John Dewey and the Reality of God

Philip J. Knight

Introduction

It might be unkindly said of 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism that it dabbles around in the entrails of theological striptease, trying to find in long discarded theological clothing the material to tailor a suit to fit a body that isn't there. In this paper I might possibly be construed as dabbling in this way. I would prefer to be considered as offering at worst a pin or two that might assist in the non-realist tailoring but at best, perhaps optimistically, as suggesting a model or pattern around which the non-realist tailor might cut his or her suit. The pattern I wish to outline was drawn initially by the American pragmatist John Dewey and was published in 1934 in a short book called A Common Faith. My aid in this paper will be to summarize Dewey's understanding of God in order to suggest that it be considered as offering important proposals for the type of theological reconstruction that religious non-realists aim to achieve. The paper will divide into three parts. In the first I shall consider the development of Dewey's understanding of the reality of God. In the second part I shall summarize the last stage of this development as it appears in his book A Common Faith. In the third I shall raise the question of atheism.

Six Stage Development in John Dewey's Understanding of the Reality of God

Neglected for about thirty years, the 1990s have seen a revival of interest in the work of John Dewey. This revival is evidenced by the publication of three major biographies since 1991: Robert B. Westbrook's, John Dewey and American Democracy, Alan Ryan's John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism and Steven C. Rockefeller's, John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism. The latter, as the title suggests, concentrates on Dewey's philosophy in the light of his sensibility to religious belief. It provides a comprehensive guide to Dewey's thought on theological matters and to Dewey's own personal religious development.

Rockefeller distinguishes six stages in the development of Dewey's religious thinking: first, from an early age, until the late 1870s, Dewey belonged to his local Vermont Congregational Church, although without sharing a whole-hearted commitment to its doctrinal beliefs. Nevertheless, the Church's influence stretched into the second stage (1878-1892) as the vehicle by which Dewey was introduced to Vermont transcendentalism; a blend of Kant's practical reason and Wordsworthian romanticism. At this stage Dewey gained a lifelong regard for the religious dimension of experience; the sense of awe and wonder, dependence, peace and joy that come with a mystical appreciation in which one sees oneself and one's community as integrated within the whole that constitutes the universe. Dewey claims to have had such an experience himself at
this stage and although he attributed it to aspects of his own psychology he
found it significant nonetheless. Talking about the experience fifty years later,
Dewey claimed that after it, he no longer had any doubts about the value and
meaning of life and thus no need of beliefs either.  

The third stage (1882-1887) coincides with Dewey’s early teaching career
during which he was heavily influenced by absolute idealism. Hegelian philos­
ophy appeared to offer an understanding of the individual in relation to the
whole which did not require belief in external revelation, disruption of natural
processes or assent to ossified timeless dogma. It appealed to Dewey’s desire
for a unified method of knowledge and spoke of the ‘absolute’ with the trap­
pings of Christian doctrine to which Dewey could not give his full assent. In
this third stage, characterized by his book Psychology published in 1887,
Dewey attempted to create a synthesis between Hegelian rationalism and the
method of scientific inquiry that derived knowledge from experience. ‘Psy­
chology’ is the term Dewey gave to the ground of this synthesis. In human psy­
chology the absolute personality of Hegel’s system is united with the individual
inquiring scientific personality. At this stage, Rockefeller notes, Dewey ‘identi­
fies the reality of God with God’s realization in a being like man and rejects
any notion that God is an eternal static being existing wholly apart from the
world of time, process, and becoming.’ However, as Rockefeller makes clear,
Dewey did not, as William James did, make God a finite dweller in time and
space. For Dewey, at this stage, time exists within the absolute and so God
remains in some unspecified way an individual centre of consciousness distinct
from human personality. Nevertheless, the idea of the realization of the
absolute in the human enabled Dewey to unite human scientific and experi­
mental inquiry with rational philosophy and to assert the union of the actual
inquiring self, that is the individual person, with the ideal rational self, that is,
the perfect personality of God. Since, for Dewey, both the inquiring self and
the perfect self had Truth, Goodness, Beauty and Being as their guiding
objects, the self’s union with the divine is to be seen as occurring through
human endeavours in science, art, social relations and religion. Religion makes
this union manifest and leads us, Dewey writes, ‘to belief and trust that God is
in all our life, and is all around us and about us.’ At this stage, the reality of
God is the source of all human action and the ground of personality. Whereas
moral action, for Dewey, tried to conform the actual to the ideal, ‘religious
action is action directed at the embodiment of the ideal in the actual’ and
truth conceived in terms of the use that such action has.

