John Dewey and Edward Scribner Ames: Partners in Religious Naturalism

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A comprehensive history has not yet been written about the origins and flourishing of religious naturalism during that extraordinary period of philosophical and religious speculation from roughly 1900 to 1940. Such a history would include John Dewey and his wide-ranging impact. As a contribution to a chapter of that history, this essay discusses Dewey's views on religion in their historical and academic context. During the early and mid-twentieth century, the University of Chicago was home to many prominent religious humanists and naturalists. Of these, philosopher Edward Scribner Ames took a position on religion which was the most similar to that of John Dewey. Indeed, among American intellectuals of that era, only two other pragmatic humanists, the Wisconsin philosopher Max Carl Otto and New School philosopher Horace Kallen, had philosophies of religion so close to Dewey's.

A striking difference between Dewey and his friends Otto and Kallen involved Dewey's willingness to use the term "God" in the stunning 1934 book *A Common Faith*. Among Dewey's pragmatist collaborators, only Ames was as comfortable with talking about God, and Ames's meaning for "God" was very similar to Dewey's. There are indeed numerous major similarities between the philosophies of Ames and Dewey, including parallels between their views on morality, religious experience, the nature of God, and the Protestant churches.

Although Dewey and Ames could have independently arrived at these conclusions about religion, the many similarities in their views and close professional contacts instead suggest a serious degree of mutual influence. They were colleagues at the University of Chicago for only four years, from 1900 to 1904, but they remained acquainted with each other's work from a distance. Dewey was familiar with Ames's major works, the 1910 treatise on *The Psychology of Religious Experience* and the 1929 book *Religion*. Also, a preserved letter by Dewey to Ames expresses his agreement with Ames's essay on religious values in the 1929 volume *Essays in Honor of John Dewey*.

This essay explores the many similarities between Ames's and Dewey's philosophies of religion, and also notes some topics on which

they disagreed. It additionally develops and explores the hypothesis that Ames's religious humanism was helpful for Dewey's development towards his conclusions about religion, nature, and democracy published in *A Common Faith*. Although anything resembling a full analysis of Dewey's philosophy of religion cannot be attempted here, several of his central religious views will receive close attention.

Two Pragmatists on the Existence of God

Among the many ways that Ames's and Dewey's philosophies converged, the most obvious and unusual similarity between Ames and Dewey concerned their use of the term "God." Both Ames and Dewey were comfortable with applying God as a label for the organic unity of human strivings with cooperating natural forces. Ames had advocated this definition of God in his 1910 book and again in his 1929 book, while Dewey did not publicly join with Ames to use the term "God" until 1934. Still, repeatedly before 1934 Dewey did express his agreement with Ames that religious experience is an experience of that organic unity of humanity with nature. Both Ames and Dewey were thus agreed that supernaturalism must be abandoned, that God is not a separate personal being, and that religious experience is not caused by any divine connection. Rather, religious experience is an experience of a special kind, in which the social pursuit of common values is vividly experienced as a cooperative relationship with much of the wider universe upon which our success depends.

Ames's and Dewey's remarkable stances towards the meaning of "God" and religious experience are not simply coincidental. They shared several basic pragmatic theories about the cultural role of religion, the moral essence of religion, and the nature of religious experience. The further idea that Ames was a *positive* influence on Dewey was first suggested by Horace Kallen in 1958, in a letter to Ames's son, Van Meter Ames. Kallen wrote, "I was particularly impressed by his *Psychology of Religious Experience*. . . . I am sure [it] enabled Dewey to accept and use the word 'God' with a good conscience."[1]

[1] Horace M. Kallen to Van Meter Ames, 21 July 1958, letter #13933 in the electronic correspondence available at the Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Steven Rockefeller has been the only Dewey scholar to expand on Kallen's suggestion. In his book *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*, Rockefeller briefly notes some agreements between Ames and Dewey about the psychology of religion and empirical naturalism that begin to support Kallen's hypothesis.[2] Yet further convergences between Ames and Dewey remain to be explored. Besides the helpful illumination on both philosophers that can come from such close comparison, a major question about Dewey's philosophical development can be answered: How could Dewey erupt with a sophisticated philosophy and sociology of religion in the early 1930s, after writing virtually nothing about religion since 1908?

