

## INTRODUCTION

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In December 1994, three young explorers in the Ardèche region of southern France noticed a draft of cold air issuing from behind a pile of rocks. Discovering a narrow opening, the woman in the group, Eliette Brunel-Deschamps, slipped through the narrow tunnel until it opened onto a ledge overlooking a vast chamber. When she returned with her companions and a portable ladder, they descended to the floor and began to realize that the walls were covered with images of Ice Age animals—wooly rhinoceroses, mammoths, bison, lions, and horses—as well as painted silhouettes of hands and abstract designs. Deep inside, a cave bear skull had been ceremonially placed on a low rock, its canines just protruding over the edge. Thirty thousand years ago, the cave had been a shrine for shamanic rituals connecting the human hunters with the spirits of the animals whom they

hunted and with whom they coexisted. “Alone in that vastness, lit by the feeble beams of our lamps, we were seized by a strange feeling. Everything was so beautiful, so fresh, almost too much so. Time was abolished, as if the tens of thousands of years that separated us from the producers of these paintings no longer existed. It seemed as if they had just created these masterpieces. Suddenly we felt like intruders. Deeply impressed, we were weighed down by the feeling that we were not alone; the artists’ souls and spirits surrounded us. We thought we could feel their presence; we were disturbing them.”<sup>1</sup>

The discovery of Chauvet Cave (as it is now known), and of other caves filled with prehistoric art, gives us an insight into the emergence of human consciousness, into the time when we became human. The hunters of Chauvet lived in a religious world rich with symbols, reverence, awe, and ceremony. And we can understand the reaction of the explorers, which is not just aesthetic admiration or scientific curiosity. They, too, felt a sense of awe mingled with the presence of something holy; they sensed a connection, even communion, with the Ice Age hunters. Is a sense of the sacred an inherent part of us, something that completes and sustains our humanity, or is it something we have outgrown, like childhood, and replaced with our glittering sciences and the powerful technologies resulting from them? This question has gripped Western culture since the convulsive birth of the modern era five hundred years ago, and it now confronts the world, for technology reaches everywhere and changes everything it touches. At first, new tools simply seem to enhance the existing social order, but we know that is an illu-

sion. Technology transforms in unforeseen ways not only how we live but how we feel and think. It changes how we experience ourselves and relate to others; it changes how society is organized and what it values. The tension between the sacred and the secular fuels contemporary conflicts, from Christian fundamentalists trying to enforce teaching “creation science” in public schools to anti-Western fundamentalists in Islam for whom the idea of a “secular” state proposes a way of life that sets God aside, a form of the sin of idolatry.

John Dewey’s *A Common Faith* stands with other twentieth-century classics like William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Paul Tillich’s *Dynamics of Faith*, and Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, all of which address this question of spirituality in the modern world. When Dewey gave the 1934 Dwight Huntington Terry Lectures at Yale on the subject of religion, he was in his mid-seventies and known worldwide as the foremost figure in American philosophy, a leader in the movement widely known as pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont, in 1859, the year Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published. He had a typical boyhood for the time, exploring the Vermont woods and swimming in Lake Champlain. He later remembered that the evangelical Congregationalism of his mother (and New England culture in general) left him with a “sense of divisions and separations,” of “isolation of self from the world, of soul from the body, of nature from God,” that was “a painful oppression.”<sup>3</sup>

Dewey had a quietly questioning mind, not precocious but reflective. Back then it was quite unusual to aspire to be a

professional philosopher, but that is where his search led. He attended one of the first graduate programs in philosophy, one newly established at the Johns Hopkins University. There George Sylvester Morris introduced him to absolute idealism, the reigning school of thought in Great Britain and Germany. Absolute idealism holds that all aspects of the world are interwoven parts of a vast, unfolding, all-embracing divine self-consciousness of which we are a part. In contrast to materialism, in which all higher things—consciousness, meaning, value—are regarded as by-products of physical events, idealism argues that ultimate reality grounds our highest values. Physical reality is but part of the picture, and our rational consciousness gives us a better insight into what truly exists. The term for this ultimate reality is “the Absolute.” Philosophy’s job is to reveal this truth against the limited, partial empirical truths of science that leave our moral values and spiritual aspirations in question. Absolute idealism tries to make sense out of the fragmented world of modernity by finding a unifying, spiritual meaning behind it all. From early on in his career, Dewey was an articulate defender of this view. His innovative thesis was that the emerging science of psychology, as the science of consciousness, could be used to support the central claims of idealism. Psychology would be no new scientific threat to our self-image but, rather, a key to finding transcendent spiritual reality. During this period, however, Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was challenging such views, seeing no ultimate purpose or meaning in existence beyond the struggle for survival. Could our spiritual self-image survive the theory of evolution?

