Lecture Supplement on Dewey's *A Common Faith* [1934][1]

A. Introduction:

In his "Introduction" Thomas Alexander maintains:

> 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**. Dewy 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, Dewy 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.[2]
>
> 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. **In fact, there is no one thing called "religion," only diverse religions. But what of "the religious" as a quality of [human] 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 religion soften *inhibit* or *prevent* people from experiencing "the religious" in their lives**….
> "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." The word "attitude" is important. Often people 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 he lives of the individuals who undergo them**.[3]

Finally, Alexander discusses an interview Max Eastman had with John Dewey where he discussed a "transformative experience" he had as a High School teacher:

> 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 mystical 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 then, nor any beliefs. To me faith means not worrying."

In the selection in our text titled "The Problem of Method" [1927], Dewey maintains that just as **scientific theories** have been "freed" from absolute and external authorities, so **social and political thought** needs such freedom. According to him

> [187-188] the essential need…is improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the process of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions. Inquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts. But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend. They are technical experts in the sense that scientific investigators and artists manifest *expertise*. **It is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns.**[4]

In the selection in our text titled "Philosophies of Freedom" [1928] Dewey elaborates regarding 'freedom" saying that

> [141] …the possibility of freedom is deeply grounded in our very beings. It is one with our individuality, our being uniquely what we are and not imitators and parasites of others. But like all other possibilities, this possibility has to be actualized; and, like all others, it can only be actualized through interaction with objective conditions. The question of political and economic freedom is not an addendum or after-thought, much less a deviation or excrescence [an abnormal outgrowth], in the problem of personal freedom. For the conditions that form political and economic liberty are required in order to realize the potentiality of freedom each of us carries with him in his very structure. Constant and uniform relations in change and a knowledge of them in "laws," are not a hindrance to freedom, but a necessary factor in coming

to be effectively that which we have the capacity to grow into. **Social conditions interact with the preferences of an individual (that *are* his individuality) in a way favorable to actualizing freedom only when they develop intelligence, not abstract knowledge and abstract thought, but power of vision and reflection**. For these take effect in making preference, desire and purpose more flexible, alert, and resolute. **Freedom has too long been thought of as an intermediate power operating in a closed and ended world. In its reality, freedom is a resolute will operating in a world in some respects indeterminate, because open and moving toward a new future**.[5]

For Dewey there are no "ends" which are "final"—instead insofar as it makes any sense to speak of the goal of "associated living" (or democracy), I think we can find what this could mean near the end of his book (but one must keep in mind the qualifications noted above about his use of "religious" terms):

75 **human beings have impulses toward affection, compassion and justice, equality and freedom. It remains to weld all these things together**. It is of no use merely to assert that the intrenched[BWH1] foes of class interest and power in high places are hostile to the realization of such a union. As I have already said, if this enemy did not exist, there would be little sense in urging *any* policy of change. The point to be grasped is that, **unless one gives up the whole struggle as hopeless, one has to choose between alternatives. One alterative is dependence upon the supernatural; the other, the use of natural agencies.**

80 **The ideal ends to which we attach our faith are not shadowy and wavering. They assume concrete form in our understanding of our relations to one another and the values contained in these relations**. We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. **Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant**.

Effectively, then freedom is a necessary condition for inquiry and where the life of free inquiry is pursued in a social setting of similarly-minded individuals, individuality will prosper and democracy can exist. ***Living* a life with others which conforms to such a model involves a moral commitment to oneself and to others which instantiates democracy.** That is, as he says in his "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," democracy is not an institution, instead it:

[244] …is **a moral ideal** and **so far as it becomes a fact it is a moral fact**. [This] is to realize that democracy is a reality only as it is indeed a commonplace of [associated] living.[6]

B. The Text:

I. Religion Versus The Religious: [pp. 1-26]

3 The heart of my point…is that there is a difference between religion…and the religious; between anything that may be denoted by a noun substantive and the quality of experience that is designated by an adjective.

7 Dewey clarifies that from his naturalistic perspective "…there is nothing left worth preserving in the notion of unseen [supernatural] powers…."

9 He contends that the adjective [religious]"…denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal."

12-13 the intent of this discussion is not to deny the genuineness of the result nor its importance in life. It is not, save incidentally, to point out the possibility of a purely naturalistic explanation of the event. My purpose is to indicate what happens when religious experience is already set aside as something *sui generis*. **The actual religious quality in the experience described is the *effect* produced**, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production. 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 pace in different persons in a multitude of ways. It is sometimes brought about by devotion to a cause; sometimes by a passage of poetry that opens a new perspective; sometimes...through philosophical reflection.

