

A More Luminous Life: An Attempt at a Religiously Informed Pragmatism

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A first rate test of the value of any philosophy.... Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?¹

John Dewey is often described in “fatherly” terms, because he took the concerns of earlier generations of American pragmatists, and brought to them the empiricism of the scientific method, thus turning a methodological corner, while preserving concrete concerns expressed in earlier generations. As early as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the rise of Transcendentalism, pragmatism centered on seeing history as the theatre in which the person-in-society uses creative intelligence to engage and construct the world, through experimental reflection and action. Pragmatists stress the voluntaristic and instrumental views of the human person.² Dewey took these concerns and read them through the lens of what he knew of scientific empiricism, considering structures, systems, and social dynamics as part of the equation, in a way not considered by pragmatists before him. He helped pragmatism to see the social context in which dreaming, envisioning, and acting took place. All human interaction could be seen in the light of these contexts, and social intelligence would enable significant human problems to be addressed. At the core of his concerns were ideas which have been the concern of pragmatists since: individual, world, social freedom, and democratic lifestyle.³

In this essay, I will look at the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr and Cornel West, both of whom articulate what West refers to as Prophetic Pragmatism, and see how it might offer a dialogue with Dewey’s pragmatism. My concern is to address the issue of whether or not a spiritually based or religious pragmatism can contribute to the renewal of interest in pragmatism today, for education and society.

Religious criticism of Dewey and pragmatists has been legion. Some is rooted in Dewey’s rejection of moral or religious absolutes. Since this is a hallmark of modernism, often suspect in many ecclesial communities, the critique is all the more pronounced. Dewey’s rejection of religion for “the religious” is based on a three-fold inquiry in which he questions the meaningfulness of religions. He asserts that in studying the religions of the world he observes a lack of unity or uniformity in the various definitions of “unseen powers,” ways of worship, and moral reasoning. Dewey finds a variety and even a sense of contradiction, rather than an overarching unity. This leads him to conclude that religions are not helpful but harmful. Curiously, Dewey demands a uniformity (or a universality of experience) of religions that is absent from his study of other phenomena, where he usually rejoices in difference.⁴

Another religious criticism of Dewey’s is his rejection of any quest by human beings for certainty (articulated by him in the 1929 Gifford Lectures). He is also open to criticism for his seeming rejection of theism as commonly understood, when he

defines God as not a Being but a relationship between the actual and the ideal. For Dewey, “god” is a word that describes human desires and ideals. He rejects the idea that God can be antecedent to human experience or transcend human valuing. Dewey’s God does not exist apart from or prior to human history, but is the ongoing creation of human effort as ideals are acted on in pursuit of desires. For Dewey, God is a name we give to a complex of cultural conditions. To be religious is to give loyalty to heartfelt desires which direct choices in events, and to pursue those desires, even in the face of opposition. There is no transcendent truth, no meaning behind what is in the event. For Dewey there really is no one God, as in Hegel’s Absolute, but in effect many gods.⁵ He may be read as not defining God as some sought-for ideal, which even atheists use as a definition for deity, but as the connecting space between the actual and ideal in the human, that is, a sort of relation, connected with the human will. This vagueness has provoked many criticisms. Dewey’s Christian critics would point out that his undergirding dream of a Beloved Community or Great Society was the direct legacy of the Christian doctrines he openly criticized.⁶ After all, in some other religions, the bringing together of diverse people into the forming of an ideal society was not supposed to be realized in history, but after it. The idea of a Beloved Community within history was central to specific religious communities. It was Jewish and Christian eschatologic language that insisted that this ideal community could begin to be realized in history.

