The Crossroads of Poetry and Prophecy

Jim Garrison
Virginia Tech

We live in destitute times wherein religious faith has fled taking with it the fundamental existential questions: What is life? How should one live? What does life mean? One cannot fail to answer these questions; they can only fail to acknowledge them. Prophetic pragmatism is a powerful approach to questions of ultimate concern.

I applaud Milligan for proposing an ideal of inclusion whose epistemology emphasizes attunement to the voice of others. For liberal pluralists, though, "the Other" is more likely to be Jerry Falwell than gays or minorities. This is dangerous ground for the orthodox liberal; I admire Milligan for not fleeing the field.

Warren Nord challenges pluralist liberals to be more inclusive of religious possibility in the school. Nord argues that, according to Milligan, "To be neutral, public education must take live religious options seriously as contenders for the truth." The guiding idea in Nord's plea rests upon free market metaphors. Milligan senses correctly that Nord's market place metaphors are inadequate and proposes Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism as an alternative; that is a good idea.

Milligan characterizes Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism as addressing several shortcomings found in other forms of pragmatism. By embracing a progressive Marxism it overcomes deficiencies in pragmatism's analysis of political and economic forces. Prophetic pragmatism is also more sensitive to issues of race and, supposedly, better appreciates that a deep sense of evil and tragedy must infuse the meaning of democracy. West's version of prophetic pragmatism is Christological and believes that human beings are created in the image of God. Above all, the prophetic pragmatist is obligated to struggle toward values that transcend history because there are ideals that are, in a sense, "unattainable by historically defined individual human beings." Finally, prophetic pragmatist teaching places ethics, rather than knowledge, at the center of educational practice. I admire the prophetic pragmatism of Milligan and West, although my prophetic pragmatism takes a more Deweyan direction. Allow me to offer my pragmatic testimony while affirming Milligan's attitude of enthusiastic religiosity before the larger existential questions.

I am a devoted naturalist for whom there is nothing supernatural; there is only the natural we do not understand. Further, I do not want to believe that there is an end of history, for if there is that place is hell to me. Those that contemplate heaven's perfection envision a realm where they may rest from the weary work of the natural world. Strangely, they never contemplate the repugnance of a world where there is no more meaning to be made.

Progress is desirable, but it is a teleological term that depends on where one wants to go. Dewey was *not* a naive progressivist: "There is something pitifully juvenile in the idea that "evolution," progress, means a definite sum of accomplishment which will forever stay done, and which by an exact amount lessens the amount

still to be done, disposing once and for all of just so many perplexities and advancing us just so far on our road to a final stable and unperplexed goal.[1]" Dewey did not think humanity could stockpile truth until it had warehoused the sum of existence; for him the cosmos was continuously creative.

One does not need to think things are getting better to do their best, or that there is some cosmic guarantee of success. Such is the attitude of the meliorist in contrast to the optimist. Dewey distinguished them this way:

> Meliorism is the belief that...conditions...may be bettered. It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good...and to put forth endeavor for improvement of conditions. It arouses confidence and a reasonable hopefulness as optimism does not. Too readily optimism makes the men who hold it callous and blind to the sufferings of the less fortunate, or ready to find the cause of troubles of others in their personal viciousness.[2]

Prophetic pragmatism seeks salvation in the struggle to realize the best available possibilities. Steven C. Rockefeller writes:

> Dewey is an American Feuerbach...He left the church in the name of human community, abandoned the idea of special revelation in the name of truth and morality, and eventually rejected the God of the church theologians in order to overcome humanities alienation from its own essential goodness and in order to realize the spiritual meaning inherent in ordinary human relations...If in 1894 he was losing his Hegelian faith in the ultimate identity of the ideal and the real, he was not losing his faith that life is in the final analysis worthwhile and full of ideal meaning.[3]

For Dewey the age of revelation is not past: "Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation."[4] Dewey also rejects the doctrine of original sin, along with any idea of evil relying on it, because it alienates humanity from its best possibilities. Personally, I believe that humanity is a participant in an unfinishable pluralistic universe and that human beings are created creators poetically continuing the creation

Humanity answers the existential questions by striving to unite the real and the ideal in thought, feeling, and action. Dewey declared: "Any 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."[5] Insofar as there is any unity between real and ideal that is not accidental, it is an achievement of creative inquiry and action, but what of ideals themselves?

Dewey proclaims: "What I have tried to show is that the ideal itself has its roots in natural conditions; it emerges when the imagination idealizes existence by laying hold of the possibilities offered to thought and action."[6] Ideal values are created through vivid imagination and passionate inquiry. This is why Dewey describes faith "as 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."[7] Poetic creation is crucial to Dewey's prophetic pragmatism including his philosophy of religion and teaching.

Aesthetics occupies a more prominent place in Dewey's prophetic pragmatism than in West's. Dewey argues that religion and poetry are identical in essence varying only in their quality of imagination. Poetry is religion when it *intervenes* in

the affairs of life, and religion, when it merely *supervenes*, is nothing but poetry.[8] Pondering Matthew Arnold's dictum that "poetry is criticism of life" Dewey asks, how is it criticism? He answers:

> By disclosure, through imaginative vision...A sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are when they are put in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating "criticism" of the latter that might be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress.[9]

Poetry, in the classical Greek sense of *poiesis*, or calling into existence, is about constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing the world. That is why Dewey thought imagination "the chief instrument of the good" and "art more moral than moralities."[10]

Dewey boldly declares:

> The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable...Art has been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meaning that transcend indurated habit.[11]

Prophets are poets because they perceive beyond the limits of the actual into the possibility of unifying ideals that could heal our wounds. Truthfully describing the world as it is may be enough for scientists seeking knowledge, but wisdom lies beyond knowledge alone. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech is a fine example of poetic prophetic pragmatism. King knew he was not describing the world as it is, but, instead, a possible union of the real and ideal. Dewey's prophetic pragmatism puts aesthetics rather than epistemology, or even ethics, at the focus education.

According to Dewey:

> Poetry teaches as friends and life teach, by being, and not by express intent...It is by way of communication that art becomes the incomparable organ of instruction, but the way is so remote from that usually associated with the idea of education, it is a way that lifts art so far above what we are accustomed to think of as instruction, that we are repelled by any suggestion of teaching and learning in connection with art. But our revolt is in fact a reflection upon education that proceeds by methods so literal as to exclude imagination and one not touching the desires and emotions of men.[12]

Prophetic pragmatic teaching strives to unify poetically the real and ideal. Prophetic teaching proceeds by methods that emphasize imagination and touch the emotions of women and men. Poetic teaching teaches by existentially Being, and not by express intent; it strives to convene creative and critical conversations in the spirit of democratic pluralism. The goal is to educate aesthetically creative and morally responsible citizens; it is not to train human resources feeding the economic production function. We live in destitute times wherein the gospel of greed and financial profit, not prophecy, answers our existential questions.

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1. John Dewey, "Human Nature and Conduct," *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 197.

2. John Dewey, "Reconstruction in Philosophy," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 12, 181-82.

3. Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 216-17.

4. John Dewey, "A Common Faith," in Jo Ann Boydston, *John Dewey: The Later Works,* vol. 9 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 18.

5. Ibid., 19.

6. Ibid., 33.

7. Ibid., 22.

8. Ibid., 13.

9. John Dewey, "Art as Experience," in Boydston, *The Later Works,* vol. 10 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 349.

10. Ibid., 350.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 349-50.