II. Faith and Its Object: [pp. 27-53]

Later in the book [p. 78] Dewey says that in this Chapter he urges

> …that conditions are now ripe for **emancipation of the religious quality** [of our experiences] from accretions that have grown up about it and that limit the credibility and the influence of religion. In [this] chapter, I developed this idea with respect to the faith in ideals that is immanent in the religious value of experience, and asserted that the power of this faith would be enhanced were belief freed from the conception that the significance and validity of the ideal are bound up with intellectual assent to the proposition that the ideal is already embodied in some supernatural or metaphysical in the very framework of existence.

Thus, he will contend that when understood naturalistically (rather than supernaturally) religious experiences can be more successfully reflectively examined, understood, and enhanced.

42-43 men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing. Dependence upon an external power is the counterpart of surrender of human endeavor. Nor is emphasis on exercising our own powers for good an egoistical or sentimentally optimistic recourse. It is not the first, for it does not isolate man, either individually or collectively, form nature. It is not the second, because it makes no assumption beyond that of the need and responsibility for human endeavor, and beyond the conviction that, if human desire and endeavor were enlisted in behalf of natural ends, conditions would be bettered.

45-46 the aims and ideals that move us are generated through imagination. But they are not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience. The locomotive did not exist before Stevenson, nor the telegraph before the time of Morse. But the conditions for their existence were there in physical material and energies and in human capacity. Imagination seized hold upon the idea of a rearrangement of existing things that would evolve new objects. The same thing is true in a painter, a musician, a poet, a philanthropist, a moral prophet. The new vision does not arise out of nothing, but 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

46 we are in the presence neither of ideals completely embodied in existence nor yet of ideals that are mere rootless ideals, fantasies, utopias. For there are forces in nature and society that generate and support the ideals. They are further unified by the action that gives them coherence and solidity. It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name "God."

47 there exist concretely and experimentally—the values of art…of knowledge…fellowship, of friendship and love….These goods are there and yet they are relatively embryonic. Many persons are shut out from generous participation in them; there are forces at work that threaten and sap existent goods as well as prevent their expansion.

53 in the degree in which we cease to depend upon belief in the supernatural, selection is enlightened and choice can be made in behalf of ideals whose inherent relations to conditions and consequences are understood. Were the naturalistic foundations and bearings of religion grasped, the religious element in life would emerge from the throes of the crisis in religion. . Religion would then be found to have its natural place in every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action on behalf of their realization. All that is significant in human experience falls within this frame.

III. The Human Abode of The Religious Function: [pp. 55-80]

67 Dewey contends that in the case of religion

> history seems to exhibit three stages of growth. In the first stage, human relationships were thought to be so infected with the evils of corrupt human nature as to require redemption from external and supernatural sources. In the next stage, what is significant in these relations is found to be akin to values esteemed distinctively religious. This is the point now reached by liberal theologians The third stage would realize that in fact the values prized in those religious that have ideal elements are idealizations of things characteristic of natural association, which have then been projected into a supernatural realm for safe-keeping and sanction.

71 But Dewey maintains

> …understanding will not develop unless we strive for it. The assumption that only supernatural agencies can give control is a sure method of retarding this effort. It is as sure to be a hindering force no with respect to social intelligence, as the similar appeal was earlier an obstruction in the development of physical knowledge.

72 reinforced by the prestige of traditional religions, and backed by the emotional force of beliefs in the supernatural, [religion] stifles the growth of social intelligence by means of which direction of social change could be taken out of the region of accident….

75 For Dewey a naturalistic account is needed:

human beings have impulses toward affection, compassion and justice, equality and freedom. It remains to weld all these things together. It is of no use merely to assert that the intrenched[BWH2] foes of class interest and power in high places are hostile to the realization of such a union. As I have already said, if this enemy did not exist, there would be little sense in urging *any* policy of change. The point to be grasped is that, **unless one gives up the whole struggle as hopeless, one has to choose between alternatives. One alterative is dependence upon the supernatural; the other, the use of natural agencies.**

78 …conditions are now ripe for emancipation of the religious quality [of our experiences] from accretions that have grown up about it and that limit the credibility and the influence of religion. In the second chapter, I developed this idea with respect to the faith in ideals that is immanent in the religious value of experience, and asserted that the power of this faith would be enhanced were belief freed from the conception that the significance and validity of the ideal are bound up with intellectual assent to the proposition that the ideal is already embodied in some supernatural or metaphysical in the very framework of existence.

80 **The ideal ends to which we attach our faith are not shadowy and wavering. They assume concrete form in our understanding of our relations to one another and the values contained in these relations**. We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. **Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant**.

