

## On the Dangers of Putting New Wine into Old Bottles

Christine McCarthy  
*University of Iowa*

Revelation, John Dewey writes, must reveal.<sup>1</sup> In an early essay, “Christianity and Democracy” (1893), Dewey begins a dangerous process of attempting to put the new wine of scientific thought into the old bottles of religious rhetoric. Dewey argues that Christianity is unique among religions because it sets out no essential dogma. It has as its only claim merely that God is truth. The revelations, then, for the “true” Christian, are simply “revelations of truth.” And “[t]he revelation of truth must continue as long as life has new meanings to unfold.” (*EW*, 4, 5).

“Revelation” is an ongoing process, and, when Christian organizations preach fixity, that it “is a sign that the real Christianity is now working...beyond the organization, that the revelation is going on in wider and freer channels” (*EW*, 4, 5). Dewey continues, that in *these* times, the best revelations of truth are made in “what we term science” (*EW*, 4, 6). By this carefully arranged argument, Dewey concludes that the best Christianity is in fact...science. The problem of any potential conflict between religious thought and scientific thought is dissolved, dialectically. This argument appears in a very early essay, and its appearance at that time is not surprising. But its appearance in his mature work is. Dewey, in “A Common Faith,” argues for the retention of the ancient religious terms, wholly redefined to suit a scientific philosophy. But Dewey’s philosophic positions are inconsistent with the supernaturalism integral to religious thought. Dewey abandons supernaturalism, but continues to employ its language.

There is a proverbial danger associated with putting new wine into old bottles. Putting naturalistic beliefs into the old bottles of religious language creates a problem, though it is not that the old bottles might break. These particular bottles are far too strong. And they have a way of transforming any “new content” put into them back into a duplicate of the old.

Joseph Meinhart asks, “Can a spiritually based or religious pragmatism...contribute to the renewal of interest in pragmatism today?” Given the growing interest in “spirituality,” it just might. But would it be Deweyan? Dewey maintains, not that religions are “meaningless,” but that the term “religion” covers such a disparate collection of beliefs that *the term* becomes effectively meaningless. Given the diversity of interpretations of “religion,” we can scarcely tell what is “religion” and what is not (*LW*, 9, 5). Dewey sees in this an invitation to proceed further along the interpretive path. Meinhart points out rightly that Dewey rejects, explicitly, all organized institutions laying claim to be “religious,” and all forms of supernaturalism, and seeks to disentangle supernaturalism from the “genuinely religious” (*LW*, 9, 4). But, what *is* the “genuinely religious?” For Dewey, the “religious” is a certain quality of experience, which may belong to any and every experience. Dewey writes, “[a]ny activity pursued in 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”(LW, 9, 19). The experience of anyone with a stalwart commitment to actualizing an ideal would now be “religious.”

Further, “[w]hatever introduces genuine perspective” into one’s life is “religious” (LW, 9, 17). In general, any experience has a “religious” quality, Dewey stipulates, when the effect of that experience is to bring about “a better, deeper and enduring adjustment in life” (LW, 9, 11). Such experiences contribute to “a thorough-going and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe” (LW, 9, 14). Morality, too, can be “religious,” but only when “the ends of moral conviction arouse emotions that are not only intense but are actuated and supported by ends so inclusive that they unify the self” (LW, 9, 16). So, experiences that are profoundly moving, and life-altering, in a positive way, are held to be “religious” in quality. Dewey seems to be making (to borrow a line from Peirce) not so much a philosophical point as “a new contribution to English lexicography.” And he makes others.

The “unseen power controlling our destiny,” that is, “God, becomes, in Dewey’s transformation, one of two quite natural things. First, the “unseen power” might be conceived as merely the power of an ideal (which, being ideal, is “unseen”) to control our activities. Or, perhaps the “invisible powers” of traditional religion “would take on the meaning of all the conditions of nature and human association that support and deepen the sense of values which carry one through periods of darkness and despair” (LW, 9, 11). Later, Dewey connects these, writing that “God” is the name that he would select for the “*active* relation between ideal and actual” (LW, 9, 34).