RELIGIOUSLY INFORMED PRAGMATISM

Not all of these religious criticisms of Dewey are shared by all religionists. Notable among the exceptions are people like Niebuhr and West. Both Niebuhr and West join Dewey in rejecting the idea that human beings can know or actualize absolutes in moral or spiritual truth. Both join him in setting aside the quest for certainty and focusing instead on the ways in which humans know experimentally.⁷ They are joined by other pragmatic, liberal, and modernist theologians in this claim, as well as some neo-orthodox ones.⁸

Religiously informed pragmatists will differ about the nature of God, but tend to understand God—though experienced personally—as impersonal and processive, the ground of being. The divine is described as immanent in the work of building a society of love and justice. The transcendence of the divine is often viewed as an important reminder that God cannot be “captured” by any method or movement. One way to address this is by limiting theological talk to what can be known experimentally, and leaving aside speculation about God (making “reasonable” conclusions not validated by experience). Christian pragmatists seem to agree with critics of Dewey that his reduction of God to a human processive element is dismissing the God encountered by religious people. They seek to remain pragmatists while recovering a sense of the antecedent or transcendent. They also describe the immanence of the divine as a guiding presence, an integrative spirit, which is more than a merely processive link, as in Whitehead. Early religious pragmatists were noted for the many ways they tended to trust scientific method more readily than their religious confreres. In seeking to construct a “prophetic pragmatism” that both respects Dewey and yet challenges him at important points, these pragmatists offer some insights that might be brought to bear on issues facing society and education today.⁹

It should be pointed out that while Niebuhr and West are often cited as critics of Dewey, they have more in common with him than other critics are willing to acknowledge. While Niebuhr is often recalled as a critic of Dewey in his own time, it should also be remembered that Dewey and Niebuhr were friends, colleagues, and fellow pragmatists. When Niebuhr ran for office in Detroit, Dewey actively campaigned on his behalf. Both West and Niebuhr join Dewey and all pragmatists in rejecting the quest for certainty as misleading and harmful, setting aside absolutes, and stressing the role of human agency in building the future. With Dewey, they emphasize the recovery of the social, the importance of experimental knowing, and the building of a social democracy. Dewey had concerns about religion that might bother a number of people of faith, yet most of those concerns were expressed in other ways by theological pragmatists like West and Niebuhr. They are concerned that the church often got in the way of what it was supposed to proclaim, and they believe that the proclaiming, by Jesus, of a “Kingdom” is more commentary on this life than the afterlife.¹⁰

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Niebuhr, a contemporary of Dewey, was an ordained minister in the Evangelical and Reformed Church (now the United Church of Christ), within the Reformed tradition of Protestantism. Pastoring an inner city church in Detroit, he became involved in radical politics. His involvement with community organizing, his frustrations with pietistic congregants, and his confrontations with the automotive giants of Detroit, led him to become both a convinced pragmatist and a dedicated social democrat.

He became known for his criticisms of Dewey when he wrote his now famous book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. This book is a religious and political criticism of an optimistic view of education and democracy. It seeks to address problems that Niebuhr saw in two separate movements he was himself a part of: the Social Gospel Movement and Pragmatism. For Niebuhr, both are well intentioned but shallow and naive at certain important points. Dewey is only mentioned a few times, notably in the introductory remarks where Niebuhr lays the framework for his argument. There he criticizes Dewey explicitly, for a certain naiveté about group power dynamics, suggesting that Dewey’s approach is to believe that with enough time and education, social transformation is somehow inevitable. The rest of the text, with Dewey in the background, is not so much a tirade against Dewey, but of those who use his ideas to promote a naive approach to education and social democracy. Niebuhr suggests that Deweyans have an overly optimistic view of education, not realizing that for it to be transformative, it must have a sense of what he calls morale—a motivating energy that incites transformation. Yet, clearly, the groundwork for this misuse is laid at the feet of the Chicago professor. He calls Dewey “a typical and convenient example” of the errors of thought he wishes to address.¹¹

Niebuhr’s Christian Pragmatism is influenced by his Calvinist theological underpinnings. Conscious of sin and weakness as always present in human life, he distrusts social and political power when concentrated in the hands of groups as well as individuals. He appears to be the pessimist in contrast to Dewey the optimist,

although he would want to be called a realist. His main concerns and fears are that Dewey and others are misreading the complexity of the human person (*MM*, xv-xvi).¹²