Evidently Dewey's thoughts about religion were considerably developed by the early 1900s, and had been enriched by additional reflection during subsequent decades. Kallen does not credit Ames's 1929 book on religion for inspiring Dewey, and *A Common Faith* does not reference Ames, although Dewey's mature views run parallel to those in Ames's later book. Instead, Kallen credits Ames's first book on *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, suggesting that Ames's views on religion were quite harmonious with Dewey's views by 1910. Therefore, it is appropriate to first examine Ames's views in *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, and then to describe how Ames's and Dewey's philosophies were in close sympathy during that earlier period.

Ames as Psychologist, Philosopher, and Minister

Edward Scribner Ames was born in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on 21 April 1870. His father was a Disciples of Christ minister for a series of Midwestern towns. Ames received his BA and MA from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and then attended Yale University Divinity School. He received the Yale BD degree in 1892 and continued to study philosophy there for two more years. During that period he absorbed the liberalism of local Yale preachers Theodore Munger and Newman Smyth, and discovered the historical-critical German methodology through philosopher George Trumbull Ladd. Ames also was deeply influenced by psychological voluntarism,

[2] Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 522-23, 625-27.

persuaded by Arthur Schopenhauer and then William James that the will leads the intellect. Transferring to the University of Chicago for a fellowship offered by William Rainey Harper during 1894-95, he earned a PhD in philosophy in 1895, awarded by John Dewey and James H. Tufts.

Ames first taught at Butler College in Indianapolis for three years but soon returned to accept a position as instructor of psychology at Chicago in 1900. He later became a valued member of the philosophy department after it separated from psychology, continuing to teach psychology and philosophy of religion and related topics for many years. He was promoted to associate professor of philosophy in 1918, and then to full professor and also served as department chair for many years, until his retirement in 1936. Ames died in Chicago on 29 June 1958 and his ashes were spread behind the family cottage on Lake Michigan in Pentwater, Michigan.

Ames published several influential studies of religious experience and values, along with doctrinal studies relating to the Disciples of Christ. Strongly influenced by his colleagues, he quickly joined their Chicago School of Pragmatism and advanced a pragmatic understanding of God and doctrine. Like several other philosophy faculty, Ames was active in the life of his city, joining the City Club and serving on reform committees. Ames maintained his devotion to the Disciples of Christ and was in close association with other leading figures of the movement. He was one of the founding members, with other graduates of Yale and Chicago, of the Campbell Institute in Chicago in 1896.

Ames was the minister of the Hyde Park Christian Church (renamed the University Church of Disciples of Christ) in Chicago from 1900 to 1940. He served as the Dean of the Disciples Divinity House in Chicago from 1927 to 1945. Ames also edited *The Scroll,* the quarterly organ of the Campbell Institute, from 1925 to 1951. Ames's distinctively liberal and humanistic approach to both theology and ministerial leadership brought him into repeated conflicts with more conservative elements of the denomination. Among the specific doctrinal questions for which Ames is remembered is the humanity of Jesus, the denial of an afterlife, the diminished role of baptism, and open membership.

Church historians over the years have taken notice of his activities. An early example of this attention is from Errett Gates:

> Another Butler College professor fell under criticism in 1898, in the person of E. S. Ames, professor of philosophy, on account of certain utterances made in an article in the *New Christian Quarterly.* He became pastor of the Hyde Park Church, Chicago, in 1900, and shortly after published a sermon entitled, *A Personal Confession of Faith.* No notice was taken of the sermon until two years after its publication, when, in connection with a sermon advocating 'Associate Church Membership', he was denounced by the editors of the *Standard* as a Unitarian and apostate from the accepted teachings of the Disciples, and pronounced unworthy of fellowship among them. The church of which he was pastor was called upon to dismiss him or acknowledge its agreement with his opinions. The church took action in a series of resolutions declaring its loyalty to the doctrinal position of the denomination, and affirming its right to liberty in local church government, as well as in doctrinal matters not involving the essential teachings of Christianity.[3]

Here is another view of Ames's church during the 1910s, from Nathaniel Haynes, which includes a portion of a statement from the church itself:

> Hyde Park Church of Disciples of Christ (Fifty-seventh Street and Lexington Avenue). Organized 1894, by H. L. Willett; present membership, 200; value of property, $7,000; Bible school began 1894; present enrollment, 100. Prof. W. D. MacClintock was also active in the formation of this church. Meetings were first held in the Masonic Hall on Fifty-seventh Street, east of Washington Avenue, and later in Rosalie Hall. Mr. Errett Gates succeeded Mr. Willett in the pastorate, and during this period the present chapel was built on the lots owned by the Disciples' Divinity House. E. S. Ames has

[3] Errett Gates, *The Disciples of Christ* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1905), 319-20.