Dewey had deftly argued for his “psychological idealism”

in his first book, *Psychology*. But the appearance of William James's *Principles of Psychology* in 1890 shook Dewey to the core. In that massive, brilliant work, James treated the mind from a Darwinian approach; he argued that experience came as a dynamic, flowing process in which the mind was no spectator but a "fighter for ends." Its role was to select certain features, those with most bearing for the organism, and ignore others in order to direct action. Like a heart, hand, or foot, it had a dynamic role in sustaining life. And this concept had philosophical implications. In 1898, James gave a talk, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," where he argued that our ideas are not "pictures" of the world but plans of action embodied in habits. Inquiry arises when habits are disturbed and seek to regain dynamic equilibrium. So far, James was echoing insights developed by his friend Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>4</sup> But James went further: philosophical theories are not "world pictures"; they are *world hypotheses* that orient the way we live, and some beliefs, even if unverified, help determine the meaning of the lives we create.<sup>5</sup> The term "pragmatism" summed up this approach. Eventually James's ideas shifted Dewey away from idealism.

In 1894, Dewey moved to the new University of Chicago as the chair and builder of its department of philosophy (which included psychology and pedagogy). He was quickly involved in advancing the new science of psychology on a theoretical and practical level. Practically he became interested in the psychology of education and developmental psychology, setting up his famous Laboratory School that stressed "learning by doing." On a theoretical level, he was

solving problems left standing in James's *Principles*. The most notable instance was his substitution of the model of the "circuit of coordination" (known today as a "feedback loop") for James's stimulus-response "reflex-arc." This circuit provides a model of continuous *learning* rather than a simple mechanistic series of causes and effects; it shows how the meaning of experience can change and develop. Dewey began to realize that learning is more important than the traditional philosophical "problem of knowledge," which consists largely of justifying existing beliefs. Other typical problems, such as "How is knowledge possible?" and "How can we know the external world?" are not "problems" at all. Humans are actively involved with the world both biologically and culturally from the moment of birth. We are perpetual learners, and the question should be how we can become *better* learners.

During his appointment at Chicago (1894–1904), Dewey became increasingly reticent about idealism; the subject of religion in his work faded away, to be replaced by an emphasis on education in publications like *School and Society* (1900) and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), whose themes eventually culminated in his most influential book, *Democracy and Education* (1916). But a dramatic change can be seen in Dewey's work beginning in 1905, the year he began teaching at Columbia University in New York. He had broken his ties with the University of Chicago in the spring of 1904, when the university administration did not renew the appointment of his wife, Alice, who had been running the Laboratory School. Then, one of his young children had died during a trip to Europe, resulting in en-

during inward agony for both parents. During this period of rupture, Dewey had come to question one of the central ideas in Western philosophy held since the days of Parmenides and Plato, that reality was solely revealed by knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Dewey realized, most experience is not some sort of “experience of knowing.” Does experience reveal reality in ways other than knowing? *Being* in pain, for instance, is not the same as *knowing* you are in pain.

This idea becomes clearer if one thinks of “knowledge” as the outcome of an actual process of inquiry. Inquiry arises from *genuine* doubt and seeks to settle that doubt in *actual* conduct or action, as James and Peirce had said. But there are many types of experience that do not call for inquiry at all, experiences that can be taken on their own terms and not reinterpreted as instances of knowledge. While this novel thesis is implicit in some of Dewey’s work at Chicago, it fully emerges in 1905 with “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism.” The official break with idealism came the next year in his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, “Beliefs and Existences,” which was followed by “Experience and Objective Idealism,” another major critique. There and repeatedly afterward Dewey portrayed idealism as a prime example of “the intellectualist fallacy” of equating the known with reality and of identifying the ideal as reality completely and fully actualized.<sup>7</sup>

Dewey remained at Columbia for the rest of his career. This marks the period during which he emerged as a nationally and internationally known figure, not only as a philosopher but as an advocate of a number of progressive social and political causes (e.g., extending the vote to

women and helping to establish such organizations as the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Association of University Professors, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). On the international level, he visited and wrote about the changing political world in the Soviet Union, China, Japan, Turkey, and Mexico. Dewey's major philosophical works begin to appear: *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), *Art as Experience* (1934), and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Dewey's masterpiece describing his metaphysics, *Experience and Nature* (1925), also belongs to this period, as do two works concerning religion: *The Quest for Certainty* (1929) and *A Common Faith* (1934).