First, Niebuhr believes it is a tragic mistake to give an optimistic reading of how educationally centered democracy can change society for the better. He warned against the idea that once educated and participating in society, people would see the obvious truths and pursue them. Dewey had said that what stands in the way of progress is “a lot of outworn traditions, moth-eaten slogans, and catchwords.”¹³ Niebuhr saw the real obstacle not as traditions and habit, but egoism: power hungry, predatory self-interest. Predatory self-interest is a Deweyan phrase, but one Dewey seemed to use lightly, in passing, and never explored. Dewey and his followers seem to ascribe social conservatism to a lack of education or plain ignorance, thinking that the overcoming of ignorance would then usher civilization out of a socially conservative muddle. Niebuhr sees this as naive, even sentimental. The true problem is the self-centeredness of those who benefit, knowingly or not, from the present arrangement of power (*MM*, x-xv). He insists that the average pragmatist, spurred on by Dewey’s optimism, fails to take into account the nature of the relationship between reason and impulse, saying “this theory hardly does justice to the complexities of human behavior and to the inevitable conflicts between the objectives determined by reason and those of the total body of impulse” (*MM*, 35).

Second, Niebuhr approaches the dynamics of group power differently than Dewey. He notes that Deweyans claim that a proper educational setting in an open democracy can address social problems in ways that bring justice and meaning. But this approach, Niebuhr claims, too easily trusts those in positions of power in the society as well as in the educational systems. Deweyans seem to Niebuhr to believe that a good educational system will make the answers to problems so readily apparent that all will voluntarily want to effect the needed change. He points out that even if it were the case that education made clear the changes necessary, society would still have to deal with the complex issues of self-interest. He calls this the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion. Dewey’s social analysis calls for empirical science to free society from ill. Niebuhr is quick to point out that the methods Dewey borrows from science are from the physical sciences, not the social ones. Dewey seems to have a trust in physicalism that extends to social relations and interaction. Niebuhr believes this is unrealistic. “The physical sciences gained freedom when they overcame the traditionalism based on ignorance, but the traditionalism which the social sciences face is based upon the economic interest of the dominant social classes who are trying to maintain their special privileges in society.” Besides this, for Niebuhr, science is a very important and trustworthy tool, and can tell us many things, but it can not tell meaning or value. That comes from reflection, faith, and insights into experience (*MM*, xiv).

Third, Niebuhr is bothered by the easy moralism of many of Dewey’s followers. He believed that followers of Dewey’s pragmatism all too easily made ethical dreams a sort of absolute norm, interpreting everything through a moral filter. For Niebuhr, the only absolute is God, who remains undefined and undefinable because

of transcendence, reminding human beings of their creaturely finitude, and the limitations of even their best visions and plans (*MM*, 52-53). Not only was the Deweyan concern for moralism seen as problematic in the face of pragmatism's rejection of absolutes, but by viewing every human act through the lens of the ethical, life became a series of crises and problems to be solved, rather than a mystery to be embraced. Ethics thus becomes complicated, and social ethics trumps personal ethics and therefore personal responsibility. Social intelligence becomes a rationale for a moralistic view of life. For Niebuhr, social ethics was not actually an invitation to goodness. It could not be, because of the competing forces and pressures built into social and political interaction. He saw the invitation to love as a mark of religion or spirituality, but an inculcation of the fear of social rejection as a hallmark of social reality. In thus tending toward fear, rather than love (however unintentionally or unplanned), even through empirical arguments, the Deweyan obsession with moralistic argument appealed to something less than the ideal it sought to strive toward (*MM*, 51-82).

Finally, Niebuhr looks at the relationship between the individual and society differently than Dewey. Niebuhr warns that groups, especially institutional groups are completely different from individuals. Niebuhr claims that Dewey recognizes the good side of social dynamics, but ignores the side of those dynamics that can become demonic. He sees Dewey viewing society as not much more than an individual writ large. Groups are not persons, and they are not to be studied as if they were physical specimens, two criticisms he makes of Dewey in the analysis of social reality. He notes that individuals can be decent and reasonable with each other in ways groups tend not to be.

Niebuhr is sure that Dewey is correct in his proposing social conversation on a subgroup and individual level, in a homogenous society. He doubts that it will work in more complicated and diverse settings. He is not sure that Dewey, in his optimism, fully acknowledges that diversity. Niebuhr makes the case that the morality of groups is inferior to the morality of individuals and so, it frustrates him to see Deweyans talk about groups and social institutions as if they could be treat each other as one individual would treat another. The individual was capable of love, and creating interwoven relationships held together by love, but society, though it might talk about love, is about conflict and justice issues. Nations and institutions of all forms (including churches) devolve into selfishness out of desire for self-preservation. Pride and easy self-deception mark the moral decisions of all institutional groupings: church, state, schools, and voluntary associations (*MM*, 83-112).