> served as pastor since 1900. In this congregation 'one of the most important features has been the adoption of a plan by which Christian union could be practically and effectively realized. This plan does not assume to change the terms of church membership as taught and practiced by the great body of Disciples. It simply recognizes members of the congregation as well as of the church in the technical sense. This plan has been employed since 1903 with the happiest results. It has not caused the slightest friction here'.[4]

Ames enjoyed the complete confidence of his Chicago congregation during his long tenure. He encouraged a thoroughly pragmatic approach to church doctrine, life, and activities. As a visible manifestation of the Social Gospel movement, Ames was a proud and confident leader of Chicago progressivism. Unlike Dewey, whose religious views matured after he left church membership very early in his career, Ames refined his pragmatic religion in active church practice and leadership over many decades.

Ames's resulting confidence in the capacity for churches to be leaders of progressive liberalism is a striking contrast with Dewey's consistently dismissive attitude towards churches. Dewey expected that the waning influence of churches over the political and legal sphere of society would soon result in a much-reduced social status for churches, little distinguished from any other mutual aid society or philanthropic enterprise. Dewey welcomed such a diminished role and power for churches, and usually spoke of churches in harsh and hostile ways, especially in *A Common Faith*. Since Dewey defined a church as an institution requiring elaborate dogmatic creeds, their disagreement over churches is only superficial. Ames's ideal of a non-dogmatic and open church did in fact assign to such a church the role of a social club devoted to mutual edification, moral ideals, and social work. Of far greater significance to philosophy of religion is the nature of religious experience, and that topic held the attention of both Ames and Dewey in both the early and late phases of their careers.

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[4] Nathaniel S. Haynes, *History of the Disciples in Illinois 1819–1914* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1915), 160.

A Social Psychology of Religious Experience

Ames's work on the psychology of religious experience during the period of 1895 to 1910 was heavily indebted to the functional psychology of William James, the allied social psychologies of Dewey and George Herbert Mead, the newly available sociological and anthropological studies of the world's religions, and his own experience as the minister of a Disciples of Christ church. Ames appreciated how religion should be approached as a universal phenomenon and how the social sciences searched for basic features shared by most religions. This universalistic approach had three serious implications for American Protestantism, which made a dramatic impact on Ames's own thinking about religion. According to the universalistic approach of sociology and anthropology, religion should be foremost concerned with the most central values held by the entire community. Second, religion is the community's expression and pursuit of those values through public ceremonies and rituals. Third, the specific beliefs of any religion have their origin and continued meaning in and through the expression and pursuit of communal values. All three of these views about the nature of religion contradicted what Ames believed was expressed by the Protestantism of his day (and also by some other faiths—but Ames was a Disciples of Christ minister, so Protestantism is the focus here).

Ames and other intellectuals of that era were distressed by what they believed about the essential nature of the Protestant faith. In their view, Protestantism was concerned with the most central values which ought to be held by individuals regardless of whether the wider community agrees. Protestant denominations emphasized the individual's expression and pursuit of these values in private ceremonies and rituals for members only. Furthermore, Protestantism believed that creeds have a meaning because of God's relationship with individuals, regardless of whether the wider community was in agreement. Because Protestantism, in Ames's view, had placed its focus on the salvation of individual souls, and believed that the relationship between the individual and God determined the course of salvation, the wider community was irrelevant. Of course, each Protestant church believed that it ought to help convert souls and spread throughout the community and the world, but this aim was a tertiary concern. No one's personal salvation depended on whether the church succeeded in

converting wider regions, or indeed whether one ever succeeded in converting a single other soul. Ames, Dewey, and many other philosophers and theologians believed that Protestantism's problematic features were mostly caused by these religious tenets. Since we are here concerned with the relationship between Ames and Dewey, we will set aside the question of whether Ames and Dewey had a just and proportionate perspective on the diverse scene of American Protestantism of their time.

