

HEART AND REASON. A COMPARISON OF JOHN DEWEY'S *A COMMON FAITH* AND HIS 'RELIGIOUS' POEMS

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ABSTRACT

In this essay a comparison is drawn between the way in which the pragmatist philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey addressed religious issues and his view on religious education in his poetic narratives and in his scholarly writings especially in his *magnus opus* on religion *A Common Faith*. Do we gain deeper insight for religious education using his two-fold articulated narratives on the religious? By using a double and reciprocal hermeneutics in Dewey and religion we will shed light on the relationship *in religiosis* of Dewey the academic and the poet. Is there a lesson here to learn for religious education?

“The actual religious quality in the experience...is sometimes brought about by devotion to a cause; sometimes by a passage of poetry that opens a new perspective; sometimes as was in the case of Spinoza – deemed an atheist in his day – through philosophical reflection” (Dewey, 1934a, p. 14).

INTRODUCTION

Is this the end?
A past with a closing door
Thru which I hardly grasp
From out of time's jealous clasp
A scant fleeting store
Of memories retreating:
A future all hope defeating
Closing in with tight shut door.

Twixt the two present penned

Great God, I thee implore
A little help to lend:-
I do not ask for much,
A little space in which to move,
To reach, perchance to touch;
A little time in which to love;
A little hope that things which were
Again may living stir-
A future with an op'ning door:
Dear God, I ask no more
Than that these bonds may rend,
And leave me free as before.

(Dewey, 1977, pp. 6-7)

This is a poem written by John Dewey (1859-1952) when he was in his fifties. In this poem Dewey “employs the traditional image of God as the object of a prayerful entreaty concerned with rest and enjoyment of simple natural pleasure” (Rockefeller, 1991, p. 320). In most of these poems God is not characterized as a wrathful God, although sometimes God is described in monarchical terms.

Eighty-nine unpublished poems by Dewey were published in 1977, twenty-five years after his death in 1952. The editor, Jo Ann Boydston, writes in her introduction: “The public image of John Dewey ...is that of a reserved, serious, unemotional, almost stereotypical New Englander (...). Dewey’s poetry taken as whole neither blurs nor significantly alters this image, but serves rather to expand it with vitally human dimensions. Thoughtful, dignified, and even cool Dewey may have been, but he was also – as we can know him in his poems – loving, sensuous, playful, perceptive, and at times emotionally torn, weary, self-doubting, depressed” (1977, p. xxii). And I like to add here that his poetry shows that he was also religious, spiritual and even mystical.

Since 1990 there is serious attention given in academia to Dewey’s view on religion in relation to education, philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, art, anthropology, and politics (cf. Rockefeller, 1991; Miedema, 1995; Rosenbaum, 2003). In this essay, however, I will take Dewey’s poetic narratives - in which we find his expression of God, faith, or the religious - as the starting point of my reflections, and compare these poetically articulated views, emotions, feelings and experiences with Dewey’s academically stated narratives on the religious. The latter can be found in its

most elaborated and concise form in *A Common Faith*. A book published in 1934 in which Dewey formulates his philosophy of religion, but it is also to be found in articles and chapters published before 1934, because Dewey has had an interest in the subject-matter of religion from the very start of his academic career.

Besides, religion played a major role in his family when he grew up as a young boy and during the time when he was still living with his family as a college and university student in Vermont (Martin, 2002, pp. 19-25). The importance of religion in the family was specially embodied in the person of his mother whose greatest interest was religion. The religiosity of his mother was firstly characterized by her evangelical pietistic views with emphasis on personal devotion and introspection, and secondly by a strong ethical and social commitment with the community. During these Vermont years Dewey gradually disliked more and more his mother's pietism with her frequently asked question to him and his brothers: "Are you right with Jesus?". This aversion lasted lifelong and probably has fuelled "Dewey's lifelong hostility to dogmatism and his aversion to moral thinking that is preoccupied with introspection, feelings, and inner purity" (Rockefeller, 1991, p. 38). However, he admired her strong social-ethical commitment and her love for thorough intellectual theologizing and a critical-hermeneutical approach of the bible. Thus, her religiosity had a lifelong influence on Dewey both *ex positivo* and *ex negativo*.

During these Vermont years strong influences also came from the pastor of the First Congregational Church, Reverend Lewis O. Brastow, who later got a professorship at Yale Divinity School. Not personal piety but intelligence and social action were emphasized by him, and reconstruction in stead of conversion. It is interesting to quote Brastow's own words here in order to understand how influential his views have been for young John Dewey: "One 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" (Martin, 2002, p. 25). Here a liberal theological and a strong ethical-social stance could meet for Dewey.

My research question in this article is: do we gain deeper insight in Dewey and religion, and in the relationship of the academic and the poet that is the person and his work if we practice a kind of double and in a sense reciprocal hermeneutics? Besides, what can we learn for religious education poetry from our exercise on Dewey?

SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Boydston's evaluation of Dewey's poetry is very accurate as we find in these poems not only the cerebral or cognitive side expressed, but also the emotional, affective and spiritual side of the person John Dewey. The totality or integrative or whole self could be shown if we let cross-fertilize the poetical and the scholarly narratives.

Dewey wrote most of these poems in the period of 1910-18. In 1909 the Dewey's bought a farm in Huntington, Long Island, and Dewey enjoyed being at that quiet place with a garden of flowers and vegetables and at that time he started to write poetry regularly. Especially during the years 1915 to 1918, a crisis period in his life, it provided him with the opportunity to give space to his emotional self-expression, to affective and spiritual feelings, thoughts and intuitions which were more or less suppressed during so many years of intense writing, thinking and organizing (Rockefeller, 1991, p. 314). In that period the relation with his wife Alice, who suffered for a long time from severe depressions, was flagging, it was the First World War, and in a sense Dewey had a burnout – with symptoms of fatigue, eye problems and depression. He also entered into a romantic relationship with a much younger woman. A Jewish-Polish immigrant, Anzia Yeziarska, who was an aspiring novelist. These poems deal with the full human life of this particular author in acts of self-organized truth telling and expression, and take us thus into some of the deep places of Dewey's personal and integrative life (Lakey Hess, 2008, p. 280). He did not have the intention of publishing his poems. Actually, the poems posthumously published in 1977 were partly rescued by a librarian at Columbia University who found these in an office wastebasket and in Dewey's desk when he moved out of his office at the end of his career.

Crucial in his poems is the battle against dualism and the search for unification of the actual and the ideal. The darker sides of life are explicitly mentioned as existential presences that should not be denied by pointing to the hereafter or to eternal life but are part of life in its fullness. Notwithstanding the positive tones of his philosophical work and his eminent status in academic, social and societal life both in the United States and around the globe, he had his personal moments of sadness and despair and was wrestling with the unification of the actual and the ideal in his self – partly due to the difficulties he had with the personally demanding pietism of his mother - and in relation to the world. In one of his poems this quest for unification culminates in a mystical experience:

Last night I stood upon the hill
And gazed across the bay;
Beneath, the city drank its fill
Of night whose drug brought stay
And stop to those fretful motions

Wherewith man runs his futile course.
Dusk, in waves and huge oceans,
Poured from some God's forgiving source
....Then rose the swelling moon
And gently sought its magic way
Across the waters. In a tune
Of silver'd silence merged the day
With night, earth with sky, the world and me.
Through the moonlight's softly shining grey
Merged rigid land and fluent sea;
By the magic inaction beguiled
Life and death slept close reconciled.

(Dewey, 1977, p. 20)

As Rockefeller has so adequately shown, in his poems Dewey is seeking release and peace from the pains of separation, the harsh divisions of his mind and weariness of life's battles in two ways: "On the one hand, at certain times he desired simply to escape life's trials by passing into some mode of unconsciousness. For example, in some poems he seeks peace and forgetfulness, night, sleep, or death. On the other hand, in other poems he aspires to find peace in some altered form of consciousness. He writes of the beauty and harmony to be found in contemplative intellectual and mystical experiences, and he celebrates the rest and joy experienced in nature, flower gardens, and a woman's love. (...) He expresses a craving to recover the spontaneity, innocence, and happiness of childhood and of a world that is made warm and secure by an all-embracing unconditional mother's love" (Rockefeller, 1991, p. 317).

As will be shown in the next paragraph, in *A Common Faith* Dewey developed a concept of 'God' different from the traditional theological connotation and denotation that is a personalized and relational God-concept. However, as a poet (and as a private man as is traceable in his letters – see Rockefeller, 1991, pp. 325-333) the image of the God of his youth was still present as may become clear in a poem strongly influenced by Psalm 23:

Not now thy scourging rod-
Thy staff, instead, oh God;-
Something to support and stay,
A guide along the ling'ring way.
Thy wrathful rod withhold
E'en tho my sins be infinite, untold.

Since to punish thou hast eternity,
Now for a little space let be, let be.
Spare thy just avenging wrath;
Walk with me a grassy path
Beside still waters for a little hour-
-Eternity thou hast to show thy power-
Lean with me upon thy staff
And, pacing the cool earth, laugh
To hear the foolish crickets sing
And see the pent in worms take wing
-Butterflies- unmindful of thee on high-
E'en as thou art for a little while – and I.

'Tis already known that thou art strong and I am weak
In all the long eternity thou canst thy justice wreak;
Then for a little while, come God and play-
Yet all too long shall be thy eternal day.

