

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JOHN DEWEY FOR RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION

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NO single individual is as important as John Dewey in determining the trend of present day religious thinking. Dewey, to be sure, has only incidentally referred to religion as such in his writings, but he has expressed more than any one else the social interest and the cultural drive which underlie many of the new attempts at religious interpretation. In a remarkable way, he seems to focus the moving forces of the day and thus to give invaluable insight which may aid in the development of a vital religion that shall be genuinely integrated into the culture of the time. A study of Dewey and of his writings constitutes probably the best prolegomena to any religious advance founded on the belief that the vitality of religious faith is in direct proportion to its ability to shape itself in response to the "social mind" of the time. This study will have as its purpose then, not so much a technical statement of the Dewey philosophy as an effort to show its relation to the cultural trend of the present day.

Dewey's work has been done in a period in which tremendous changes have taken place. Within his life time America has changed from a rural and small scale manufacturing nation into one of the great capitalistic industrial countries of the world. The year of his birth saw the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and every year since has seen the advancement of concrete application of the evolutionary hypothesis over wider and wider aspects of the world. The democratic movement, forced into wider channels by the new and dominating industrialism, has become, within the same span of time, something more than a mere political arrangement; it has become a social philosophy voicing new attitudes and calling

for new interpretations of life. Evolutionary science, the new industrialism, the modern movement of democracy—these are the factors which have proved germinal in Dewey's life and thought. These factors have set his problems and furnished the material for his interest and for his thinking. These, it should be noted in passing, are likewise the factors which have proved most potent in disintegrating the traditional social background under which developed our inherited religious dogmas. One of the most fruitful approaches to the thinking of Dewey in relation to religion may be found as we take up each of these factors and show how it has worked itself out in his philosophy.

I

Darwin little realized, we surmise, the importance of the evolutionary hypothesis which he had developed in the *Origin of Species*. Today many are seeing how revolutionary and epochal were the implications of his work. "Darwin", says Dewey, "conquered the phenomenon of life for the principle of transition." The thinking of Dewey is built around this fact with the result that the fixed, the final, the transcendent disappear in his thinking and in their place we have the emphasis upon the changing, the concrete, the "natural" elements of the world. This thoroughgoing acceptance of the genetic standpoint of evolutionary science has important results for Dewey. It furnishes one of the keys for the interpretation of all his philosophy.

Man, his institutions, his moral codes, his beliefs and his values are all seen in a new light when they are placed in the evolutionary process and their genetic development traced. Thinking itself is given an interpretation in terms of its biological development. Its function and place is no longer that represented by the older philosophies. Thinking is not a means for arriving at objective finalities. It is a secondary process and functional to the activity of the organism. Thinking is a means of adjustment; an instrument for ongoing processes of life. This naturalistic interpretation of thinking, so fundamental to pragmatism, cuts under or "short circuits" the traditional theories of knowledge upon which the classical philosophies were constructed. Traditional idealism, for example, interprets the world by the laws of consciousness. The universe becomes a system of ideas from which you arrive at the conception

of an Absolute Spirit or Intelligence that constitutes the system. Dewey's instrumentalism eliminates the necessity of any such system; with him thinking is never general but always concrete, experimental, practical. Neither can it by its very nature give any final results or absolute values or have anything to say as regards any transcendent or supernatural world. Thinking is empirical, concrete, instrumental; arising in the evolutionary process to bring adjustment between the organism and its environment.

This naturalistic interpretation of thinking means that for Dewey truth becomes a relative and experimental matter; something formed in the actual social process itself. Thus the experimental logic which he develops makes no pretensions of dealing with the ultimate nature of things, of giving certainties or finalities. The evolutionary study of morality and ethics has also reinforced the conception of truth which Dewey holds. Moral values, genetically studied, are not easily acknowledged as final things given to man and eternally valid. When their origin is traced out their absolute-ness disappears; for they are recognized as rooted in the social process and growing and developing with the changing culture of a people. Hence Dewey's insistence that moral judgments are not absolute principles to be held as universally valid but hypotheses for experimentation. This experimental ethics and its implications mean a radical change when it is applied to the religious program. Religion has contended that its values are authoritative, absolute and final. Religion in the minds of most people is so tied up to such conceptions that they are unable to conceive of it under any other form. Religion as interpreted however from the insight which Dewey affords is a human social construct; its values and beliefs are relative to the social culture which produced them and it carries no super-empirical authority.