The fourth stage in Dewey’s account of the reality of God is marked by
three major developments in his thought. First, his increasing use of Darwinian
rather than Hegelian terminology to explain the relation of humankind to its
environment; second, as a result of his Darwinism, a shift from absolute to eth­
ical idealism; and third, his increasing use of the pragmatic test of truth. At this
stage Dewey drops the notion of the absolute Will and instead attempts to rec­
oncile Christianity to modern culture by demythologizing the transcendent
God of the Bible in terms of the goods of human social life, democracy, open
unfettered inquiry and education. In this period, God's reality is no longer viewed as the absolute of neo-Hegelian idealism, but 'the organic unity of the world' interchangeable with nature and the immanent life of personality. At this stage, Rockefeller comments that for Dewey:

Divine revelation is the disclosure of truth in general, . . . the Incarnation is the presence of God in all persons and society; [while] . . . the true church and kingdom of God are to be identified with the democratic community.\(^7\)

However, Dewey's increasing acceptance of naturalism and pragmatism and his move to Chicago that cut his ties with the institutional church of his youth also led to the abandonment of this liberal theology. In the fifth stage, from 1894-1928, Dewey is mostly silent on religious matters. In works like *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*\(^8\) Dewey explains that he rejected idealism because it was pragmatically useless. Instead he affirms a naturalism which does not reduce to materialism but asserts the natural origins of science as well as art, philosophy as well as religion, human experience as well as human imagination. At this fifth stage, Dewey's earlier Hegelian panentheism has slipped into a religious naturalism in which God is now to be viewed as a projection of human values. At this stage Dewey can be seen as America's Feuerbach.

However, Dewey had not dispensed with the idea of God. In the sixth stage, Dewey combines the social concern of the demythologized gospel of his fourth stage, the union of the Ideal in the actual of the third stage, and the emphasis upon experience which had dominated his thought since the second stage. He then views them in the light of the imaginative projection of his fifth stage. The result was his naturalistic religious humanism to which he gives expression in his book *A Common Faith*. Condemning both supernatural theism and atheism, he adumbrates in this sixth stage what Rockefeller describes as 'a major alternative way of being religious open to modern men and women.'\(^9\) In part two of this paper I shall briefly summarize what Dewey says about the reality of God in this final stage.

**The Reality of God in John Dewey's A Common Faith**

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey makes a distinction between the noun 'religion' and the adjective 'religious'. Whereas the noun denotes the doctrines, practices and the 'supernatural encumbrances' that have grown up around religious faith through the ossification of historic and culturally specific dogmas, the adjective denotes a certain human experience of unseen powers. For Dewey, these unseen powers are those ideal ends that are projected in the human imagination and arise within the natural conditions and processes of human living. The imagination provides a unified notion of the self with the universe, and has a moral and religious function giving guidance to our contingent and transient practices by directing them toward the ideal ends that we currently envision. Such ideal ends, for Dewey, are not to be understood as
JOHN DEWEY AND THE REALITY OF GOD

‘already embedded in the existent frame of things’. To think that they are is to display a lack of moral faith in the need to strive for moral ends. When, however, we maintain moral faith in ideal ends in a way that suggests their total inclusiveness we move from a merely moral faith to the faith that is religious. The religious attitude is defined by Dewey as one that seeks ‘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’.

The ideal ends of religious faith are not to be viewed as being either antecedently realized or guaranteed to prevail. For then, dogmatism would replace the open pursuit of ideal ends and possible future goods closed off by the fixation of religious ideals into credal formulae. Free from such supernatural encumbrances, Dewey suggests:

Any activity pursued on 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.

Thus the religious dimension of experience is potentially available within every human activity and not restricted to a single privileged set of doctrinal formulations which claim to evoke an entity in whom ideal values are already realized. Dewey writes: ‘What I have been criticizing is the identification of the ideal with a particular Being, especially when that identification makes necessary the conclusion that this Being is outside of nature.’

