel. There would be Buddhists, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Muslims, Confucians, and even atheists. But despite their other differences, all of these people would have one important thing in common. Each one of them would have passed through the corridor of the Pragmatic method to get to his or her room.

But there are some people who would not have a room in the Pragmatic hotel. Even though you would find religious people and secularists in the hotel, for example, you would not find humanists and religious fundamentalists there.

The reason for this lies in the nature of the Pragmatic method itself. The reason that you would not find fundamentalists there is that the primary method of fundamentalism is not experimental. It is the method of authority. Christian, Muslim, and other forms of fundamentalism, for example, rest on appeals to direct divine revelation and textual literalism in ways that close down inquiry rather than opening it up for participation by all concerned. And if the method of authority fails to achieve their goals, what then? In the absence of experimentalism, religious and other types of fundamentalists must
fall back on the application of psychological, physical, or political power rather than the application of intelligence.

So the idea behind the Pragmatic method is that it serves as an alternative to nonscientific methods such as appeals to tradition and authority. In judging religious belief, Pragmatists hold the view that the meaning of an idea or experience is the difference it will make for your and my future experience.

The first of the two themes of Dewey's Pragmatism that I singled out as having a major impact on his treatment of religious experience and education, then, is that experience must be allowed to develop on its own terms without being trumped by intransigent institutional doctrines. Ideals, as generalized ends-in-view, arise from experience, and "they never escape their origins in temporal conditions. They are not outside of experience."

The second theme is truth is a matter of having been tested in the laboratory of experience. Ideals—even those that accompany or stem from religious experiences—must put to objective tests in order to determine the extent to which they are valuable.

If we take these two themes together, then we get the following picture. He was in no way suggesting that religious institutions are unimportant or should be abolished. Quite the contrary. His writings on social and political philosophy emphasize the importance of religious institutions as "publics," groups of individuals with common interests and purposes that relate to and interact with other publics.

So Dewey was in no way attacking the existence of religious institutions. By distinguishing a religion from the religious, meaning religious experience, he was instead saying more or less what William James had said in his essay "The Will to Believe": the meanings of religious institutions, and any other institution, are in the work they do, in the effects they have on people, not in criteria that exist prior to or outside of experience. The meanings of religious institutions do not lie in their history, dogma, or any other form of authority. The upshot of this is that for Dewey's version of evolutionary naturalism, religious institutions have no particular privilege just because they
claim to have some link to the supernatural. The burden of the history of the effects of the Enlightenment—or what has been called modernity—is that religious institutions will either stand or fail on the basis of what they do to effect a better adjustment of human beings to their environing conditions. Dewey is clear on this point: the only alternative to coming to terms with modernity that is available to religious institutions is to lapse into fundamentalism or other forms of debilitating sectarianism.

In terms of education, including religious education, Dewey’s program means educating the whole person, fostering the virtues of love and faith, encouraging the pursuit of learning, and respecting the dignity and worth of every person. It demands educators who are ready to devote their lives to the development of a humanistic culture in which all of humankind can participate.

Once the full impact of this idea is recognized, then it is easy to see why James called Pragmatism “a new name for some old ways of thinking.” He was alluding to a famous saying in the Christian Bible. In the parable of the fig tree related in Matthew 7:16–20, Jesus says: “By their fruits you shall know them.” He does not say, “By their roots you shall know them.” Nor does he say, “You shall know them only when you have compared them to a transcendent norm or hollowed tradition.” In this passage Jesus makes a Pragmatic point: although the roots of the tree are planted firmly in the soil of nature (and not up in the heavens), the test of its value lies in what it produces. Jesus says that it will be necessary to take a bite of a fig if we are determine whether the fruit of the tree is valuable.

This brings us back to a point I made earlier about Dewey’s use of the term “religious.” Since the term is an adjective, it does not denote “anything that can exist by itself or than can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal” (LW 9.8).

This is tantamount to saying that those who think that there is a definite type of experience that is termed “religious” and that is marked off from experiences that are aesthetic, scientific, moral, and
political—from experiences that involve companionship and friendship—for example, are in effect limiting and demeaning the notion of religious experience. They are selling religious experience short.

On the contrary, Dewey thinks that “the religious” is a quality of experience that may belong to all these types of experience. He thus wants to demonstrate how expansive the notion of the religious is, and at the same time how it is often curtailed and stunted by too close an association with this or that religious institution.

The religious is thus not a type of experience that can exist by itself. It is instead a quality that can leaven many types of experiences, making them richer and more satisfying.