II

Modern industrialism is the second creative factor that has strongly influenced Dewey. The new industrialism, really a product of the scientific development of the age, is the factor that has most changed the world in his life time. It has created conditions which have changed the actual social relations and environments of men and thus indirectly developed new values, attitudes, interests and

tasks. Dewey is very cognizant of this fact and it is apparent in all his writings.

Dewey, as we have indicated, is not interested in a philosophy that is seeking final truths or ultimate realities but rather is interested in a philosophy as a way of life—as furnishing guidance to secure practical control over the world of material things in the interest of the best possible life for all men. That interest has in part, we may be sure, arisen out of the practical situation resulting from applied science in the field of industrial development. Modern civilization is what it is because of the control of the physical forces of the world. Through their subjugation and the resultant development of industrialism, wealth and quantity production have been made possible. Such material control has for the first time made possible the opportunity of a decent life for all men. This power which we have attained in the material realm of life augurs even greater possibilities in the future. Yet everywhere there is the haunting fear that all is not well. With all the possibilities it affords, the great industrialism has made poverty for many, has produced social discord and war. The last decade has startled multitudes into the realization that possibly mankind had in the process of its material achievements released forces which might prove beyond its control. The application of intelligence, so evident in the realm of material forces, is lacking in moral and social life. Social life is still proceeding on cult values, social platitudes and traditional habits to such an extent that many feel we are in acute danger of catastrophe. No writer is more cognizant of this danger than Dewey. Hence his practical interest in a philosophy that shall furnish intelligent guidance for the social life of mankind. Dewey has felt on every hand the result of man's intelligent control over his physical environment. As he says, in *Psychology and Social Practice*:

Man has come to recognize that the existing order is determined neither by fate nor by chance, but is based on law and order, on a system of existing stimuli and modes of reaction, through knowledge of which he can modify the practical outcome. We can anticipate with the application of the scientific method no other outcome than increased control in the ethical sphere—the nature and extent of which can be best judged by considering the revolution that has taken place in the control of physical nature through a knowledge of her order.¹

Dewey pleads that the same study, foresight and planning be applied to human relations that we have applied to physical nature.

¹ Page 39.

While his philosophy is by no means devoid of epistemological and metaphysical interest yet those interests are secondary to that in philosophy as a way of life. No American thinker has made a greater contribution than has Dewey to the actual development of practical technique for achieving human betterment. His books on education, ethics and in recent years his numerous articles on current issues all witness to that social interest. That interest has come out of the actual needs of a civilization built on a control through intelligence of its physical order but endangered by lack of that same control in its social and moral life.

The tremendous changes wrought by the application of science through the development of modern industrialism has affected Dewey's thinking in another very vital way. The world of the past, the pre-scientific, pre-industrial world, was a world in which change was slow, insignificant and often imperceptible. That type of a world found expression in the thinking and social organization of the time. Thus there were absolutistic philosophies, an infallible church and an infallible book, eternal certainties and ultimate values. We could expect such ideas to be held in a world where progress was slow and men looked to the past rather than to the future. The modern world has made Dewey, and all of us with him, feel the force of another kind of a world. Industrialism has within the life time of most of us changed the whole aspect of our civilization so that we feel change as the very nature of things and have developed the forward look. Dewey's philosophy voices this new experience of the world—an experience of a world which is dynamic, changing, pluralistic; continually showing new developments and calling for new formulations and new types of social organization.

The viewpoint of truth, which as we have seen, constitutes one of the contributions of Dewey and of pragmatic thinkers to philosophy, finds a reinforcement also in the spirit created by an industrial world. The real test of a given tool, or method, is in this practical world of applied science, its ability to accomplish the purpose for which it is designed. There is no need of any super-empirical tests. The modern industrial world has increased that way of looking at things until it has become a commonplace in the practical affairs of our life. Dewey has made a practical method used by everyone into a guiding philosophy. Beliefs, values, institutions and philosophies find with Dewey only the empirical test of actual service in

the achievement of purposes for which they were designed. They are creations of man, his servants and not his masters.