Dewey is not concerned in A Common Faith to provide a new argument for God’s existence based upon his reinterpretation of religious experience. Such arguments prove only that the person affected by such experience has imbibed a certain culture associated with the supernatural dogmas of a religion. For Dewey: ‘The actual religious quality in the experience described is the effect produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production.’ By emphasizing the reality of the effect rather than the causes of religious experience, Dewey believes that the faith that is religious can be emancipated from the beliefs and practices which constitute religion.

Although Dewey’s terminology appears to suggest an analogy of kernel and husk, this appearance is mistaken. For Dewey there is no unchanging central core or essence to religious faith. A better analogy to express his position would be that of birth and growth, the bringing to life of something new. Neither does Dewey allow much time for the idea that the term ‘religion’ denotes a single essence of which the various world religions are multiple expressions. Rather, the religious dimension of experience is as natural to those human beings who practise a religion as it is to those who do not. Again, Dewey’s notion of ideal ends does not imply a further distinction between means and ends. Ideal ends are not ends in themselves, but are part of a plurality of goods manifest in the natural conditions of human experience and in the imaginative
projection of possibilities for growth. They are not to be viewed as final goals to be aimed at as if they were limits to be attained, but point toward directions of change in the ongoing process of life and growth. Thus, Dewey’s understanding of the religious dimension of experience has little heed for the traditional distinctions between kernel and husk, essence and existence or ends and means.

However, Dewey still believes that it is useful to continue to employ the word ‘God’ in his religious vocabulary. Not ‘God’ defined in terms of some antecedently existing supernatural being but in terms of ideal ends. Such ideal ends are not simply mental, for while they have no embodied existence, they are rooted in the material conditions of life – in nature, action, character and personality. It is the active unity of our imaginatively projected ideal ends with the natural conditions that promote their actualization that provides, for Dewey, the meaning of the term ‘God’. Dewey’s use of the term adumbrates a ‘natural piety’ in which human endeavour is conceived in its whole relation to natural and moral ends, community goals and individual aspirations as these are influenced by the inheritance bequeathed by history, and is employed by him because he felt that people ‘would feel a loss if they could not speak of God’.

In a summation of his position on religious faith Dewey asks:

What would be lost if it were . . . admitted that they [the objects of religion] have authoritative claims upon conduct just because they are ideal? The assumption that these objects of religion exist already in some realm of Being seems to add nothing to their force, while it weakens their claim over us as ideals, in so far as it bases that claim upon matters that are intellectually dubious.

Dewey and Atheism

Does this mean that Dewey is just an atheist by a different name? I do not think so. For Dewey atheism lacks that ‘natural piety’ which prevents us from regarding the world as hostile and indifferent. In the religious faith Dewey commends: ‘Use of the word “God” . . . to convey the union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance.’

Further, Dewey opposes atheism because it does not fulfil the purposes of ‘conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received.’ This sense of tradition is best conveyed within the practices of religious faith. It reminds us of our connection to past generations as well as of our responsibility to the future. It also reminds us, in Dewey’s words, that: ‘The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link.’
Despite Dewey's opposition to atheism, John K. Roth has argued that Dewey's critique of supernatural religion does not touch upon more subtle versions of theistic faith exemplified in the work of William James; and, secondly, that Dewey is offering nothing more substantial to theology than that offered by the 'death-of-God' theologians. Both points, I believe, are mistaken. In relation to the first point, it has been noted by William Dean that James' understanding of God is ambiguous, both in respect to his account of God in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and in respect to a comparison with his later account of God in *A Pluralistic Universe*. Here James is expressly critical of the God of theism in favour of a historical and local God. James writes of his finite God: 'Having an environment, being in time, and working out a history just like ourselves, he escapes from the foreignness from all that is human, of the static timeless perfect absolute.' However, James carried over from his previous work the hypothesis that the goodness of such a God could only function if human religious experience was more than psychology. Such experience, he argues, brings us into contact 'with a wider spiritual environment'. But the idea of such an environment does not fit at all comfortably with the idea James has of God as a finite 'Superhuman' in whom the plurality of ideals are already evident and waiting to be communicated to us. Indeed, this idea of God may not even be of much assistance to James' other desire to 'naturalize' the foreign God of theism. For Dean, the value of James is not his theistic subtlety but that, like Dewey, he tells us that 'one can be religious without leaving history.' Roth's argument, in that case, can be seen as gaining its contrastive force from the fact that he confuses the ambiguity in James' position with theistic subtlety and then offers an overly atheistic account of Dewey's religious naturalism.