(Dewey, 1977, p. 24)

But in other poems it is evident that Dewey was looking for new ways to express his thinking about God which are more in line with his naturalistic worldview as for instance articulated in *A Common Faith*. In the poem *Two Birds* there is – might this have been the influence of Spinoza's philosophy of religion? - the identification of God and the world:

....
No thief is nature but mother
Whose power shall not lack
To turn me in time to clean brother
Worm and sister flower and laden air
To feed the tender sprouting plants
Till in their mingled life I share
And in new measures tread creation's dance

Tho unshelter'd is the tomb
Of the rude and thoughtless clods of earth
That make my second secret womb
Yet eén there is miracle of birth
And wondrous food for the mysterious life
With which the world, our God, is rife

(Dewey, 1977, p. 31)

In his poetry Dewey in rather simple language expressed his religious feelings and insights sometimes more along the lines of the traditional and personalized God-concept but also in terms of his newly developed naturalistic philosophy and accompanying concept of God. It may have helped him “to achieve a better integration in his personality of thought and feeling, work and play, duty and pleasure, moral striving and aesthetic enjoyment” (Rockefeller, 1991, p. 325).

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

In *A Common Faith* Dewey deals in the first of the three lectures with religion versus the religious (Dewey, 1934a, pp. 1-28). It is his contention that the religious aspect of experience is allowed to develop freely on its own account. That the religious quality of experience will become consciousness and will find the expression that is appropriate to present conditions, intellectual and moral. Religions mostly hinder the flourishing of the religious quality experience. A religion “(and ...there is no such thing as religion in general) always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight” (Dewey, 1934a, p. 9). Religion mostly prevents the freely development of religious experience, because of the weight of historic encumbrances. Dewey points to identification of the religious with the supernatural, and the faith in a completed revelation. So, religions are characterized by institutional forms of for instance church life, and dogmatic sets of convictional belief.

Dewey does not want to propose a new or another religion, but proposes “the emancipation of elements and outlooks that may be called religious” (Dewey, 1934a, p. 8). Dewey's proposal to use the adjective ‘religious’, and to avoid the use of the noun substantive ‘religion’ combined with his demand, as he stated it to wipe the slate clean and to start afresh, could give us the idea that there is no place left for religion at all. However, his *emancipatory devotion* of getting rid of inconvenient aspects of past religions could also be read differently. Just as intelligence can unlock the potentialities of experience in relation to habituated behaviour typified as machine-like repetition, a duplicating recurrence of old acts, the religious attitude can free the religious domain from the fixation of patterns of ritual behaviour and dogmatic belief propositions (Dewey, 1934a, p. 11). But it may prevent also from isolating the religious domain by building impermeable, institutional walls. A striking parallel can be found in Dewey's philosophy of art where he is defending art against its *museologization*, that is. reducing art to an compensatory or ornamental function in daily life (Joas, 1992, p. 209).

There is another parallel between Dewey's approach of art and

religion in respect to the concept of 'experience'. Both the aesthetic and the religious experience are not completely isolated from other experiences. On the contrary, both the aesthetic and the religious potentially are dimensions of every experience. What does it mean to have an aesthetic or religious experience? Due to the continuously occurring interaction, or more adequately stated transaction of live creature and environing conditions, experience occurs continuously (Dewey, 1934b; Dewey & Bentley, 1949). In order for things experienced to be composed into *an experience*, the material experienced need to run its course to fulfilment. "Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences (...) Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency" (Dewey, 1934b, p. 35). In contrast with normal action where experience is fragmented due to extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy, so cessation - having a aesthetic or religious experience is characterized by a *consummatory closure*.

"The 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. It takes place in different persons in a multitude of ways' (Dewey, 1934a, 14). The core terms are effect, force, function and value. The religious quality of experience is independent of specific types of beliefs and practices or any particular thing or object. Characteristic for these experiences is that they bring about "an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace" (Dewey, 1934a., p. 13), "a better, deeper and enduring adjustment in life (...), significant moments of living" (Dewey, 1934a, p.14).

The term 'adjustment' is crucial here. Dewey distinguishes between 'accommodation', 'adaptation' and 'adjustment' to make clear what he means by the religious quality or dimension of experience. *Accommodation* is the mainly passive modification of particular personal attitudes, that is particular aspects of action and not the entire self in accordance with the environment. With lasting external conditions we become habituated. The process in which we modify the environment so that it will be accommodated to our wants and demands is called *adaptation*. "But there are also changes in ourselves in relation to the world in which we live that are more inclusive and deep seated. They relate not to this and that condition of our surroundings, but pertain to our being in its entirety. Because of their scope, this modification of ourselves is enduring. It lasts through any amount of vicissitude of circumstances, internal and external. There is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being such that, in spite of changes in the special conditions that surround us, these conditions are also arranged, settled, in relation to us. (...) It is a change *of* will conceived as the organic plenitude of our being, rather than any

special change *in will*' (Dewey, 1934a, 16-17).