III

The most profound ethical force which has affected Dewey's philosophy has come from the democratic movement. One feels throughout his writings that spirit of experimentation, of courageous adventure, of cooperative sharing, of humanism which we have come to recognize as the deeper meaning of the term democracy. Dewey has carried the humanistic spirit into all his writings.

Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have a meaning, a purpose. That purpose is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status. . . . Democracy has many meanings but if it has a moral meaning it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society.²

Dewey has applied himself with enthusiasm and devotion to the bringing about of the kind of a world which will result in such a development of human capacity. Several factors are of significance in this connection because of the central place they take in Dewey's treatment of ethical and indirectly religious problems.

A social study of the traditional philosophy shows that it arose from the social tradition which ruled in a class society with its "higher" and "ideal" interests. The old dualisms between matter and spirit, things and ideals, natural and supernatural, science and religion are seen, when studied as regards their social genesis, to be closely related to social organization.³ These dichotomies were, as we have seen, avoided when the naturalistic interpretation was accepted and intelligence placed within actual experience, in the procession of events. The spirit of democracy in breaking down the class distinctions which are underneath the social tradition of the classical philosophy is giving strong reinforcement to the new type of philosophy founded on the continuity of the "ideal" and the "real". The development of this aspect of Dewey's thinking is of the utmost importance for ethics and religion.

God only knows how many of the sufferings of life are due to a belief that the natural scene and operations of our life are lacking in ideal import, and to the consequent tendency to flee for lacking ideal factors to some other world inhabited exclusively by ideals. . . . If a philosophy could

²Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. p. 186.

³Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Chapter 1.

aid in making it clear to a troubled humanity that ideals are continuous with natural events, that they but represent their possibilities, and that recognized possibilities form methods for a conduct which may realize them in fact, philosophers would enforce the sense of a social calling and responsibility.⁴

This recognition by Dewey of the continuity between ideals and natural events makes his approach to the problems of ethics and religion entirely different from that of traditionalism. Dewey is interested above all in the promotion of the best possible life for men and women. Most religious people would likewise affirm this as a primary interest. Dewey's viewpoint however results in his use of a method that does not seem religious to many. Christianity, traditionally at least, has been greatly interested in "ideals", only secondarily in objective changes in the social order. Changes were desired, to be sure, but it was believed that the best method for the attainment of such changes was through the development of good will, altruism and idealism. "What the world needs", the religious individual would say, "is more love and good will." "Get right the hearts of men and all will be well", has been the slogan of religion. Dewey does not ignore such "ideals" but he believes the best way to achieve such "ideals" is through changing the social situation so that there may be more means for evoking them. He feels there is plenty of "good will", for example in society, but our social order is not organized in such a way as to evoke it. Hence Dewey's concern for "non-moral" factors to bring about moral ends. There is with Dewey no distinct and separate province of the moral sciences. "It (moral science) is physical, biological, and historical knowledge placed in a human context where it will illumine and guide the activities of men."⁵

This accounts for Dewey's opposition to doctrinaire and sentimental solutions of social problems. His enthusiasm for discovering the concrete thing that is needed in any social situation makes him a stern critic of far away ideals and platitudinous generalities.⁶ So much of religion is still voiced in such terms that religious people often feel Dewey as an outspoken critic of religion. He is however interested in the same human problems as the religious man but "ideals" in themselves have little interest for him when such "ideals" are simply empty abstractions.

⁴ Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic*, p. 72.

⁵ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 296.

⁶ Best shown in the essay, "Intelligence and Morals" in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*.

IV

The direct treatment of the question of religion by Dewey seems to most people disappointingly meagre. This is no doubt due to several facts. For one thing, he is judged by traditional definitions of religion. Any application of measures and institutional standards drawn from supernaturalism will show by the very nature of the case, little that is "religious" in his naturalistic thinking. Then again, religion with him is nothing separate and isolated that can be the monopoly of any special institution. When religion is treated as a natural expression of human experience, the spiritual import of our common life together, it is implicated in every aspect of our life. Economics, education, science are all "religious" or can be religious from this point of view. So in one sense the apparent meagerness of detail regarding religion *per se* is due to our judgment of religion as something isolated, separated and capable of treatment in and of itself. While one must recognize this fact it is however evident that whereas in ethics, education, and logic Dewey has carried through his viewpoint with splendid insight the field of religion still awaits from him any such formulation. Any religious formulation based on Dewey's thinking will we may surmise show certain characteristic aspects.