This brings us to Roth's second point. Contra Roth, Dewey's understanding of the faith that is religious is not a matter of 'man come of age' but a matter of the lack of pragmatic utility and possibilities for human growth in notions of an antecedently existing divine reality. The experience that is religious is now more fruitfully understood in naturalistic terms. According to William Rowe, not only is Dewey 'a naturalist who advances and defends a version of religious humanism', he may also be described, against Rowe, as 'a humanistic theist'. While the use of the term 'theist' is not one I would use to describe Dewey, the suggestion that it is possible should make us think twice about any easy association of Dewey's ideas with those of the 'death-of-God' theologians.

There are further reasons why the label 'atheist' is inappropriate when applied to Dewey. Firstly, there is his own mystic experience that he reports to having had while in his early twenties and secondly, there is in Dewey a sense of personal loss that would accrue if he dropped the term God from his vocabulary. In particular, as Rockefeller shows, a vocabulary about God is movingly manifest in Dewey's own poetry. At this personal level, one might say at the level of prayer, Rockefeller argues that Dewey 'never did entirely abandon the idea of God'. Indeed, Rockefeller asserts that:
His poetry as well as the tenor of his discussion of God in *A Common Faith* indicate that he himself got a certain personal satisfaction and consolation in being able to speak about God or the divine within the framework of his naturalism.\textsuperscript{36}

Can we then see in Dewey's account of the reality of God a new way of being religious that is neither atheistic nor dependent on the idea of an antecedently existent reality? That is, can we have a pragmatic Christianity? If we can, we might have a pattern or model that will assist the work of the religious non-realist tailor.

Notes:


8. Rockefeller, p. 22.


18. *Ibid.*, p. 48. Dewey writes: 'the ideals that move us are . . . not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience (p. 49).

19. Dewey writes, 'It is the active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name "God".' *Ibid.*, p. 51.


32. In a poem about the way he experienced the death of two of his sons, Gordon and Morris, Dewey writes:

To us you came from out of dark
To take the place of him who went—
Quenched that glimmering joyous spark—
Not ours you were, but lent.

To us you came from out of light
Brightest of lights that ever shone
To make dark life sweet and white;
Not ours you were, but God's own loan.

With us a little while, our light, you dwelt—
And did we fail to care or did we care too much?
Again we saw a dying light to darkness melt
While our aching arms vainly strove to touch
And hold our own
God's blessed loan.

Quoted in Rockefeller, John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism, p. 231.

33. Ibid., p. 231.
34. Ibid., p. 522.

Philip J. Knight has recently completed his Ph.D. at the University of Durham.

John and Donald Baillie

George Newlands

John and Donald Baillie were among the most significant Scots theologians of the twentieth century, and indeed since John Macleod Campbell. They were outstanding among a series of distinguished scholars – John McIntyre and Tom Torrance, Donald Mackinnon and John Macquarrie, Ronald Gregor Smith and the magnificent Hugh Ross Mackintosh. I want to suggest here that in the Baillies the Scots theological tradition reached a peak and a maturity, which it urgently needs to recover if it is to provide any effective input into the theology of the next century, beyond the familiar replaying of an all too parochial tune. In the tradition of the Baillies, I shall claim, there are resources to overcome the impenetrable fog of sub-Hauerwasian post-liberalism which sometimes appears to be about to engulf British systematic theology at the approach of the millennium.

John and Donald Baillie were born in the Free Church of Scotland manse of Gairloch in 1886 and 1888. Though John later recalled 'a rigorously Calvinistic upbringing', mainly by their mother who was very soon widowed, there were also astonishingly liberal strands in nineteenth century Free Church culture and a huge respect for learning, which drove the brothers through brilliant academic careers in school at Inverness and university at Edinburgh, both graduating with Firsts in Philosophy, distinction in Divinity and winning every possible prize, medal and fellowship in sight. They both became assistants in