*The Quest for Certainty* is a book resulting from Dewey's Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh in 1929. The purpose of this noted lecture series is to address "natural theology," that is, the question of God as approached through science. Dewey's lectures mostly focus on critiquing the traditional philosophical views of knowledge in light of his own instrumentalism, his theory of inquiry. As in *Experience and Nature*, Dewey portrays human life as pervaded by two interweaving themes: chance, transience, loss, defeat, and death, on the one hand, and joy, order, regularity, artful skills, and life, on the other—the "precarious and the stable," as he sums them up. This rhythmic alteration leads to exploring ways to secure transitory goods through developing tools and skills that provide some control over the environment. But there is another story as well: the ardent desire for these goods motivates us to imagine them already "safe and secured," eternally existing in a spiritual realm.



Our human “quest for goods” gets deflected into a “quest for certainty” by thinking that these goods somehow already exist in another, truer world.

For example, Mircea Eliade sees religious rituals as attempts to escape “secular time” for “sacred time.” This latter is the time of cosmic origins and beginnings recounted in religious mythology. By connecting with the “time of origins,” the “strong time,” ritual awakens the powers that can renew the world.<sup>8</sup> This desire to turn precarious goods into assured realities is also reflected in the history of philosophy, from Plato’s forms to the Absolute of the idealists to the worship of symbolic logic by analytic philosophers like Bertrand Russell. When this tendency combines with the belief that reality is identical with the known, a bifurcation is made so that two worlds are set up: one the world of change and fallible action, and the other that perfect realm of pure being attained by rational insight. Plato’s “divided line” separating Becoming from Being in the *Republic* is a prime example. But the implications of Dewey’s argument also clearly apply to most religious theologies that point to an eternal divine realm.

*The Quest for Certainty* does not explicitly raise the topic of religion until the very last lecture. There Dewey presents a dramatic challenge: What if we realize that ideals belong not to the realm of what is actual, realized, and perfect but instead to the realm of what is possible, so that they have to be realized by action? Though we might lose a false comfort in the security of “eternal values,” we would recognize that ideals have to be imagined, struggled for, and constantly reevaluated to become living meanings in human existence.

“The religious attitude,” Dewey says, would be “a sense of the possibilities of existence” and “devotion to the cause of these possibilities” (LW 4: 242). What Dewey proposes, in other words, is to replace what might be called a “spirituality of the actual” with a “spirituality of the possible.”<sup>9</sup>

*A Common Faith* can be read as a continuation of *The Quest for Certainty*. Like the Gifford Lectures, the Terry Lectures are devoted to “religion in the light of science and philosophy.” Yale’s inviting Dewey to deliver the lectures in 1934 was not entirely a surprise. First, there was the tantalizing conclusion of *The Quest for Certainty*. But there was also a more immediate reason. Dewey had entered into a highly public, controversial debate in *The Christian Century*, the main magazine for liberal Protestantism in the United States. It began, innocently enough, with Dewey agreeing to write a review of *Is There a God? A Conversation*. This book sprang from articles by three philosophers who had debated the question in earlier issues of the magazine. But the editors realized they had a hot topic, and Dewey’s anticipated review was trumpeted by full-page ads exclaiming “A Journalistic Event of the First Importance.”<sup>10</sup> The review, however, was not very positive. In it, Dewey criticizes the debate mainly for its vagueness. Had it been about “The God”—*the* God of biblical tradition or any one of the recognizable “Gods” of the philosophers (such as Plato’s Divine Craftsman, Aristotle’s Prime Mover, or Spinoza’s infinite rational substance), at least the reader could have fathomed what it was that was supposed to exist or not exist. Debating the existence or non-existence of the “jealous God” of Israel, says Dewey, at least would be “something to get excited

about.” This is the God of a set of definite theological beliefs, like the seven days of creation, which modern science has challenged and which, as a result, liberal theology has rejected. But what we have is a vague, abstract, open idea of “a” God—one characterized by “the most colorless and indefinite word in the English language.” At best this seems to express “a cosmic guarantee for our moral idealism and optimism” or some “objective counterpart to human love and devotion” (LW 9: 215, 217, 219). What is needed, says Dewey, is to cease trying to make God into “a” being, “a single objective existence, *a* God” in the universe beyond the genuine ground of human goods and ideals (LW 9: 220).<sup>11</sup> The controversy did not die down; Max Otto, one of the book’s authors, told Dewey, “In the back of my consciousness there has been a smile, most of the time, as I said to myself: I’ll bet he didn’t know what he was letting himself in for when he agreed to review the debate” (LW 9: 448).

It was this immediate controversy that led the president of Yale, James R. Angell, to invite Dewey to give the Terry Lectures. Then, as now, religion was a topic of intense discussion with numerous points of view. In addition to liberal theologians like those in *Is There a God?* one could find the full spectrum from fundamentalists and conservative theists to liberal theists to militant atheists, like Bertrand Russell and Joseph Wood Krutch. Above all, there was the powerful figure of Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian who advocated radical social change, by force if necessary. He aggressively criticized Dewey for a naïve, optimistic view of human nature that did not take sin and evil seriously.<sup>12</sup> Dewey knew that he had to define himself against this background.