In this process of *adjustment*, this reorganization of our being in its entirety (Alexander, 1987, p. 255), the constitution of the person itself in her/his fundamental striving is at stake (Joas, 1992, p. 210). All religions claim to bring about such generic and enduring changes of the person. Dewey, however, turns the statement around: precisely when this kind of change in attitude takes place there is a definitely religious attitude. Such an attitude appropriates a person's life as a whole. The grasping of the possibilities of life as a whole is mediated through an ideal (Alexander, 1987, p. 255). "The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea. The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the Universe only through imaginative extension. It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection. Neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole. The *whole* self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through imagination"(Dewey, 1934a, p. 18-19).

Dewey's philosophy of religion can adequately be described as an empirical philosophy about the constitution and the role of ideals in human action (Joas, 1992, pp. 209-210). Ideals can not be put aside as irrelevant, nor should they be taken as already existent in some supernal region. "The aims and ideals that move us are generated through imagination. But they are not made out of imaginary stuff.(...) The conditions for their existence were there in physical material and energies and in human capacity.(...) The new vision ... emerges through seeing, in terms of possibilities, that is, of imagination, old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating" (Dewey, 1934a, p. 49). Imagination can be very adequately defined as "the ability to grasp the meaning of the present in terms of a possible situation which may be realized *because* its ideal possibility has been grasped and used to mediate the situation and direct action" (Alexander, 1987, p. 262).

The capacity to generate ideals which transform the meaning of experience in such a manner that deeper and broader ends become recognized, Dewey calls 'God' in *A Common Faith*. God denotes "the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and actions" (Dewey, 1934a, p. 42), or the "*active* relation between ideal and actual" (p. 51). This unity is not something given, but is 'a uniting'. Dewey thinks it fitting to use the word 'God', because both supernaturalism and militant atheism have an exclusive preoccupation with man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows. This is, according to Dewey, the essentially unreligious attitude (p.25). They also lack natural piety (p. 53). "A religious attitude, however, needs the sense of a connection of man, in the way of both dependence and support, with the enveloping world that the imagination feels is a universe. Use of the words

‘God’ or ‘divine’ to convey the union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance” (p. 53). One of the consequences of Dewey’s conception of the religious dimension of experience is that another dualism, namely between the secular and the profane, between religious life and modern culture has been neutralized.

RECIPROCAL HERMENEUTICS

Now I come back to the research question that I formulated in the introduction of this contribution. Have we gained deeper insight in Dewey and religion, and in the relationship of the academic and the poet that is the person and his work practicing a double or reciprocal hermeneutics?

Not by incident I used the following quote as the motto for this essay: “The actual religious quality in the experience...is sometimes brought about by devotion to a cause; sometimes by a passage of poetry that opens a new perspective; sometimes as was in the case of Spinoza – deemed an atheist in his day – through philosophical reflection” (Dewey, 1934a, p. 14).

Taking this interpretation of the religious as a criterion for evaluating the poetical narratives and the scholarly narratives of Dewey on the religious, the one and only conclusion should be that both are expressions of actual religious qualities in the experiences Dewey had. Crucial is that they both resulted in a personal adjustment in respect with his own self as well as with the world. The emphasis in his poems is on the self and on nature. In his scholarly work it is on philosophical reflection on the religious with the intertwinement of the individual and the social, although hardly dealing with institutional religion. But both are complementary from the criterion of the *effect* they produce, that is the better adjustment to life in its fullness or entirety. Analytically the two narratives can of course be distinguished, however, they should not be separated epistemologically and ontologically.

And here is also a lesson to learn for religious education. Richard Rorty has stated that “a pragmatist philosophy of religion must follow Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief” (Rorty, 1999, p. 158). Faith deals with the person in relationship with God and can be compared with the love for another person. Belief, on the contrary, deals with propositional attitudes and does not exhaust our relationship with God. Or to phrase it in Deweyan terms, belief does not completely spell out the actual religious qualities of experiences. However, if in religious education we pertain to the comprehensive aim of stimulating the development of the religious identity formation of the whole personhood of children and youngsters in school life – and characterize this also as

religious citizenship education - (Miedema and Bertram-Troost, 2008, p, 131), belief and faith should go together. In that way the integrative personality of children and youngsters in relationship with the world could be fostered. Precisely this Dewey himself actualized in the combination of his poetical and scholarly narratives. Pedagogically speaking poetry can be used to open up new religious and interreligious perspectives for children, but there is more to it. Writing poems themselves might also supply the opportunity to give space to their emotional self-expression, to affective and spiritual feelings, thoughts and intuitions, that is in Rorty's terms their faith-side.

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Field Code Changed

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