CORNEL WEST

West, a leader in the African-American community and a current contributor to Christian and Marxist journals and political discussion, identifies himself as a prophetic pragmatist pursuing love and justice in the face of malicious environments, refusing to be deterred from a democratic and Christian dream by stultifying events. A person holding such a viewpoint recognizes there are reasons for cynicism without becoming the cynic, and finds courage to live love in the face of the darkness of the night. A prophetic pragmatist, West embraces pragmatism with the insights of religious interpretation. A future rooted in hope is the truth of God, to which

faithful people give witness by their lives, their struggles, their compassion. Such a pragmatist also rejects belief in a dogmatic endpoint, whether that endpoint is defined by religion or political ideology, and embraces the process and the chosen procedures by which growth can be pursued, in light of an encounter with the divine. It means to recognize in the stories of Israel and Jesus, the reality of suffering as well as the recognition of the inevitability of personal and institutional evil. With Chekhov and Kierkegaard and others as guides, West embraces a skeptical Christianity that questions everything existentially.¹⁴

For West, Dewey brings American philosophy and particularly pragmatism to its highest level of sophistication. Dewey defines the essentials of pragmatism, as inspired by Emerson, and points out the problems inherent in the totalizing tendencies of the works of Europeans like Hegel and Marx. He is also praised by West because he anchors his thought in the valuing of the individual, social freedom, and democracy (*AE*, 69-74). West rests his criticism of Dewey on three points: his deification of power, his ignorance of class issues, and his clinging to an outmoded homogenous view of society. The first point, the deification of power," is the way West addresses the optimism of Dewey about social intelligence. He believes that Dewey's optimism is unrealistic and will allow and encourage trust in structures that tend to embrace, through fallible institutions, the very totalization he wishes to oppose. Here, he particularly identifies with Niebuhr's criticism. Dewey places so much authority in the hands of the powerful who are educated in social intelligence and he does not see how that social intelligence can become demonic (*AE*, 101).

West also believes that Dewey was never able to transcend his own class loyalties; and that he remained trapped in a view of society that depended on middle-class notions such as professionalism. West points out that Dewey criticizes these values at points, yet continued to promote them in writings and addresses, as the attitudes that undergirded much of his dream for education and society. He sees Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* as the best American defense of democratic socialism (*AE*, 154). In his reading, Dewey seems not to be able to acknowledge the role that class difference plays, except in passing, so that it never becomes part of his analysis, nor of his democratic proposal (*AE*, 83).

Finally, West points out that these presuppositions on the part of Dewey lock him into a view of ideal society that is actually premodern. The society Dewey describes when he talks of democracy is a carrier of middle-class values, is homogenous, and is almost pre-industrial in make-up and structure. That is to say it is more reliant on *gemeinschaft* than *gessellschaft* (*AE*, 54-156).

DIALOGUE WITH DEWEY

What can a religious or theistic pragmatism have to offer the wider range of pragmatism, in light of this encounter of Dewey with West and Niebuhr? In social and political conversation, as well as the educational context, what might a turn of the century pragmatism take into the future from religious voices within pragmatism? I have four suggestions.

First, both Niebuhr and West would call us to a truth central to Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions, that asserts that suffering is a fact of life that shapes

our world and our relationships. (Suffering—or its analysis—does not seem to be a concern for Dewey, as, for instance, ignorance might be.) This suffering, or conflict, experienced socially as poverty, class difference, exclusion, oppression, and injustice, is a necessary focus of political discussion and the educational task. The idea that the work of education and social conversation or politics would eradicate suffering is naive. Having said that, the pursuit of such an eradication is not to be laid aside, but to be addressed realistically, as a necessary challenge for human society, acknowledging our limitations and the complexities of history as we construct it. Here, it would be important to teach consciousness of difference associated with race, class, gender, age, and other signifiers of suffering which can be addressed socially. It would also seem important to explore ways in which religion or spirituality can enhance the social conversation in promoting the dignity and worth of each person.