Turning directly to *A Common Faith*, we should consider the title first. George Santayana (a philosopher with whom Dewey had crossed swords) judged the book, saying, “‘A Common Faith’? A very common faith indeed!”<sup>13</sup> The usual associations of the word “common” are “ordinary, usual, having no special status, unremarkable,” as well as “shared.” But Dewey has a rather uncommon sense of “common” in mind. In “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” a speech given at the celebration of his eightieth birthday, he says, “Democracy as a way of life is controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being regardless of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth” (LW 14: 226). A “common faith” means a faith in the *potentialities* of human life to become genuinely fulfilled in meaning and value, but only if those potentialities are actualized through action. Dewey is often misread as saying that “ordinary” experience is fine as it is. This misreading is usually followed by a critique of his “optimism.” In fact, Dewey did not think things were fine as they were; he saw that the problems of modern society left the best potentialities of most lives unrealized and frustrated. In *Experience and Nature*, commenting on the way we justify some activities as “useful” in the purely utilitarian sense, Dewey agrees that many activities are necessarily like that. But, he adds, we also thoughtlessly call a lot of activities “useful” simply because we do *not* think about their consequences for the quality of human life.

If we were to ask useful for what? we should be obliged to examine their actual consequences, and when we once honestly and fully faced these consequences we should probably find ground for calling such activities detrimental rather than useful. . . . We do not ask for their effect upon the quality of human life and experience. They are useful to make shoes, houses, motor cars, money, and other things which *may* then be put to use; here inquiry and imagination stop. What they also *make* by way of narrowed, embittered and crippled life, of congested, hurried, confused and extravagant life is left in oblivion. But to be useful is to fulfill need. The characteristic human need is for possession and appreciation of the meaning of things, and this need is ignored and unsatisfied in the traditional notion of the useful. (LW 1: 272)

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey points to the arts because they show how the material of ordinary, “common” experience can be cultivated so as to become inherently fulfilling. The materials of existence have the *potentiality* to become enriched with meaning; this does not mean that they *actually* are so. This is what democracy means for Dewey: a way of life that cultivates the possibility for meaningful, value-rich lives. Such a life requires critical intelligence to comprehend the way things are now, imagination to see the way things might be, and a tragic awareness of how fallible our ideals may turn out to be. To see something as “common,” for Dewey, is to grasp it *imaginatively* in terms of its *possibilities for growth*. Dewey’s use of the word “common” should not

be taken to indicate a complacent optimism based on satisfaction with things as they are now. To grasp the possibilities in the present requires creative exploration and struggle.

The three crucial themes Dewey presents in *A Common Faith* are: (1) the distinction between religions and “the religious” as a form of experience, (2) the idea of God as the creative intersection of the ideal or possible and the real or actual, and (3) the infusion of the religious as a pervasive mode of experience into democratic life. Insofar as the “Abrahamic” religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have defined themselves by sets of theological dogmas about the world, they have been challenged by modern science as well as by other religions with dogmas of their own.<sup>14</sup> If by “religions” one means “beliefs,” religions conflict not only with science but also with each other. In fact, there is no one thing called “religion,” only diverse religions. But what of “the religious” as a quality of experience—as a way in which existence can become fulfilled? (It should be recalled that for Dewey “experience” refers primarily to a way of *living in the world*, not to some “mental” or conscious event.) In fact, states Dewey, established religions often *inhibit* or *prevent* people from experiencing “the religious” in their lives. One result is that when people reject the religion in which they were raised, they reject the importance of the religious in living. *It is these people whom Dewey is addressing.*

“The religious” is not a specific type of psychological experience, such as those William James explores in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. “It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal” (9). The word “attitude” is important. Often peo-

ple who have mystical experiences think that some truth about reality has been revealed. Dewey urges that we put the question of revealed truth aside and look at the effect such experiences have on the lives of the individuals who undergo them. There is “an adjustment in life, an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace” (12). Dewey is not talking about *particular* forms of adaptation or accommodation to *particular* situations. “Adjustment” is an orientation of “the whole self” to “the world in which we live” or “the Universe.” Nature, existence, or “the Universe” is not just what actually is; it includes *all* its possibilities as well. An “adjustment” is “voluntary,” but not as a conscious, intended act of volition; it is “a change *of* will conceived as the organic plenitude of our being” (15). So Dewey is talking about a fundamental orientation to existence that arises from the depths of our being, not just the conscious, volitional mind. It engages existence in terms of its possibilities as well as its actualities. It defines an attitude toward life.