(end)

In his "Introduction" Thomas Alexander says that as Dewey discusses religion in his *The Quest for Certainty* [1929] he

…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." What Dewey proposes…is to replace what might be called a "spirituality of the actual" with a "spirituality of the possible."[7]

For Dewey religious experience is one instance of what he calls "**consummatory" experience**—experiences which are satisfactions. They are valued by those having them, and they often engender reflection as one seeks to have more such experiences, or to enhance them. For him it is a *fact* that we have such experiences, and as we critically reflect upon them they can become *values* or *ideals*. There is a very broad of such consummatory experiences including those which are aesthetic, gustatory, sensual, athletic, and so on. In fact as one lives one's life one sometimes finds such consummatory experiences when one least expected to. Dewey does not believe consummatory experiences are easily ordered in a hierarchy, and he believes that individuals will not always concur in their view of particular experiences as consummatory. Indeed, he is avowedly **pluralistic**—recognizing that different individuals will have different values, goals, and ideals. Initially many of our values, goals, and ideals are inherited from our shared social context, but individual experiences will introduce new ones, and reflection may lead one to change one's values, goals, and ideals.

As we have seen, Dewey contends that our values and ideals are **tools** as our beliefs, habits, and theories. They are to be **assessed in action** (in future experiences), and they should not be considered to be fixed, absolute, or "final."

For him as far as we can see (backward or forward), human nature is fundamentally social, and this means that we are likely to have social values and ideals as well as individual ones. Given his belief that we must recognize that we *begin* our reflective and critical activities with a rich set of habits, beliefs, theories, values, goals, and ideals which we try to revise, improve, and weld together, and his belief that we have learned the most successful inquiry processes are social ones, our social habits, beliefs, theories, values, goals, and ideals are very important. As he sees it our social setting is one which

values the ideal of democracy. That is not to say we live in a full-fledged democracy. Indeed, as Westbrook points out, Dewey completely understood that many American social theorists believed that

> …widespread political participation was not only not a necessary feature of democracy, it was also not a desirable feature. They argued that increased political participation by incompetent citizens might undermine the stability of liberal-democratic regimes by unleashing irrational passions and encouraging demagoguery, thereby destroying the peaceful competition of responsible elites which was at the heart of a realistic democracy. Widespread apathy was thus seen by some as a *functional* feature of an effective democratic polity. Participatory ideals were useful primarily for purposes of legitimation and for ensuring elite responsibility but were not to be taken seriously as ideals.[8]

Dewey explicitly and forcefully rejected such views and championed a *moral* democracy which *required* his "common faith" that we can life of free inquiry which is pursued in a social setting of similarly-minded individuals. When this faith is present individuality can prosper and democracy can exist. *Living* an "associated" life with others which conforms to such a model involves a moral commitment to oneself and to others which instantiates a democracy**.**

For Dewey the chief obstacle for such a life arises when groups of individuals (examples: castes, classes, races, sexes, material wealth groupings, or "cultural wealth" groupings) isolate themselves from one another and seek to exploit others. Against these divisive forces, as we have seen, Dewey marshals his "faith"—one he did not invent, but acquired from his cultural surroundings:

> …what is the faith in democracy in role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication. I am willing to leave to upholders of totalitarian states of the right and the left the view that faith in the capacities of intelligence is utopian. For the faith is so deeply embedded in the methods which are intrinsic to democracy that when a professed democrat denies the faith he convicts himself of treachery to his profession.[9]

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I greatly appreciate comments and corrections--typos and infelicities are all too common and the curse of "auto-correct" plagues me!

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File revised on 09/27/25

[1] John Dewey, *A Common Faith* [1934] *Second Edition* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2013). Page references here refer to this and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.

[2] Thomas M. Alexander, "Introduction" to John Dewey's *A Common Faith* [1934] *op. cit.*, pp. ix-xxxvi, p. xx. Emphasis [bold] has been added to some of the passages cited. *Cf*., Dewey's "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," first read at a dinner in honor of Dewey in New York on 10/20/1939 and .reprinted in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), on pp. 240-245, p. 242-243.

[3] *Ibid*., pp xxii-xxiii. The citation is to Dewey's *A Common Faith, op. it*, p. 9.

[4] John Dewey, "The Problem of Method," was first published in his *The Public and Its Problems* (NY: Henry Holt, 1927) and reprinted in *Later Works*, v. 2. The selection discussed appears in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro. *op. cit*., on pp. 184-191, and page reference here refer to this reprint.

[5] John Dewey, "Philosophies of Freedom," originally published in *Freedom in the Modern World*, ed. Horace Kalen (NY: Coward-McCann, 1928), and reprinted in *The Later Works*, v. 3. The selection we are discussing appears in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro. *op. cit*., on pp. 133-141, and page reference refer to this reprint—emphasis [bold] has been added to the passage.

[6] John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," *op. cit*., p. 244.

[7] Tomas Alexander, "Introduction" to Dewey's *A Common Faith, op. cit.*, pp. xvii-xviii—emphasis [bold] has been added to the passage. He cites Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* [1929]--volume 4 of his *The Later Works*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: SIU UP., 1899), p. 243.

[8] Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy, op. cit*., p. 545.

[9] John Dewey," Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," *op. cit*., pp. 242-243

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