Dewey thus reminds us of something both obvious and overlooked. The religious quality of experience is the lifeblood of religious institutions. The religious, as the quality of many types of experience, provides the energy that can maintain and reform religious institutions, that can let them grow and flourish even as environing conditions change. His implicit argument is that religious institutions depend for their vitality on the quality of the religious in experience, not the other way around. If we think of this or that religious institution as the custodian of the religious quality of our experiences, therefore, then we have gotten the cart before the horse. More specifically, the religious quality in experience is a better adjustment to life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of an adjustment. The fruits, not the roots, provide evidence of the religious quality in experience.

When we experience this religious quality or attitude, then we do not merely adjust to changed circumstances, we have a profound and important awakening—a reorientation of the whole person. Dewey makes this point clearly in A Common Faith in his discussion of what he calls the two poles of human experience.

The first is the pole of our experience that is concerned with the alteration or adaptation of relatively external circumstances. The other is the pole that is primarily concerned with accommodation to such circumstances. It involves the changes we make in ourselves in response to environmental conditions that we cannot change, or cannot easily change. Beyond these ordinary modes of adjustment is the life-changing experience that exhibits a religious quality.
In the first few pages of *A Common Faith* Dewey expressed this matter at length:

While the words “accommodation,” “adaptation,” and “adjustment” are frequently employed as synonyms, attitudes exist that are so different that for the sake of clear thought they should be discriminated. There are conditions we meet that cannot be changed. If they are particular and limited, we modify our own particular attitudes in accordance with them. Thus we accommodate ourselves to changes in weather, to alterations in income when we have no other recourse. When the external conditions are lasting we become inured, habituated. . . . The two main traits of this attitude, which I should like to call accommodation, are that it affects *particular* modes of conduct, not the entire self, and that the process is mainly *passive*. It may, however, become general and then it becomes fatalistic resignation or submission. There are other attitudes toward the environment that are also particular but that are more active. . . . Instead of accommodating ourselves to conditions, we modify conditions so that they will be accommodated to our wants and purposes. This process may be called adaptation.

Now both of these processes are often called by the more general name of adjustment. But there are also changes in ourselves in relation to the world in which we live that are much more inclusive and deep seated. They relate not to this and that want in relation to this and that condition of our surroundings, but pertain to our being in its entirety. Because of their scope, this modification of ourselves is enduring. . . . It is a change of *will* conceived as the organic plenitude of our being, rather than any special change in will. (LW 9.12–13)

Of course there are elements of accommodation and adaptation in most of what we do on a daily basis. Dewey calls our attention beyond them to cases of adjustment that are more profound, that result in a “generic and enduring change of attitude” (LW 9.13). This is a type of adjustment that does not simply *supervene* upon life, but *intervenes* within it, touching its every aspect, interpenetrating all of its elements.
The aims and ideals that move us are generated through imagination. But they are not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience. . . . The new vision does not arise out of nothing, but emerges through seeing, in terms of possibilities, that is, of imagination, old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating. . . . 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. (LW 9.33–34)

Despite all I have so far said, it might be asked how we are able to test these ideas and ideals in the absence of higher norms that are absolute or transcendent. In order to answer this question, I now turn to a matter that has been just barely below the surface of what I have said up to this point. I now turn more explicitly to the relevance of my discussion to the philosophy of education.

The implications for education of Dewey’s Pragmatic account of religious experience are far-reaching and profound. He works out those implications in considerable detail in his 1929 essay “The Sources of a Science of Education.” At first glance his statement appears so disarmingly simple that it is easy to miss his point. He writes that “education is itself a process of discovering what values are worth while and are to be pursued as objectives. To see what is going on and to observe the results of what goes on so as to see their further consequences in the process of growth, and so on indefinitely, is the only way in which the value of what takes place can be judged. To look to some outside source to provide aims is to fail to know what education is as an ongoing process” (LW 5.38).

Three aspects of this type of educational program are pertinent here. First, education must take into account the fact of change. It is a simple historical fact that when religious dogma and the results of scientific experimentation have come into conflict, religious dogma has suffered defeat and loss of face. The case of Galileo provides an example from the 17th century, and so-called “scientific creationism” and “intelligent design” provide examples from our own century (even though the practitioners of such faulty attempts at scientific
rigor don’t seem to know or care just how ridiculous their claims sound to practitioners of real science.)

But conflicts between science and religion need not occur. If education is in fact a process of “discovering what values are worth while and are to be pursued as objectives,” then it will be prized as a body of improving methods and not as a body of unchanging facts. Moreover, insofar as the religious quality of experience that I have been discussing becomes a part of the educational experience, then education will be touched with the sort of intelligence and idealism that looks forward to change with eager anticipation for the possibilities that it holds. It will not fear what may come, because it is open to opportunities for growth and development.