Ames believed that important features of American Protestantism appeared to be contradicted by the universalistic standpoint of the sociology and anthropology of religion. And Ames was not alone is coming to see that Protestantism could be better integrated with society. Naturally, some efforts were already underway to mediate these contradictions and find compromises. On the side of the churches, several churches were becoming more liberal about their creeds, including Ames's Disciples of Christ. Many theologians and laypeople had realized that strict creeds about the nature and activities of God were preventing the Protestant churches from having an effective role in social life. The previous century's experience demonstrated that the more strenuously each church pronounced its particular creed as the "most Christian," the more splintered the churches became. With thousands of American churches to choose from, each individual felt more empowered to select the one that he or she personally approved. Simultaneously, people felt more free to regard the social and political life of the community as having a life and logic quite distinct from the various religions. In order for the churches to regain social relevance, the suggestion soon arose that they must reunite, by losing their individuality and setting aside their particular creeds. The Disciples of Christ were a prominent example of this effort in America, because only the most central and simple convictions about God, Jesus, and the ethical life were to be required for membership.[5]

Ames embraced this ecumenical mission of the Disciples of Christ, and in his ministry he pushed this liberalism to its fullest extent. He was unabashedly frank with his congregation from the beginning. In his 1902 sermon "A Personal Confession of Faith," published as a

[5] The best history of the movement is still Winfred Ernest Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot's *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1958). Errett Gates's *The Disciples of Christ* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1905) may also be consulted.

pamphlet by his church, Ames informed his listeners that the supernatural did not interest him, that the divinity of Jesus was mythical, and that the essence of Christianity was devotion to moral ideals. Ames restates key themes of his 1902 confession in his autobiography: "Salvation is ethical. It means developed character. It is a life process and signifies the realization of the natural powers of the soul."[6] His confession also assigned to churches the task of providing opportunities for pursuit of ideals, reasoning that all great human interests become embodied in social institutions. Finding that his liberalism aroused some resistance from his denomination, Ames nevertheless always held the firm support of his own church. After abandoning the traditional practice of baptism by complete immersion, he gradually eliminated other practices distinctive of the early formative days of the Disciples of Christ movement, and arrived at an open membership to all who desire to join worship. Ames fervently believed that this ecumenical path would eliminate the worst features of Protestantism and help reunite its churches.

Academics were also searching for ways to mediate the contradictions of the sociology and anthropology of religion with Protestantism. Several philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists in America, including William James, undertook the study of the phenomenon of religious conversion, thereby casting a distinctly Protestant perspective on personal religious consciousness. Ames did not agree with this personalistic emphasis, having himself been "converted" to Dewey's Hegelian social psychology. In this social psychology, all mental life is primarily social, and the study of intelligence should be the study of visible social manifestations: the cultural tools, constructions, and modes of life of human communities.

Ames accordingly defines the job of the psychologist of religion in the first chapter of *The Psychology of Religious Experience*:

> The psychologist of religion accepts the facts of religion, the temples and priests, the sacred books and ceremonies, the faiths and customs which exist in such profusion throughout the world. He seeks to know the needs, impulses, and desires from which these

[6] Edward Scribner Ames, *Beyond Theology: The Autobiography of Edward Scribner Ames*, ed. Van Meter Ames (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 76.

> institutions and activities arise. He inquires concerning the circumstances under which they appear in the race and in the individual. He attempts to trace their development into settled institutions, doctrines, and emotions. He marks the part that they play, the function they perform, in the experience of individuals and of society.[7]

In this definition we hear a concern for the religious life of the individual, but only as that individual life is connected with the wider social life. Ames's sociological approach to religion exemplified his close harmony with several other pragmatic-minded theologians at Chicago including George Burman Foster, Shailer Mathews, Gerald Birney Smith, and Albert Eustace Haydon, and this common stance cannot be overemphasized.[8]

In his chapter on conversion, Ames explicitly applies this sociological approach to sudden and intense religious emotions. He states that they almost always occur only in certain religious communities where such experiences are directly suggested and controlled by adults having a special religious standing, such as parents, teachers, and evangelists. Ames also takes the pragmatic view that the process of conversion follows the basic stages of any problem-solving inquiry: the uneasiness of doubt, the turning-point of a possible resolution, and the joyful rest of confirmed solution. Ames concludes his chapter by noting how agitating religious fervor in others is far easier than sustaining it. He criticizes those Protestant churches that find their purpose in immediate pleasures of arousing crowds rather than the long-term work of social reform.

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[7] Ames, *The Psychology of Religious Experience* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 13-14.

