

Echoes of the Coming Kingdom of God on  
 Earth in America:  
 The Religious Animation of Sarah Stitzlein’s  
 Hopeful Hope in Democracy

Clarence W. Joldersma  
*Calvin University*

Stitzlein’s insightful and compelling book, *Learning How to Hope*, begins with “[h]ope is at the heart of democracy.”<sup>1</sup> This radical idea has great promise for American society, which alone makes the book worth reading. She suggests teaching habits of hope to motivate citizens towards possibility, improving their own lives and that of others. Schooling should be directed towards citizenship, teaching hope “aimed at sustaining and improving democracy.”<sup>2</sup> Her idea of citizenship is broad. Not just a legal status in a country which offers political rights and responsibilities, citizenship is a social/political identity connected to public practices. Habits of hope are not enacted in individuals pursuing personal goals of individual well-being, but rather towards public good in the social and political realm. In short, Stitzlein’s book addresses “the role hope plays in democracy and how it might be fostered in schools and civil society.”<sup>3</sup>

But what form of hope is at the heart of her vision of democracy? Stitzlein embraces a pragmatist form of hope, a Deweyan inspired hope for a robust democracy—living well together, associatively. It is “a hope that is related to *our* experiences and *our* agency (our ability to participate in and impact democratic life).”<sup>4</sup> This is an active sense of hoping, embodied in taking responsibility for shaping our lives together. It is tied to the well-being of communities, bringing them together to solve common problems. Stitzlein contrasts her pragmatist hope with hope “tied to faith in God.”<sup>5</sup> For her, in formal religions “[t]heologians tend to locate hope in an individual’s faith in a deity who will act on his or her behalf,” where the “desire for a better future... is then allocated based on

the faith, belief, and/or practices of the individual, depending on his religious affiliation.”<sup>6</sup> She depicts religious approaches as depreciating human agency and fostering passivity, and suggests they are inadequate to animate democracy. She summarizes, “[r]ather than a religious faith, which entails an adherence to God or ideology, pragmatists exhibit faith by being willing to try out ideas and to pursue desired ends even in the face of uncertainty or difficulty.”<sup>7</sup>

Stitzlein’s contrast with religion echoes Dewey’s distinction in *A Common Faith* between “religion” (noun) and “religious” (adjective). *Religion* for Dewey “signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization,” i.e., settled doctrines specifying the parameters of organized religion.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, *religious* for Dewey is a spirit moving beyond the actual into what is possible, as if “[a]n unseen power controlling our destiny becomes the power of an ideal.”<sup>9</sup> The *religious* has a “comprehensiveness and intensity” and “[l]ives . . . are consciously inspired by loyalty to such ideas.”<sup>10</sup>

Dewey’s idea of religious (adjective) evidently drew on his own religious tradition of Calvinist congregationalism. Dewey’s pastor at First Congregational Church, Lewis Brastow, emphasized “intelligence and social action . . . and reconstruction.”<sup>11</sup> Brastow explained, “[o]ne should rise to ‘spiritual manhood’ [but] the rescue and reconstruction are not wholly of individual men in their isolation from their fellows, but of men in their associate life . . . No man ever finds completeness in himself . . . only in our associate life. Men must be won to a common life.”<sup>12</sup> Dewey says “[t]he actual religious quality in the experience described is the effect produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions . . . The way in which the experience operated, its function, determines its religious value. If the reorientation actually occurs, it, and the sense of security and stability accompanying it, are forces on their own account.”<sup>13</sup> For Dewey the religious nature of the experience is in its trajectory, a force towards “better adjustment” in living together. Rather than mere accommodation, it is adjustment that signals the experience as religious. What makes it a religious experience is its reorienting power, towards collective security and stability and peace. It also implies an inner change that accompanies a social change. Precisely when this sort of change of attitude occurs, it is a religious change, especially when it

“appropriates a person’s life as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> The person as a whole self is imaginatively projected into the ideal of harmonizing with society in associative living. The *religious* thus involves, Dewey says, “the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and [to] actions.”<sup>15</sup> Dewey’s idea of the religious (adjective) has obvious parallels with Brastow’s Calvinist congregationalism.