There is no reason why religious institutions cannot be in the forefront of such efforts to foster such progressive educational programs. Dewey thought that this in fact occurs when it is recognized, as he put it, that “the values prized in those religions that have ideal elements are idealizations of things characteristic of natural association, which have been projected into the supernatural realm for safe-keeping and sanction” (LW 9.48). Dewey wanted to push education, including religious education, in the direction of fostering and improving our knowledge of things in their fullness, and opening up new vistas of human communication. He saw in education the primary means for the growth of individuals and communities. What Dewey meant in this regard for religious education in particular is the moral faith that ideals or ends-in-view can be realized must trump the intellectual faith that posits this particular existence or that particular existence.

The second point is that this text does not say, and in fact denies, that existing social conditions or traditions are to be the sources of the discovery of educational values. The same is true of educators themselves. Social conditions and traditions, far from providing the ultimate norms for valuation, are among the things that education is called upon to evaluate. And even the ideas and ideals of the educator himself or herself, as they are expressed in the form of syllabi, lesson
plans, or directives, must be evaluated in terms of the broader educational processes that Dewey here characterizes.

Allowing existing social conditions to dictate educational practice results in precisely the type of education against which Dewey argued forcefully during his decade at the University of Chicago, from 1894 to 1904, and then, afterward, during his years at Columbia University. He continually reminded his readers that rote rehearsal of received tradition, without opportunities to innovate through creative hypothesis-formation and testing, fails to be educative: it is little more than indoctrination and initiation into the traditions of existing norms.

And third, this passage implies that neither the methods nor the contents of the technosciences are directly applicable to education in the absence of concrete, experienced problems. They should not dictate educational practice any more than do existing social conditions or traditions. In other words, the methods and contents of the sciences are only instrumental to education, and not its equivalent. Allegedly scientific tests, such as those that are administered to assess personality or intelligence, are not where education begins, even though they may be useful educational tools on an individual basis. Nor does education begin with instructions about how to take standardized tests (though it does sometimes seem to end there).

Dewey also addressed these matters in a 1922 essay, “Mediocrity and Individuality.” He began by assuring his readers that he had nothing against mental testing provided that such tests were administered and applied in a proper manner. The goal of constructing tests, he wrote, “is a method of discrimination, of analysis of human beings, of diagnosis of persons, which is intrinsic and absolute, not comparative and common. . . . The pity is that a scheme for testing tests which are ultimately to be employed in diagnosing individuality has been treated as if it already provided means of testing individuals” (MW 13.292).

Does the religious, then, have a place in education? Of course it does. In all of this, Dewey argued that a religious perspective can and should enter into education in the form of a moral faith. What is this
moral faith? It is a type of faith that involves a “natural piety” that “is not of necessity either a fatalistic acquiescence in natural happenings or a romantic idealization of the world. It may rest upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable. Such piety is an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life” (LW 9.18).

This religious perspective can and should also enter into education as promoting understanding and knowledge. It can and should enter into education as a “faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor [that] is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation” (LW 9.18).

Far from proposing a religion, Dewey offers us a “common faith” that is built upon the religious as a quality of experience. It is a faith that must be at the core of educational practice if it is to be successful. And it is a faith that transcends religious organizations and institutions in ways that can serve to bring them together in common purpose, even while they continue to honor what is good in their historical and cultural differences.

It is now time to pull these diverse strands together. On reflection, I think that we would have to agree with Dewey’s claim that there is no such thing as religion in general, that is, that there is nothing that all religions qua religions have in common. But given the wide variety of the world’s religions, and given differences in cultural background and temperament, how is it possible to choose a religion from among them? What sorts of criteria are available? Rejecting claims that ideals must be grounded in absolutes, justified in terms of objects and events that transcend experience, or warranted by history or tradition, Dewey invites us to exhibit a particular type of moral faith. This moral faith, this common faith, would be one that takes experience seriously as a source of values, that tests values and ideals experimentally, and that honors the religious qualities of experiences of many types, including those that are aesthetic, scientific, and educational. It is this religious attitude, this common faith, that Dewey thinks can
drive, inform, and refresh religious institutions, insuring their continuing relevance in a changing world.

The norms by which our values and ideals are tested are themselves generated and tested through processes that are best described as education. And this is because it is education that broadens our cultural and historical understanding, allowing us to enter into the lives of individuals and communities of the past, in other parts of the world, in novels and plays, and elsewhere. It is only by means of education that the growth of individuals and communities can be advanced. Moreover, a key component in education is the religious perspective that enters into experience whenever and wherever education functions as it can and should.