Meinhart points out that “Christian pragmatists,” along with various “religiously informed” critics of Dewey, take Dewey to be “dismissing the God encountered by religious people.” And this is precisely what he is doing. The traditional “God” concept, the supreme and supernaturally powerful Being, is eliminated, entirely, from Dewey’s position. What we have, instead, under the name “God,” turns out to be simply human beings, working intelligently and cooperatively in the context of natural conditions, to bring cherished ideals into actuality. “Religious faith” is strongly recommended by Dewey, but not, of course, in the traditional sense. The new “religious faith” is to be a “[f]aith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor” (LW, 9, 18). This faith, that is, faith in intelligence, Dewey asserts is “more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation” (LW, 9, 18).

Dewey, in 1934, is employing the same “redefinition” strategy he had used in 1893, but with greater and even more extensive revisions in meanings. Dewey acknowledges the possibility that his strategy might backfire. He writes, “[t]here are those who hold that the associations of the term [“God”] with the supernatural are so numerous and close that any use of the word “God” is sure to give rise to misconception and be taken as a concession to traditional ideas” (LW, 9, 35). Dewey allows that this might be correct. In my view, it is transparently correct. But Dewey chooses to risk that misinterpretation, in an attempt to harness the fervor of traditional religion to intelligent social action. He writes, “[o]ne of the few experiments in the attachment of emotion to ends that mankind has not tried is that of

devotion, so intense as to be religious, to intelligence as a force in social action" (*LW*, 9, 52). This tactic, employing religious words for naturalistic meanings, seems unlikely to increase devotion to intelligence, because the "new" meanings are too quickly forgotten. Niebuhr's criticism of Dewey's optimism in believing that "once educated people would see the obvious truths and pursue them" is apt here. Dewey considered a most obvious truth to be that the supernatural, including the "Supreme Being," of religious lore was nothing more than a figment. Yet most people seem not see this obvious truth at all. Education was to have led to a secularized society able to relinquish the superstitions of the past—and we have, today, a great deal of education. Dewey does seem to have been too optimistic. Unless, of course, we do not have "education" in the sense that Dewey had in mind. Dewey's education would have fostered a scientific way of thinking, and a scientific frame of reference, in the population at large. And it was the widely shared scientific outlook that should have both freed us from religion and led to ethical progress in the social sphere. A key word here is "widely." There is no justification in Dewey's thought for the vesting of authority in the hands of a powerful few.

What about the possibility of effective social conversation in a fundamentally heterogeneous society, composed of those who accept the idea of an actually existent supernatural realm, and those who do not? Again, Niebuhr's pessimistic account seems all too accurate. Disagreement within a society about the fundamentals, that is, the nature of what exists, the nature of knowledge, and the means of attaining knowledge, is an obstacle to cooperative social action to achieve common ideals. The remedy is the *general* spread, via education, of "social intelligence," so that in this fundamental respect the society would be unified. Only with this form of homogeneity can an otherwise diverse society find the possibility of resolving the difficulties inherent in diversity. West's critique of Dewey, for this reason, misses the mark with respect to class and power. (West's apparent fear of a social intelligence that might someday become "demonic" is hard to comprehend from a naturalistic perspective.)

Meinhart is right that Dewey focused intently on the ethical, and did view life, *in part*, as "a series of crises and problems to be solved." Absent an all-powerful God-figure, it becomes abundantly clear that we are on our own, that the problems *we* do not solve are not going to get solved. And absent any supernatural compensation, there is no escaping this fact. This does not seem like "sentimentality" to me. Because of the conceptual difference in the matter of "God," Niebuhr's and West's positions are inconsistent with Dewey's.

Finally, what about the possibility of "other modes of knowing?" Meinhart's suggestion that "a religiously informed pragmatism might curb the temptation to an empirical positivism" is telling. Dewey's empirical naturalism allows only one mode of knowing, *viz.*, the naturalistically conceived inquiry process. Revelation, in the traditional sense, cannot lead to knowledge. Meinhart's suggestion that it can illustrates the flaw in Dewey's re-definition strategy. Despite the ingenious rhetorical moves by which Dewey superimposed new naturalistic meanings over the traditional supernatural, the original meanings invariably reappear. And the new meanings are lost.

So, in conclusion, can we link “religious” language to Dewey’s philosophy? Yes, but only in a manner of speaking. Should we adopt that language, following Dewey’s example? No, not if we value, and wish to advance, the *substance* of the philosophical positions Dewey set out.

---

1. John Dewey, *The Early Works 1882-1898*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 5. The works of John Dewey will be cited according to *Early Works 1882-1898 (EW)*, *Middle Works 1899-1924 (MW)*, and *Later Works 1925-1953 (LW)* in the text for all subsequent references. Volume and page number follow initials of the series.