[8] In an otherwise useful sketch of Ames, Gary Dorrien tightly links Ames to James and barely mentions Ames's debts to Dewey, obscuring Ames's sociological approach to religion and religious experience. See *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 226-37. Selections from major Chicago theologians can be usefully consulted in *The Chicago School of Theology: Pioneers in Religious Inquiry*, eds. Creighton Peden and Jerome A. Stone (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

The Moral Essence of Religion

Ames and Dewey, like many other liberal theologians and philosophers of that time, believed that all religions at their core are moral doctrines and generate moral energy for social reform. As essentially moral in nature, religions instruct the moral expectations of societies, help maintain devotion to moral ideals, and provide an account of humanity's place within creation that justifies those ideals. Pragmatists generally have had little quarrel with these tasks of religion, but have typically demanded that religions be primarily judged by their functioning on these three tasks. For example, pragmatists including Ames, Dewey, and James argued that traditional religions can obstruct normal moral development and adult capacity for moral thinking. Traditional religions also sometimes erect unnecessary theological conflicts with scientific knowledge, forgetting their primary moral responsibilities. Like James, both Ames and Dewey sought to describe how religious belief is intrinsically connected with moral conviction.

In a chapter titled "Normal Religious Development" in *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, Ames explains that religious capacity normally results from gradual learning in the social environment. We slowly become more religious as we participate in social activities. Religious education should not be the recitation of sophisticated creeds or the imitation of complex religious emotions of adults. Children will naturally become religious as their capacity for contributing to the community advances. There is no special religious sensibility, no specialized mental function devoted to religion, and no separate type of intelligence concerning religion.

Ames continues this theme of the general character of religion throughout the rest of his book. With the gradual erosion of religious obsession with metaphysical and theological doctrines about the nature of God, liberal religion will be reduced down to its core: the devotion to moral ideals. Furthermore, Ames stresses how religion as moral devotion should pervade one's entire consciousness to some degree. One's religious nature cannot be intellectually compartmentalized, or awakened only during some portions of one's day. "Religion, with its changing forms, may thus be seen as a phase of all socialized human experience."[9] Towards the end of *The Psychology of Religious*

[9] Ames, *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, 279-80.

Experience Ames declares that "the religious consciousness is identical with the core of the social consciousness."[10] The connection needed between religious beliefs and social life is moral ideals: a person fully expresses her religious capacities by ensuring that her moral ideals energize all participations in social relationships. Since the quite abstract and highly demanding moral ideals that deserve to be called "religious" are the sort of ideals that cannot be turned on or off when convenient, or attended to only when dealing with some people but not others, religious values are co-extensive with social values.

Ames elaborates this perspective on religious values in his contribution to the 1929 volume *Essays in Honor of John Dewey*:

> [R]eligious values are not special kinds set off from others such as health, economic goods, and social interests, but rather the religious values are just those common values in so far as they are fitted into a well-proportioned, working system where each makes its proper contribution to the whole. The religious values are always also at the same time other kinds of values. Religion is the integration of various concrete values in the way which ministers to the fullest and most harmonious and expansive living.[11]

It was this essay that elicited the only preserved approval from Dewey, in a letter from November 1929: "I am still engaged in reading the essays in the volume presented to me on my birthday celebration. I need not say that I am in general sympathy with the position that you have taken in your essay, and that I am very grateful to you for your share in the preparation of the volume."[12]

Ames, like Dewey, was convinced that Protestantism's legacy instead encouraged religious compartmentalization, as the strife of denominational pluralism required a partial divorce of civic and religious life. Nineteenth century liberalism further encouraged this

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[10] Ibid., 414.

[11] Ames, "Religious Values and Philosophical Criticism," in *Essays in Honor of John Dewey* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 29.

[12] *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 2: 1919–1939*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, VA.: Intelex Corporation, 2005), #04846, 11 November 1929.

divorce, and twentieth century liberalism completed it (in, for example, the work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas), but that sort of liberalism without public religion did not attract Dewey or Ames. To reunite religious and civic life, these two philosophers believed that Protestant liberalism must be transformed. Protestant liberalism must refocus on its core moral commitments, starting with the Enlightenment commitments of equal liberty and opportunity for all. This moral ideal of universal liberty and opportunity is the foundation for, and justification of, democracy. By demanding that religion in America become compatible with democracy, these pragmatists believed that they were doing nothing more than asking that Christianity return to its true nature. After all, modern Western democracy was no alien import but developed from within Christianity.