Indeed, Dewey himself underwent such a transformative experience as a young high school teacher. His mother had constantly asked him as a child if he was “right with Jesus.” Max Eastman reports from an interview with Dewey, “One evening as he sat reading he had what he calls a ‘mystic experience.’ It was an answer to that question which still worried him: whether he really meant business when he prayed. It was not a very dramatic mystic experience. There was no vision, not even a definable emotion—just a supremely blissful feeling that his worries were over.” In Dewey’s words, the sense of it was, “What the hell are you worrying about? Everything that’s here is here and you can just lie

back on it.” Dewey added, “I’ve never had any doubts since then, nor any beliefs. To me faith means not worrying.”<sup>15</sup>

Unlike those moments when imagination merely “super-venes” in life, here imagination “intervenes”; it “interpenetrates all the elements of our being” (17). Imagination is necessary because this sort of experience involves “the world” as a totality beyond what we cognitively grasp—it includes both the world and the self in terms of possibilities as well as actualities. Imagination is what engages the possible. “Neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole” (17). What Dewey is talking about is *not* an object of cognition; it is *not* a result of a conscious act of will; it is *not* a result of “practical activity.”<sup>16</sup> It “possesses the will” as an “influx from sources beyond conscious deliberation and purpose” (18–19). What emerges from this is “the authority of an ideal” or “moral faith” (19). It is faith precisely *because* it is not mistaken as an object of cognition, a dogma, or some external ritual practice. It is an *orientation* to an ideal possibility of existence that constitutes who we are and what we value. It can be compared to theologian Paul Tillich’s idea of “ultimate concern”: “the embracing and centered act of the personality” that integrates the rational and the unconscious, and so is “ecstatic,” by standing beyond the narrow ego of the conscious self.<sup>17</sup> This attitude for Dewey is also integrative, so it is not “ecstatic” in the sense of transcending the body or the world or leaving oneself behind. The conscious ego becomes integrated with a larger self-in-the-world. This deep, pervasive sense of connection to nature in its creative depths Dewey calls “natural



piety.” Natural piety is acknowledgment of the ground of our being-in-nature, the source of all possibilities as well as that in which we live, move, and have our being.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps this idea can be illustrated with an example taken from the religious life of the Plains tribes of the United States, the ceremony of the calumet, *chanupa*, or “peace pipe.” The pipe is one of the most sacred items of Native American culture, for it is what connects a human being to the sacred powers of the world. It is, in the words of Joseph Epes Brown, a “portable altar” that can, upon use, place one at the center of the cosmos. One of its primary uses is to honor the beings of the sky and earth and the four directions of the horizon (usually beginning with the east and moving to the south, west, and north, the “sunwise” motion replicating the journey of the sun). The pipe is smoked, but often after it has been offered first, mouthpiece pointing away, toward the direction or being that one is honoring. The pipe itself when assembled is a living being replicating the human body, with the “heart” of the bowl and “foot” of the stem, and with the burning *kinnikinik*—tobacco and willow bark—representing the living spirit. In the act of smoking, the pipe invites, invokes, and welcomes the living powers of the universe and conveys prayer and respect through the fragrance. *Mitakuye oyasin*, “we are all related,” say the Lakota upon completion of the ritual. The ceremony has integrated the individual with the cosmos, with other people, and with other living beings, animal and spiritual. The individual has become both “oriented” and “grounded” in the fullest sense. The “religious” is this *attitude of living*. It is “walking in beauty,” as the Diné (Navajo) say.<sup>19</sup>

In the second lecture, “Faith and Its Object,” Dewey addresses the conception of God in light of his discussion of “the religious.” He asks, “Are the ideals that move us genuinely ideal or are they ideal only in contrast with our present estate? The import of the question extends far. It determines the meaning given to the word ‘God’” (39). First of all, what does he mean by “genuinely ideal”? As we have seen, “ideal” means not only “possible” but also “having authority.” He takes the question to be: Do we see “God” as “the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and actions,” that is, as “having authority” over volition and emotion, to which one is “supremely devoted,” or do we think of God as “some kind of Being having prior and therefore non-ideal [that is, actual] existence” (39)? A desired value conceived as a possibility calls one to action, while a value conceived of as an actually realized good—as “non-ideal”—does not. One might think of this ideal as external, but I think Dewey means an ideal that is *enacted as a meaning of our existence*, one that has to be lived and not just externally attained. It is the difference between running for office and living a whole way of life that is expressive of value—one can think of activists like Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, and Frederick Douglass, but this way of life can refer to anyone whose life comes to embody an integrative value, such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Albert Einstein, or Pablo Picasso. A dramatic example is that of Morris Dees, founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that fights racist and other organized hate groups. Dees was at the beginning of a successful law and publishing career, but a snowstorm in Chicago closed O’Hare Airport, where he was

bound, and caused him to spend a night at the airport in Cincinnati. To pass the time, he bought a paperback copy of Clarence Darrow's *The Story of My Life*.