Second, there is the concern for what West calls the deification of power, and which Niebuhr addresses in his criticism of the naiveté of certain forms of pragmatism. This concern is about how readily we trust the exercise of power. A religiously informed pragmatism would suggest modesty in the development and exercise of power, and a readiness to acknowledge the limitations of knowledge and power. We become self-congratulatory otherwise, thinking we can banish human problems forever, or dismissing problems as simply a part of life to which we must adjust. Helping students and citizens to see problems as challenges that are open ended, and always in need of interrogation, will provide an appropriate humility that just might keep us from what religious pragmatists see as the idolatry of power. Here, an education that encourages students to question, learn, and relate to the world in a democratic fashion would help discourage concentration of power in the hands of a professional few. Studying how power is exercised in various settings and institutions, and how privilege perpetuates itself in general would be specific tactics that both West and Niebuhr might encourage. Reading them suggests that students and citizens would profit from a public discourse (in a variety of venues, schools included) on how best to create conditions for the sharing of power in ways that do not consolidate it in a privileged group or class.

A religiously informed pragmatism might curb the temptation to an empirical positivism with the consideration of other modes of knowing, in cultures and religions. Working this out in the school as well as voluntaristic associations—insuring a variety of voices—could be first steps to modeling new ways of exercising power for the larger citizenry. Curiously, in arguing against Dewey's concern for ethics, Niebuhr falls back on the conflict of one power with another as a rationale for not being ethically consistent. As he criticizes Dewey for placing empiricism over power issues, so he seems to place power over ethical goods. Here, he can learn from Dewey something of the importance of the ethical in planning and carrying out acts of social engagement. The development of moral discussion around issues of power, especially the exercise of institutional power, would seem to be part of the concern for progress that would mark a pragmatist.

Third, religiously informed pragmatists would embrace Dewey's pragmatism with a healthy dose of skepticism about any leaning toward sentimentality. To a

great degree, one can read this as the underlying concern in Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, because he criticizes both a certain form of pragmatism as well as the Social Gospel, for engaging in a kind of nostalgia. Honesty is called for in assessing the problems that face individuals and society, plus an understanding of how social realities continue to change. It can be argued that a certain nostalgia informs an attitude in society today which seeks answers to complex educational and social problems in simple formulae, for instance, we seek better schools by way of standardized testing, we seek safer streets by way of mandatory sentencing. This kind of sentimentality needs to be challenged.

Finally, religiously informed pragmatists would have us consider a wider role in education and political discussion for conversation on meaning and valuing. This is where Niebuhr and West both rely on religious experience to help raise to the surface enduring concerns for meaning and a sense of purpose that motivate women and men to work for democratic values and social progress. Listening to what others believe, and why and how their beliefs and narratives shape relationships and social commitments, especially in an increasingly diverse society, may be a first step toward a society that truly listens to and celebrates its moving beyond the myth of homogeneity.

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1. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).
 2. Morris Dickstein, ed., *The Revival of Pragmatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 73, 260-61.
 3. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 70. This book will be cited as *AE* in the text for all subsequent references.
 4. John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 4-6, 12-13.
 5. *Ibid.*, 49-52; see also, Sydney Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1939/1971), 221.
 6. Any number of "orthodox" Protestant and Catholic writers have criticized Dewey's proposals in the past. Neo-conservatives lead the way today, in journals like *First Things*.
 7. Dickstein, *The Revival of Pragmatism*, 404-16.
 8. Examples would include the writings of James Cone, Karl Barth, Martin Buber, and A.N. Whitehead.
 9. Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 149-74.
 10. Dickstein, *The Revival of Pragmatism*, 404-16.
 11. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1932), xiii-xv. This book will be cited as *MM* in the text for all subsequent references.
 12. The idea of predatory self-interest is a concern of Dewey, but not a central concern in his analysis, as it is for Niebuhr, who sees it as central when dealing with power. Dewey seems to equate sin with ignorance, while Niebuhr equates it with self-interest.
 13. John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1931), 232.
 14. West, *The Cornel West Reader*, xi-xx, 3-18