More will be said about Christianity and democracy in the next section. Ames's and Dewey's hope for reuniting religious and social consciousness was not based solely on Christianity's potential. When Ames and Dewey spoke about the way that a culture's religion can be found in aspects of all cultural activities, they relied on historical accounts of other civilizations and the discoveries of modern cultural anthropologists and sociologists. Based on this large amount of information, modern Western civilization is not normal but is rather an aberration among most other societies which have had one universal religion. Where Dewey notices other more unified societies, he treats them as the human norm and often adds a tone of admiration. Conversely, when Dewey speaks of his own fragmented culture, he is evidently not proud of its divisiveness over religion. Speaking of his own era in *Individualism Old and New* (1930), Dewey writes,

> The divorce of church and state has been followed by that of religion and society. Wherever religion has not become a merely private indulgence, it has become at best a matter of sects and denominations divided from one another by doctrinal differences, and united internally by tenets that have a merely historical origin, and a purely metaphysical or else ritualistic meaning. There is no such bond of social unity as once united Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, and Catholic medieval

> Europe. There are those who realize what is portended by the loss of religion as an integrating bond.[13]

But Dewey immediately warns against the seemingly obvious solution of supplying a unifying religion to the people of such a divided society. This method could not be effective because the imposition of any particular religion would seem arbitrary to many, and even if this imposition were done, the bonds of strong social relations cannot be built from mere intellectual assent to doctrinal creeds. The very existence of a particular creed to be adopted is proof of continued disunity. Religious unity is the product of social unity, and cannot cause social unity.

> Religion is not so much a root of unity as it is its flower or fruit. The very attempt to secure integration for the individual, and through him for society, by means of a deliberate and conscious cultivation of religion, is itself proof of how far the individual has become lost through detachment from acknowledged social values. It is no wonder that when the appeal does not take the form of dogmatic fundamentalism, it tends to terminate in either some form of esoteric occultism or private estheticism. The sense of wholeness which is urged as the essence of religion can be built up and sustained only through membership in a society which has attained a degree of unity. The attempt to cultivate it first in individuals and then extend it to form an organically unified society is fantasy.[14]

Since religious unity is the manifestation of social unity, the re-unification process has to happen within the field of social interactions themselves, and nowhere else. Of course, no society by definition is completely fragmented. The old social contract notion of atomic self-interested individuals was always a myth. Any society is such because

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[13] John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 71-72. Hereafter references will be made to the *Early Works* (*EW*), *Middle Works* (*MW*), and *Later Works* (*LW*) followed by volume and page numbers.

[14] *LW* 5: 72.

its members have many overlapping joint interests and cooperative pursuits as well as the inevitable conflicts. A person's facility with the habits of cooperation in his society involves awareness of the factors of social unity. As one grows to adulthood, the norms of social unity are typically internalized and accepted as normal and obligatory. Since normal religious development is continuous with normal social development, peoples' awareness and acceptance of the more abstract social norms, values, and ideals behind society's habits of cooperation are simultaneously their commitment to a shared religion.

Ames and Dewey held a particular view of the trajectory and proper destiny of Christian pluralism. After the Protestant Reformation, many European countries accommodating religious pluralism maintained some degree of social unity even while their citizens' loyalties were now divided between church and state. Protestants in England, for example, became more tolerant of Christian diversity so long as loyalty to king and country was assured. America, since early colonial times, has long relied on ideals of toleration, liberty, and equal opportunity to help maintain social unity despite the dispersing energies released by democracy. Both Ames and Dewey concluded that the political religion of America was nothing other than the Christian denominations' common ideals viewed from a political perspective.

The Political Aspect of Religious Commitment

Many of Ames's views about religious experience and education are also found in the few articles about religion by Dewey that he published before 1910, especially his 1903 "Religious Education as Conditioned by Modern Psychology and Pedagogy" and his 1908 "Religion and Our Schools." In the latter article, from which Ames quotes in his own book, Dewey argues against including religion as its own curriculum topic, but declares that the schools' proper work is quite religious. Dewey says, "Our schools, in bringing together those of different nationalities, languages, traditions, and creeds, in assimilating them together upon the basis of what is common and public in endeavor and achievement, are performing an infinitely significant religious work. They are promoting the social unity out of which in the end genuine religious unity must grow."[15] In these articles Dewey is looking

[15] *MW* 4: 175.

forward to the reunification of religion in America and views public schools as an essential tool for this work. The primary obstacle is the fragmentation of Protestantism in America, with each church consumed by the notion that God approves of only its particular creeds and ceremonies. The primary condition favorable to religious unity in America is exemplified by the public schools. The public schools help to unify all students under some very moral values and political ideals.