Before daylight I finished Darrow's story of his life. It changed mine forever. I was reading my own thoughts and feelings. Darrow wrote that as a young boy, "not only could I put myself in the other person's place, but I could not avoid doing so. My sympathies always went out to the weak, the suffering, and the poor. Realizing their sorrows, I tried to relieve them in order that I might be relieved . . ." . . . Once freed from the restraints of the corporate world and able to follow his conscience, Darrow undertook cases that made legal history in the fight for human dignity and justice for the powerless. I read about those cases all night. . . . On the flight to Chicago the next morning I thought a lot about Clarence Darrow. . . . When my plane landed in Chicago, I was ready to take that step and to speak out for my black friends who were still "disenfranchised." . . . I had made up my mind. I would sell the company as soon as possible and specialize in civil rights law. All the things in my life that had brought me to this point, all the pulls and tugs of my conscience, found a singular peace.<sup>20</sup>

Dees sold his publishing business and founded the SPLC, fully aware that he would become a target for the rest of his life. In all these instances, the individuals did not so much "make" a choice to be who they are as they *realized* who they are. The choice made them.

In this sense, God is a “unification of ideal values that is essentially imaginative in origin” (40). For Dewey, imagination is the ability to grasp possibilities—it is seeing the actual in the light of the possible. It should not be thought of as something “imaginary” or “illusory” or even as a “faculty of the mind.” When humans grasped how to make fire, an existential possibility *in the world* was actualized that changed the basic relation of our species to the environment. For Dewey, possibilities are as much part of nature as we are. To conceive of them as “mental” replicates a dualistic way of thinking that Dewey regards as part of the problem we have inherited from the birth of modernity. Dewey’s view of imagination, then, is “ecological,” not “mental.” When imagination achieves an integrated unification of our ideals, our *lives*—not our “minds”—become enactments *in the world* of an integrated self; we are living the life of someone we want to be, and who we want to be is someone whose life is pervaded by these ideals. They genuinely *guide* us from within.

God, then, for Dewey is an immanent creative possibility in existence, not “a” being that transcends nature—for nature’s possibilities are as natural as its actualities. Dewey says, “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” (44). These possibilities are not just the “stuff of dreams,” either. They “are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience” (45). Dewey then proceeds to make one of his most controversial pronouncements in the entire book: “It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to

which I would give the name ‘God,’” though he adds, “I would not insist that the name *must* be given” (47).

This statement startled both Dewey’s followers and his critics, and the vortex of criticism that surrounded Dewey upon publication of *A Common Faith* centered on this claim. Dewey’s allies, who identified naturalism with atheism, felt betrayed. Corliss Lamont, reviewing the book for the Marxist periodical *New Masses*, titled his essay “John Dewey Capitulates to ‘God.’”<sup>21</sup> Liberal theists, like Henry Nelson Wieman (one of the authors of *Is There a God?*), thought that they had triumphed: Dewey *was* a theist all along! But Dewey himself had clearly stated why he thought the term “God” should be used: it was to challenge “aggressive” or “militant atheism.” This sort of atheism, he observes, shares something with the theistic positions it rejects: “the exclusive preoccupation . . . with man in isolation” (49). Both positions see human beings as separate from nature, atheism giving us a supernatural status *above* nature and theism pitting us *against* nature. “Militant atheism is also affected by lack of natural piety. The ties binding man to nature that poets have always celebrated are passed over lightly. The attitude taken is often that of man living in an indifferent and hostile world and issuing blasts of defiance. 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” (49).<sup>22</sup> In contemporary language, Dewey could be said to advocate an “ecological spirituality.” Traditional Christianity and Cartesian dualism see the human soul or mind as something apart from nature, either transcending it or mastering it through science. This

alienation has not been helpful in the past and is positively dangerous now as we face the consequences of our ecological negligence and greed. Dewey's "militant atheists" are still present in figures like Richard Dawkins or the late Christopher Hitchens.