Stitzlein’s pragmatist hope clearly contrasts with what Dewey calls religion (noun). But does it contrast with what he calls *religious* (adjective)? She invokes Cornel West, someone situated in the pragmatist tradition who brings explicitly religious sentiments into play to encourage agency for change.<sup>16</sup> Stitzlein references West’s idea of meliorism, explaining that “[West’s] meliorism is driven by virtues that enable one to flourish as one faces despair, a drive ‘to try to keep struggling for more love, more justice, more freedom, and more democracy.’”<sup>17</sup> She cautions that West isn’t drawing on his religion, for his “prophetic, blues hope is bolstered by habits of courage and Christian love, which is focused less on a savior figure and more on how people can support each other.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps not his religion (noun). However, West’s prophetic pragmatism is self-identified as an “Afro-American revolutionary Christian perspective.”<sup>19</sup> West characterizes his prophetic stance religiously, as involving “distinctive Christian conceptions of what it is to be human, how we should act towards one another and what we should hope for.”<sup>20</sup> His identification with what he calls the downtrodden involves a “moral vision and ethical norms . . . derived from the prophetic Christian tradition. I follow the biblical injunction to look at the world through the eyes of its victims.”<sup>21</sup> His hope is rooted in “the good news of Jesus Christ, which lures and links human struggles to the coming of the kingdom,” the hope which he believes wards off despair and disappointment.<sup>22</sup> West’s pragmatism is animated by a religious spirit, in Dewey’s adjective sense, where the Christian narrative is “stripped of its static dogmas and decrepit doctrines” while animating “political engagement.”<sup>23</sup> However, West’s religious spirit still includes the “truth” of “the Reality of Jesus Christ” which “encourages the putting of oneself on the line.”<sup>24</sup> West states that “the resurrection claim essentially refers to the inauguration of a new future, a future that promises redemption and deliverance.”<sup>25</sup> West’s religious (adjective) spirit

draws on his religion (noun) to animate political actions of the sort Stitzlein values and connects to authentic democracy.

West's pragmatism isn't an outlier. The Chicago school of pragmatism—Dewey, Mead, Tufts, Addams—has a similar religious spirit.<sup>26</sup> Tröhler argues that American Protestantism and the pragmatist idea of democracy are intimately connected, that “the ultimate aim of Protestantism (and, by extension, Pragmatism) . . . was to build the kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>27</sup> Without the doctrinal trappings associated with particular organized denominations in America, these pragmatists drew this decidedly religious sentiment from “the work of authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and especially Walt Whitman.”<sup>28</sup> Tröhler quotes Dewey as drawing on Whitman especially for “[h]is philosophy of democracy and its relation to religion.”<sup>29</sup> The religious vision of “establishing God's kingdom on earth” was thought to embody particularly “an emphasis on mutual communication as a prerequisite for democratic decision making.”<sup>30</sup> As a result, argues Tröhler, Dewey and the Chicago school thought of themselves as academics whose primary goal was “social justice guided by a spirit of democratic Protestantism.”<sup>31</sup> In particular, influenced by Whitman and others, for Dewey and the Chicago school “the teaching of salvation was seen as the prerequisite to thinking and acting.”<sup>32</sup>

This was not, Tröhler makes clear, a concern with settled dogmas and doctrines, but with a religious (adjective) spirit. Nevertheless, for the Chicago pragmatists “[t]he goal of realizing the message of salvation required adjusting politics and education to these conditions in order to respond to them, where adjustment is an active process that requires targeted action.”<sup>33</sup> Although not a fixation on dogma, this religious spirit was not devoid of doctrine either. The activities of intelligent cooperation and changing society, moving in the direction of becoming more democratic were not only religious in spirit, but echoed the protestant doctrine of salvation. This echo of salvation included particular religious public roles for humans. In Mead's words, “Christianity was an infallible motive for an active life, ‘which raises every man to become a King and Priest.’”<sup>34</sup> The Calvinist doctrines of the priesthood and kingship of all believers echoed within pragmatism. It lifted up everyday actions of doing good

and looking out for others to be a priestly function, and it lifted up the everyday mutual and active governance to be a kingly function, each mimicking Christ's priestly and kingly functions. This allowed Mead and the other pragmatists to envision even small everyday actions for change as part of the religious trajectory of moving towards a better society. The trajectory of religious progress uncovered "the idea of a true community of interests" as normative, allowing a contrast with personal individual interests. It meant that "a true community of interests" was involved in moving society towards the "realization of the kingdom of God."<sup>35</sup> Although Protestantism as a religious spirit rather than settled dogma was the animating pulse of pragmatism, formal doctrines were nevertheless operative in that spirit. So when Mead states, "[t]he centering of our interest upon riches that pass away involves the absence of all 'treasure in the Kingdom of Heaven.' For where your treasure is there will your heart be also [Matthew 6:21]," he's urging people to put their heart in building the kingdom of God here on earth.<sup>36</sup>