In Dewey's writings, these moral values and political ideals, such as diversity, toleration, equality, justice, and cooperation, are all justified by the type of community that emerged in an immigrant nation such as America's. Nowhere does Ames similarly offer details about the role of religion in American politics. However, Ames, like Dewey, saw no fundamental conflict between liberal democracy and liberal Christianity.

Both Ames and Dewey viewed the growing conflict between conservative Protestantism and liberal democracy as unnecessary and regrettable. Like Hegel, the inspiration for much of their social theory, the Chicago pragmatists viewed the Protestant emphasis on the individual's religious liberty and conscience as a highly positive cultural development. Unfortunately, conservative Protestantism overemphasized the individual conscience and the individual's duty to God, placing religious freedom entirely outside the sphere of community conditions and responsibilities. The Chicago pragmatists viewed religious liberty, like all liberties, as organic growths out of successful communities. There are no pre-government or pre-society rights or liberties. Rights and liberties are bestowed by communities in the normal course of social organization. If citizens should have religious freedoms, they must exercise those freedoms in a manner consistent with the community's overall welfare.

In a religiously pluralistic society that has adopted democracy, individuals should have the religious freedom to question and inquire into the community's values and ideals *with the aim* of improving the community's welfare. For Ames and Dewey, the improvement of community life is therefore the final pragmatic standard by which values must be compared, re-evaluated, and revised when necessary. For too many conservative Protestants, their own churches' doctrinal creeds about values supply the final standard. These conservatives believe that the individual's conformity to specific divine decrees about

values must always trump the community good, since these decrees sufficiently define what the Good is.

We may now directly discuss the role of God in Ames's and Dewey's philosophies. By 1910 Ames was prepared to say that all human conceptions of divinity are imaginative hypotheses about the relationship between the human community and the wider environment upon which the community depends. As imaginative hypotheses, each culture's conception of the divine can go no farther than its conception of the possibilities of social relationships. Ames observes that monarchical societies are most comfortable with divine monarchs, and therefore Christianity went even further than Judaism in the direction of molding God into an all-powerful king.[16] However, Christianity now should consider the new social relationships engendered by the rise of democracy.

The last chapter of Ames's *The Psychology of Religious Experience* discusses the new possibilities for religious consciousness when merged with the democratic consciousness. A democracy no longer believes that moral knowledge and virtue reside only in a privileged class or denomination. A democracy no longer believes that just one tribe or church or race or nationality alone possesses divine sanction and receives divine assistance. The notion that the divine holds a special place or role for only one privileged part of humanity will fade away to mythology for a democracy. As the notion of divine sanction fades away, so too will the notion that moral values are fixed and absolute. The democratic community will simultaneously believe that its moral values are the common possession of all people and also believe that its moral values are under the direction of all the people. A democratic community, because it remains a community with a past and a future, will cherish its traditional moral values, without believing that those values can never change. In America, democracy works to maintain social unity despite ethnic and religious pluralism. Ames and Dewey concluded that Liberal Christianity can still be a positive force for American democracy, so long as we surrender the notion that God is a supernatural king who commands obedience to eternal moral decrees.

What is the democratic alternative to a supernatural God? As early as 1892, Dewey had taken the sociological stance towards religion and concluded that a liberal, non-supernatural Christianity was best for

[16] Ames, *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, 310-11.

America. This liberal Christianity was still Christianity because the American community still holds Jesus to be an exemplary moral figure of love. For Dewey, the example of mutual love and respect for all people is simultaneously Christian and democratic. Let us hear two quotations from Dewey's 1892 address "Christianity and Democracy." First, he provides his sociological perspective on the genuine nature of religion:

> [E]very religion has its source in the social and intellectual life of a community or race. Every religion is an expression of the social relations of the community; its rites, its cult, are a recognition of the sacred and divine significance of these relationships. The religion is an expression of the mental attitude and habit of a people; it is its reaction, aesthetic and scientific, upon the world in which the people finds itself. Its ideas, its dogmas and mysteries are recognitions, in symbolic form, of the poetic, social and intellectual value of the surroundings.[17]

Second, Dewey announces that beyond proclaiming love, Jesus had no doctrine or creed or church to impose on the world. By offering a universal moral duty of love and nothing more, Jesus did not start a religion, but he did want all of us to become more religious. According to Dewey, we would have to gradually discover how best to love each other over time, in a progressive process of free and intelligent experimentation. "Democracy thus appears as the means by which the revelation of truth is carried on."[18] Therefore, American churches risk betraying democratic Christianity: "An organization may loudly proclaim its loyalty to Christianity and to Christ; but if, in asserting its loyalty, it assumes a certain guardianship of Christian truth, a certain prerogative in laying down what is this truth, a certain exclusiveness in the administration of religious conduct, if in short the organization attempts to preach a fixity in a moving world and to claim a monopoly in a common world—all this is a sign that the real Christianity is now