The third main idea Dewey discusses is the social dimension of religions and the religious. Most societies have been pervaded by religion as a whole way of life. One thinks of tribal societies, for whom the whole way of life is "religion," or of communities defined by one religion, such as Medieval Christendom or the life of the Jewish villages or *shtetels* of eastern Europe. In these instances one is raised in a religion; there is no question of "choosing" it. Today, however, modern societies tend to be secular, offering a variety of religions from which to choose or not to choose. Religions are aspects of society, not a pervasive, defining collective way of life. Dewey sees this shift as more significant than the intellectual challenge modern science brings to old theological beliefs. A whole way of existence, not just a set of beliefs, has been altered. As noted, the very idea of a "secular civilization" threatens Islamic as well as Jewish and Christian fundamentalists. This is where Dewey's distinction between "religions" and "the religious" hits home. The religious *way of life* is felt to be challenged because it is bound up with some "religion" as a *set of beliefs* that is questioned. Dewey asks: "What would be the consequences upon the values of human association if intrinsic and immanent satisfactions and opportunities were clearly held to and cultivated with the ardor and the devotion that have at times marked historic religions?" (66). He points to the possibilities of social transformation so that

the basic conditions for shared lives of meaningful growth are increasingly available, even though “vested interests, interests vested with power, are powerfully on the side of the *status quo*” (71). What was true in 1934 is truer today, as multinational corporations protect vast wealth for a few and acquire political influence by pouring huge sums into elections. Dewey’s point is that this is not the way it has to be—any more than slavery or the subjection of women had to be. When those conditions changed, new possibilities began to open up, albeit slowly and with continued struggle. One way of defining democracy could be that it seeks to provide every person with the most meaningful choices possible, which means imagining what those possibilities might be.

The most important implication of the idea of the religious in social existence lies in education. Dewey remarks at the beginning of *Democracy and Education* that everyone dies—but not everyone all at once. Thus, culture can be passed on from generation to generation. There can be transmission and cumulative learning. Moreover, what we inherit from the past can develop and change. We may like to think we are isolated individuals; in fact, we are the inheritors of the whole range of human experience as embodied and passed on in culture. The three French cave explorers who discovered Chauvet Cave were not physically different from the humans who painted the images of the animals on its walls thirty thousand years ago. What separates them from, as well as connects them to, those archaic people is the transmission of culture. In teaching, we are giving others a *world* to inhabit, explore, and develop. This must not be done uncritically; much of the past is a dubious

burden. But knowing that we have been blind in the past is one of the most important lessons to pass on, for it makes us aware of our inherent finitude—the “tragic wisdom” embodied in the Greek saying *gnōthi seauton*, “Know thyself.”

Finally, we can raise some questions concerning *A Common Faith*. Though Dewey’s natural piety stresses acknowledging nature, and not human nature alone, as the source of value, does he adequately appreciate how awe arises from what indeed does “transcend” or go beyond us? The capacity for reverence is part of what makes us human. The painters who left the stunning images of mammoths and bison in the caves were not just expressing their physical connection to the game animals or trying to overpower them by magic. The images express a sense of awe, holiness, and gratitude. Are we losing even the *ability* to experience reverence, aside from whether we live with it as a pervasive sense of existence? In *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, Robert Paul Woodruff worries that he is describing a dying but crucial virtue.<sup>23</sup> A culture devoted to egoistic materialism cannot meet our deepest needs. So how might a way of democratic life pervaded by a sense of the religious be achieved? How can we cultivate awe, gratitude, and a sense of the holy democratically?

Does Dewey, though no naïve optimist, place too much confidence in science and technology even if they are used to enrich human existence? He acknowledges that the main problem of modernity is that the power science has given us has not been matched by the wisdom to use it. Dewey placed his hope in the power of education. Is this enough? Before we dismiss the idea, we should remember what minimal resources we allocate to education. What if even half as



much as we spend on the military were spent on education? But would even that be enough to counteract the influences bombarding young and old from all sides? Intelligence may be passed on, but so can lies, stupidity, greed, and hate. And what of the personal needs of individuals to meet the crises and tragedies of life? Is a “God of possibility” enough? Nor does Dewey have much to say about inwardness and the individual cultivation of spirituality.

Dewey’s *A Common Faith* is a rich and provocative text that provides an original response to the question of the role of the religious dimension of human experience in a world that has been transformed by science. While it may call forth some of the questions listed above, it may also indicate one way to explore an “ecological spirituality” that does not succumb to the dualistic and supernatural dogmas that have defined Western religion in the past.<sup>24</sup> It is still a vital text that speaks to us.

### Notes

1. See David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 17.

2. Dewey called his philosophy “cultural naturalism.” Pragmatism—or “instrumentalism,” as he preferred to call it—refers to only part of that philosophy, the theory of inquiry. In a letter to Corliss Lamont, Dewey wrote: “I have come to think of my own position as cultural or humanistic Naturalism. Naturalism, properly interpreted, seems to me a more adequate term than Humanism. Of course I have always limited my use of ‘instrumentalism’ to my theory of thinking and knowledge; the word ‘pragmatism’ I have used very little, and then with reserves” (Dewey to Corliss Lamont, Sept. 6, 1940, cited in Corliss Lamont, “New Light on Dewey’s *Common Faith*,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 1 [1961], p. 26).

