

Dewey on Religion in Public Schools

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Walter Feinberg invites us to worry about religion and education in a postmodern, liberal, pluralist community. He worries that the basic thrust of modern philosophical thinking on this topic, particularly John Dewey's, is inadequate to the contemporary challenge. And he asks us to consider an approach to religion education that might be more responsive to this need.

FEINBERG'S INTERPRETATION OF DEWEY ON RELIGION AND EDUCATION

Feinberg uses two main sources for his interpretation of Dewey's views on religion and education. First, he cites a Dewey essay from the *Hibbert Journal* in 1908 entitled "Religion and Our Schools."¹ Citing one passage from this article, Feinberg concludes that there is evidence that Dewey was "categorical in his rejection of religion education in the public schools." This source is interesting and problematic in two ways. First, Feinberg correctly recognizes that Dewey's writings were a response to a particular historical moment and have to be understood in context. There is a well-known body of scholarship on Dewey's changing perspectives on religion. For example, we know that in 1884 he wrote of the "obligation to know God."² In 1887 he wrote that the "cause of theology and morals is one and that whatever banishes God from the heart of things...excludes the ideal, the ethical, from the life of man."³ We also know that by 1903 he had developed an account of religious education in which the particular subject matter is irrelevant. He writes, "it is possible to approach the subject of religious instruction in the reverent spirit of science, making the same sort of study of this problem that is made in any other educational problem."⁴ In later years, Dewey was particularly worried about the role of the Catholic Church as a conservative force in the Polish community. This wrestling with religion never left him. In the autobiographical essay "From Absolutism to Experimentalism", Dewey writes dramatically and poignantly about the tension experienced his whole life between pious belief and critical reason. He uses powerful religious terms to describe this tension existentially as an "inward laceration" that left a "stigmata."⁵

This is not to argue that Dewey was for religion in public schools, but rather that Feinberg's conclusion that Dewey was "categorical in his rejection of religion in public schools" based on one paragraph from one essay is inadequate and fails to read Dewey in a dynamic historical and biographical context.

Second, the *Hibbert Journal* article has a history of its own. The first edition of *The Library of Living Philosophers* in 1939 was devoted to Dewey. Edward L. Schaub contributed a chapter on "Dewey's Interpretation of Religion."⁶ The two primary sources for this chapter were the *Hibbert Journal* essay and Dewey's *A Common Faith*. Dewey responds to Schaub in the same volume. First, Dewey is perplexed that Schaub places so much attention on the *Hibbert Journal* article as "prophetic" about his views on religion as developed. For Dewey, the *Hibbert* piece

was a response to a particular issue at a particular time and was not prophetic about anything. Second, Dewey offers several quotes from this essay and *A Common Faith* to counter the interpretation that he was categorical in his rejection of religion. For example, from *A Common Faith*, “The book was an attempt to show . . . persons that they still have within their experience all the elements which give the religious attitude its value.”⁷ In short, Dewey’s views on religion and religious education have a remarkably dynamic quality, grounded in his own biography as well as responses to historical and political problems. The sources Feinberg uses are limited, open to many alternative interpretations, and inadequate to sustain any “categorical” conclusions.

FEINBERG ON DEWEY AS AN EPISTEMOLOGIST

Feinberg interprets Dewey’s views on religion as an outgrowth of a scientific epistemology. It is hard to know what to make of this interpretation, especially for those, like Feinberg, who recognize a postmodern perspective. A large body of work in philosophy over the last thirty years has offered postmodern, neopragmatist, or postfoundational interpretations of Dewey. At the center of all of this work is the claim that Dewey’s mature work, beginning in the late nineteenth century and extending to *Knowing and the Known*, was an attempt to overcome epistemology as the core concern of philosophy. Central to his argument is the effort to show that experience as lived is uncertain, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and hazardous. Dewey’s argument that we live in an aleatory world, marked as deeply by luck, chance, and fortune as by order and cohesion, is directed against a modernist epistemology of reason and prediction. Dewey did not believe that religion or science was a “truth claims generator.” His case against religion and modern epistemology was based on their claim to predict the future based on speculation about antecedents. Both attempt to control the uncontrollable by appeal to the superstition of order and unity. As he writes in *Experience and Nature*,

We have substituted sophistication for superstition, at least measurably so. But the sophistication is often as irrational . . . as the superstition it replaces. Our magical safeguard against the uncertain character of the world is to deny the existence of chance, to mumble universal and necessary law, the ubiquity of cause and effect, the uniformity of nature, universal progress, and the inherent rationality of the universe . . . Through science we have secured a degree of power and prediction . . . and made the world more comfortable to our needs . . . We have heaped up riches . . . We have professionalized amusement as an agency of escape and forgetfulness. But when all is said and done, the fundamental hazardous character of the world is not seriously modified, much less eliminated.⁸

Feinberg’s interpretation of Dewey as a scientific epistemologist, rejecting religion because of its inadequacy as a “truth claims generator” misses the basic point. Dewey might have been wrong about religion in public schools, but his error was not a consequence of seeing the world through a scientific “epistemological lens.”

WHAT TO DO?

Feinberg argues rightly that schools cannot be “religiously empty” and must provide spaces where the experiences of tragedy, joy, faith, and membership can be learned and shared. He recounts observations in a school where religions are taught as part of the school curriculum and quotes a teacher who describes the pedagogy

and purpose of the course. The language used in this example is wholly derived from a rationalist epistemology. The primary aim of the course is “increased knowledge” rather than “increased tolerance.” Another goal is to teach students to raise “objections” to religious views of other students. Students are taught that they have a “right to respond” in ways that are rational. When emotionally charged words come up, students are asked to “rephrase” and stick to “neutral” and “academic” words that are not open to too many different interpretations. “Offensive,” “irrational,” and “vague” are good academic words, but “crazy” is not. This is a classic expression of modern, liberal, progressive pedagogy and an example of much of what goes on in the public school study of religion. Many schools offer world religion or comparative religion courses that take the same approach. I suppose such schools are not “religiously empty,” but they are hardly responses to the existential concerns of students and sectarian concerns of the parents Feinberg believes are leaving the public schools in order to put their children in private, denominational religious schools or teach them religion themselves at home.

Perhaps there is another model, expressed best by Nel Noddings in *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*.⁹ Here Noddings helps us make a fundamental shift from inquiry into knowledge into inquiry into belief, a move that de-centers epistemology from the core of philosophy in favor of a focus on educational and existential questions. Her aim, like Feinberg and Dewey’s, is to open up a space in schools for conversation and study about the changing and complicated stories of our humanness. Perhaps this is a way to reconnect religion and the religious as things that matter in becoming an educated person.

1. John Dewey, “Religion and Our Schools,” *Hibbert Journal* 6 (1908).

2. John Dewey, “The Obligation to Know God,” in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 61–63.

3. John Dewey, “Ethics and Physical Science,” in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 209.

4. John Dewey, “Religious Education as Conditioned by Modern Psychology and Pedagogy,” in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1903–1906*, vol. 3, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 215.

5. John Dewey, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Structure of Experience*, ed. J.J. McDermott (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1973).

6. Edward L. Schaub, “Dewey’s Interpretation of Religion,” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. P.A. Schilpp (New York: Tudor, 1939).

7. Dewey, “Experience, Knowledge and Value,” 597.

8. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 44–45.

9. Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College, 1993).