This was connected to the early American theology of millennialism, Christ's reign over a kingdom on earth in which it was assumed that "America was the kingdom of God."<sup>37</sup> Early America was dominated by views of a 1000-year reign of Christ at the end of time: "[t]he millennial theme was pervasive in [American] religion, where ministers promised millennial states that ranged from the literal heavenly kingdoms of the Calvinist conservatives to the metaphorical earthly states of the dissenters and deists."<sup>38</sup> The idea of millennialism, which had at least two major variations—premillennialism and postmillennialism—meant that what in Christian doctrine was termed "the kingdom of God" was going to occur at a particular location on earth at some time in history. For some—the *premillennials*—this was believed to be *preceded* by a feared apocalyptic war and condemnatory judgment, before Christ would reign in peace and make all well. For others—the *postmillennials*—Christ's reign on earth was going to happen *after* an age (millennium) in which Christians paved the way for that coming. In post-millennium doctrine, human action would Christianize culture, preparing a receptive earth for Christ's return and reign. Both pre- and post-millennialism played central roles in the self-understanding

of America. In both versions, America was thought to be the place where that kingdom of God was going to occur on earth. In the postmillennial version, “[t]hese political prophets assumed that the founding would usher in a new era of republican peace and happiness. They called this political heaven-on-earth the ‘political millennium.’”<sup>39</sup> Among the nations, America was an exceptional country precisely because it was going to be the geographic location where God’s kingdom would come down to earth.

Although using markedly different language, and written in a different time, I’m struck by how Stitzlein’s depiction of democracy, and her urging America to engage in a pragmatist hope, echoes not only the Chicago school’s religious spirit but also postmillennialist theological doctrine. Not apocalyptic or dogmatic, her form of hope nevertheless embodies the spirit of the hopeful hope of postmillennialism. Just like postmillennialists, her hopeful hope is tied up with America as a way of life, a combination of vision and action in America for America. She approvingly quotes pragmatist Colin Koopman, “America, like pragmatism, is an emblematic vision of hope.”<sup>40</sup> This phrasing suggests that America is an exceptional nation in its serving as a symbol of hope. Further, Stitzlein suggests that pragmatism involves a profound social imaginary about “how we understood ourselves, our relation to each other, and our role in the world.”<sup>41</sup> The “us” here is consistently “us Americans” and the place that we are living is consistently “America.” She references Thomas Paine, who envisioned “a common cause and a new utopian nation,” rooted in a religiously based exceptionalism: “*America* was *God’s* country of the *future*.”<sup>42</sup> Of all the countries, it is *America* that is God’s country; America isn’t just a secular country, but *God’s* country; and, it isn’t America’s present, but its *future*, that is being imagined. In this social imaginary, “being an American meant building social and political life anew.”<sup>43</sup>

The content of Stitzlein’s pragmatist hope is American democracy. She states, “[t]he content of such hoping comes to compose a vision of our shared life together within American democracy, one that springs from the people and is enacted by them, and one that is, importantly, revisable.”<sup>44</sup> This echoes not only Paine’s exceptionalism but also Mead’s “true community of

interests” that could move society towards the “realization of the kingdom of God.”<sup>45</sup> Stitzlein’s idea of our shared life together in democracy, her broadest form of hope, is connected to a specific nation, America. It is America in the future, in which the shared life together involves “the flourishing of American people.”<sup>46</sup> She suggests, “[s]hared objects and objectives of hope may help us build a new conception of America that we can rally around—a sense of who we are and what we stand for that we can take pride in, defend, and advance.”<sup>47</sup> This is future-oriented vision of America is one in which more people will feel at home and thrive. Stitzlein’s hopeful hope for democracy echoes postmillennialism’s American exceptionalism, that America is (on its way to) the kingdom of God on earth.

As stated earlier, central to Stitzlein’s form of hope is meliorism. She quotes Dewey in this context, who describes meliorism as “the idea that at least there is a sufficient basis of goodness in life and its conditions so that by thought and earnest effort we may constantly make things better.”<sup>48</sup> But meliorism is central to postmillennialism, which embraces preparation for the Kingdom of God through steady progress of social improvement: “the future depended on the power of steady perseverance,” preparing a path “for the universal reign of the Prince of peace.”<sup>49</sup> Postmillennialism centered on humans enacting such meliorative preparation: “the application of human action held out the possibility of incremental progress.”<sup>50</sup> The Kingdom of God would be “ushered in by human means.”<sup>51</sup> America could bring about its own status as Christ’s kingdom on earth by its own collective incremental effort of associative living. Stitzlein similarly emphasizes a future-directed meliorism, “a belief in the agency of people, trusting that they can have significant impact on the world.”<sup>52</sup>