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3. John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in *The Later Works*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 153. This series, including *The Early Works* and *The Middle Works*, is the standard edition of Dewey's writings and henceforth will be cited in text and notes with the customary abbreviation (EW, MW, LW) followed by volume and page number, e.g., LW 5: 153.

4. See Peirce's famous essays "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," both of which may be found in *The Essential Peirce*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992, 1998).

5. These ideas are developed by James in *The Will to Believe* (1897), *Pragmatism* (1908), and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1903). Peirce's own application of pragmatism to the question of religion can be found in his essays "Evolutionary Love" (1893) and "The Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (1903). These also may be found in *The Essential Peirce*.

6. Dewey's questioning of this assumption may be compared to alternatives explored by Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Martin Heidegger.

7. See, for example, *The Quest for Certainty*, LW 4: 234–35. See MW 3 for Dewey's article and critical responses. "The Intellectualist Criterion of Truth" develops the criticism of the "Intellectualist Fallacy," and "What Pragmatism Means by Practical" (both in MW 4) develops the positive alternative, that action engages reality as possibility.

8. See studies by Mircea Eliade: *Myth and Reality* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1998), *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

9. See my essay "The Spirituality of the Possible in John Dewey's *A Common Faith*," in Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros: Eco-Ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

10. See Dewey's review and supporting textual material and discussion in LW 9: 213–22 and 445–56. (LW 9 also contains the critical edition of *A Common Faith*.) For discussion see Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 512 ff., and William Shea, *The Naturalists and the Supernatural* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1984). A synopsis of Rockefeller's views can be found in his essay "Dewey's Philosophy of Religious Experi-

ence,” in *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 124–25.

11. Theologian Paul Tillich also rejects the idea of God as “a being” among the collection of beings in the universe; God is, for him, the “ground of Being” and is symbolized for each of us as our “object of ultimate concern.” See his *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), especially chaps. 1 and 6.

12. See Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, pp. 461–62, 484–85, and 523–24.

13. John Herman Randall, Jr., “The Religion of Shared Experience,” in *Philosophy after Darwin*, ed. Beth J. Singer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 241.

14. Many religions, however, are not defined by beliefs or dogmas. Joseph Campbell, a scholar of world religions, told the story of a Westerner asking a Japanese Shinto priest what his “theology” was. The priest looked puzzled and replied, “We don’t have a theology. We dance.” See Stephen and Robin Larsen, *A Fire in the Mind: A Life of Joseph Campbell* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), p. 438.

15. Max Eastman, “John Dewey,” *Atlantic* 168, no. 6 (December 1941), p. 673. See discussion in Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, pp. 67–68. A very similar experience happened to the Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller. See Robert Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 237–38. Victor Kestenbaum provides a sensitive, probing analysis of this rather neglected side of Dewey in “Faith and the Unseen,” in his *The Grace and Severity of the Ideal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 202), pp. 175–99.

16. This is why Dewey’s theory of the pervasive, qualitative dimension of all experience, including practical and cognitive experience, is crucial for grasping his thought. See Douglas Anderson’s “John Dewey’s Sensible Mysticism,” in his *Philosophy Americana* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 129–41.

17. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 6.

18. The phrase “natural piety” comes from Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up” (also known as “The Rainbow”; it is quoted in part at the beginning of “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”). The idea is developed at length in George Santayana’s *The Life of Reason: Reason in Religion* (New York:

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Scribner's, 1905), chap. 10. See discussion in Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, pp. 495–96.

19. See Joseph Epes Brown (with Black Elk), *The Sacred Pipe*, 3rd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), and his essay “The Spiritual Legacy,” in *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), as well as Hartley Burr Alexander, *The World's Rim* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), chap. 1. For a sensitive, fascinating discussion of the Navajo concept of “walking in beauty” (*sa'a naghai bik'e hozho*), see John R. Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1984), chap. 5.

20. Morris Dees with Steve Fiffer, *A Lawyer's Journey: The Morris Dees Story* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2001), pp. 95–97.

21. The critical approach that seeks to reject or marginalize Dewey's philosophy of religious experience is best represented by Michael Eldridge's *Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), chap. 5. Eldridge says, “I think Dewey's willingness to use the language of faith and even the word ‘God’ is counter-productive” (p. 168).

22. Compare: “A *Common Faith* was not addressed to those who are content with traditions in which ‘metaphysical’ is substantially identical with ‘supernatural.’ It was addressed to those who have abandoned supernaturalism, and who on that account are reproached by traditionalists for having turned their backs on everything religious. The book was an attempt to show such persons that they still have within their experience all the elements which give the religious attitude its value.” *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul Schilpp (Tudor Publishing: New York, 1939), p. 597.

23. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

24. See Steven Rockefeller's exploration of this issue, *John Dewey*, pp. 532–33.