1. Dewey's thorough-going evolutionary viewpoint makes impossible any religious formulation which allies itself with supernaturalism because a philosophy extracted out of the possibilities actually existant in this world makes impossible any supernaturalism. The explanation of Dewey's world is found in terms of the natural and any religious formulation using the insight of his writing cannot offer supernatural explanation as part of its data. This naturalism gives a freedom to religion and spiritual values so that many of the old fears are seen as unnecessary and baseless because a new confidence is gained when religion is seen to spring from the needs, aspirations and ideals that are found in human nature itself. Dewey has thus stated it:

If we set out with a fixed dualism of belief and knowledge, then the uneasy fear that the natural sciences are going to encroach and destroy "spiritual values" haunts us. So we build them a citadel and fortify it; that is, we isolate, professionalize, and thereby weaken beliefs. But if beliefs are the most natural, and in that sense, the most metaphysical of all things, and if knowledge is an organized technique for working out their implications and interrelations, for directing their formation and employ, how unnecessary, how petty the fear and caution.⁷

⁷ *Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays*, p. 195.

The change in religion from an authoritatively imposed system where confidence rests upon an infallible book or unchanging doctrine can only come when men find a new confidence and security. Modern science is bringing it about that increasing numbers of people are finding such security in methods of inquiry and experimentation based upon the hypothesis. Their security is in the method of procedure not in any unchanging system of truth. This means the substitution of human confidence and self-reliance for the authoritative supernaturalism of the traditional system. Dewey's thinking is doing just that thing for religious interpretation.

2. The democratic implications of Dewey's thinking are certain to be far reaching on religious thought. Its final effect on all modified theism is as yet uncertain but unquestionably traditional theism has no contact with the insights which he develops. The humanistic drive of the present day goes back to Dewey more than to any other single individual. If the conception of God survives as a vital factor in the religion of the future it will have to be fundamentally changed if the humanistic thinking of Dewey prevails. Actually one can see drastic changes taking place in the whole idea of God. The old conception, construed on political patterns derived from absolute sovereignty, is gradually being adjusted to a democratic world so that great numbers of people think of God's activities not as externalistic to man but as actually blended with man's activities. The purposes of God are no longer interpreted as something within his own counsel but as including the cooperation of man as a real part of that purpose. Whether such attempts to modify theism so that it shall prove adequate to a naturalistic and democratic world will stand is uncertain. If theology does remain it will be secondary for Dewey's instrumental logic and democratic idealism mean that religion, morality, God himself, come into the functional category. Religious interpretation founded on Dewey's thinking is certain to be humanistic. It will emphasize the possibilities of human nature and voice the cry of Swinburne, "Glory to Man in the highest, for Man is the master of things." Dewey would probably say that to be religious is to show practical loyalty and consecration to the realization of the democratic life, to seek with all one's power to bring about the "miracle of the shared life." A religious person would be one whose ideal was to use the material resources to attain the better life for all mankind. This better life

would be one which allowed for the development of human capacity to the fullest extent and made possible the widest sharing of human experience.

3. The question of how a religion of devotion to human values might be promoted receives little consideration from Dewey. Evidently he would rely almost exclusively on the *intelligent* understanding of the meaning of life. The church would apparently have no part in such religious promotion; philosophical insight rather than theology would be the instrument of religious progress. Dewey does not believe that the old ideas can be given new shades of meaning and made to serve in an effective way.

Nothing is gained by deliberative effort to return to ideas which have become incredible, and to symbols which have been emptied of their content of obvious meaning. Nothing can be gained by moves which will increase confusion and obscurity, which tend to an emotional hypocrisy and to a phrase mongering of formulae which seem to mean one thing and really import the opposite.⁸

In recent writings he has occasionally given expression to a certain type of mysticism. Thus he speaks of religion making real a "sense of the whole," a "sense of the community." The symbol of God finds somewhat incidental use in the closing pages of *Human Nature and Conduct*. God as used there would seem synonymous with all those elements of our environment that have shaped our natural and social order. Dewey has not carried out the thought expressed here but it seems capable of further development.

⁸ Dewey, *Hibbert Journal*, VI, 799.