Stitzlein’s meliorism is connected to her idea of hope in a robust democracy. Democracy is a radical way of living together, associative living. Stitzlein quotes Colin Koopman, “[d]emocracy is the simple idea that political and ethical progress hinges on nothing more than persons, their values, and their actions.”<sup>53</sup> She states explicitly that this spirit of democracy, present in America from its founding, lingers to this very day. Central to democracy is the impulse “to create a new and better nation and world,” and “meliorism fits well with democracy

as a way of life where our hopes can be nurtured together.”<sup>54</sup> Meliorism as a belief in the improbability of the nation is not local and particular but general and national. She quotes Koopman to show that essential to America is such hope-embodied meliorism: “a loss of hope is a loss of America itself.”<sup>55</sup> For Stitzlein, the hopeful impulse to create a new and better nation is the animating heartbeat of America itself. She argues that America’s history shows us becoming “more just and freer over time,” that despite significant exceptions, “the overall trend of progress.”<sup>56</sup> This resonates with the long tradition of religiously hopeful meliorism that comprises postmillennialist thought in America, the religiously-inflected idea of working together towards perfection by slow degrees. Stitzlein’s hopeful hope in democracy echoes the religious spirit of hope in the coming of the kingdom of God to earth in America.

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1 Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Our Schools and Civil Society* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 1, <https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190062651.001.0001/oso-9780190062651>.

2 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 3.

3 Stitzlein, 17.

4 Stitzlein, 3.

5 Stitzlein, 17.

6 Stitzlein, 17 & 21.

7 Stitzlein, 22.

8 John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (Yale University Press, 1936), 9.

9 Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 23.

10 Dewey, 27.

11 Siebren Miedema, “Heart and Reason: A Comparison of John Dewey’s



A Common Faith and His ‘Religious’ Poems,” *Religious Education* 105, no. 2 (2010): 178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344081003645178>.

12 Quoted in Miedema, 178.

13 Quoted in Miedema, 183.

14 Quoted in Miedema, 184.

15 Quoted in Miedema, 185.

16 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 34, 53–54.

17 Stitzlein, 54.

18 Stitzlein, 54.

19 Mark David Wood, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 2.revolutionary socialist stance to a later, progressive reformist one. Wood shows how West’s subsequent reworking of Marxism supports his transition from a socialist to a progressivist politics. \”--BOOK JACKET.”,”ISBN”:"978-0-252-02578-5”,”language”:"en”,”note”:"Google-Books-ID: RVdQ0mhiapUC”,”number-of-pages”:"264”,”publisher”:"University of Illinois Press”,”source”:"-Google Books”,”title”:"Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism”,”author”:[{"family”:"Wood”,”given”:"Mark David"}]”,”issued”:{“date-parts”:[["2000"]]}”,”locator”:"2"}]”,”schema”:"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”}

20 Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York and Great Britain: Civitas Books, 1999), 13.

21 West, *The Cornel West Reader*, 370.

22 West, 14.

23 West, 177.

24 West, 419.

25 West, 419.

26 Daniel Tröhler, “The ‘Kingdom of God on Earth’ and Early Chicago Pragmatism,” *Educational Theory* 56, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 89–105, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2006.00005.x>.

27 Tröhler, “The ‘Kingdom of God on Earth’ and Early Chicago Pragmatism,” 93.

28 Tröhler, 94.

29 Tröhler, 95.

30 Tröhler, 95.

31 Tröhler, 97.

32 Tröhler, 99.

33 Tröhler, 100.

34 Quoted in Tröhler, 100.

35 Tröhler, 102.

36 Quoted in Tröhler, 101.

37 Tröhler, 94.

38 Michael Lienesch, “The Role of Political Millennialism in Early American Nationalism,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 446, <https://doi.org/10.2307/448402>.

39 Lienesch, “The Role of Political Millennialism in Early American Nationalism,” 446.

40 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 25.

41 Stitzlein, 24.

42 Stitzlein, 23 (emphasis added).

43 Stitzlein, 23.

44 Stitzlein, 66.

45 Tröhler, "The 'Kingdom of God on Earth' and Early Chicago Pragmatism," 102.

46 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 67.

47 Stitzlein, 69.

48 Stitzlein, 33.

49 Lienesch, "The Role of Political Millennialism in Early American Nationalism," 448-458.

50 Lienesch, 458.

51 Lienesch, 458.

52 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 36.

53 Stitzlein, 37.

54 Stitzlein, 36-37.

55 Stitzlein, 37.

56 Stitzlein, 33.