[17] *EW* 4: 3.
[18] *EW* 4: 9.

working outside of and beyond the organization, that the revelation is going on in wider and freer channels."[19]

Although this 1892 address was Dewey's only exploration of democratic religion until his 1934 book *A Common Faith*, we can see much of the book already contained in Dewey's early philosophy. However, his 1892 address says some very strange things about God. For example, without denying supernaturalism, Dewey demanded that God be "incarnate" in humanity. This demand, expressed here in religious terms, is the counterpart to Dewey's philosophical demand that any Absolute spirit must be evident in human experience. We know that by the early 1890s, Dewey had abandoned both supernaturalism and Hegelian absolutism, leaving him with only humanistic naturalism. Since Dewey had almost nothing to say about God between 1892 and the early 1930s, Dewey was known to be a staunch atheist. For example, Dewey was asked in 1933 to sign the Humanist Manifesto, while Ames was not. An author of the Humanist Manifesto, Edwin Wilson, later explained that although Ames was obviously a humanist, he had unfortunately continued to talk about God.[20] After Dewey's *A Common Faith* came out a year later in 1934, many humanists regretted that Dewey had joined with Ames and felt that Dewey had also betrayed humanism.

To summarize so far, we have seen that by 1910 Dewey and Ames were in agreement with a sociological and progressive view of religion in general and with a liberal democratic Christianity in particular. They agreed that commitment to society's moral ideals is sufficient for being religious, regardless of whether a person happens to also be a member of a church. Indeed, Dewey's distinction in *A Common Faith* between "religions" and "the religious," already evident in his 1892 article, is explicitly made by Ames in his 1910 book. There, in a chapter titled "Non-Religious Persons," Ames classifies only the most anti-social and isolated people as non-religious. I have also pointed out that Ames was a prominent Chicago pragmatist who continued to speak of God. We have already asked, and must ask again, What is the pragmatist alternative to a supernatural God? We have seen that the pragmatist might, as most did, take the easy option of

[19] *EW* 4: 5.

[20] Edwin Wilson, *The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto* (Amherst, NY: Humanist Press, 1995), chap. 11.

naturalistic and humanistic atheism. These pragmatists simply wait for notions of the divine to become completely absorbed into social ethics and for "God-talk" to fade away. Although Ames and Dewey shared so many assumptions about religion, these are not sufficient to account for Dewey's surprising return to "God-talk" in the 1930s.

Natural Piety

Kallen's hypothesis that Dewey adopted Ames's understanding of God by 1934 is supported by these major considerations: Dewey and Ames shared many views about religious experience; they agreed that it was Christianity's proper destiny to make its final transformation into liberal democracy; and no one besides Ames was so visibly defending the label of God to stand for the holistic way that certain aspects of nature function to support humanity's goals. Furthermore, both Ames and Dewey approached God in a thoroughly functional and pragmatic way, evident from their pragmatic tactic of converting nouns into adjectives and then into adverbs. For example, a pragmatist would prefer to talk of "true hypotheses" rather than "the truth" and would even more prefer to speak of "hypotheses that work truly."

Rather than talk about the divine, Dewey and Ames described an aspect of nature as being divine, and then preferred to talk about nature behaving divinely. Under what conditions would human beings understand nature as behaving divinely? Ames gave the answer first, in his 1910 book: Nature is conceived as behaving divinely when we view it as supportive of our efforts. Nature is thus conceived as entering into an idealized social relationship with us, rather than as being merely a cold, dead, uncaring chaos. In a 1924 essay "My Conception of God" Ames says, "My idea of God is the idea of the personified, idealized whole of reality."[21] In Ames's 1929 book *Religion*, he writes, "Hence we say God is reality idealized. . . . God is the world or life taken in certain of its aspects, in those aspects which are consonant with order, beauty, and expansion."[22]

Also in 1929, Dewey wrote in *A Quest for Certainty* about how nature is idealizable when it is regarded as a potential aid for realizing human ideals. But idealization must be carefully understood. In all his

[21] Ames, "My Conception of God," *My Idea of God: A Symposium of Faith*, ed. Joseph Fort Newton (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1926), 237.
[22] Ames, *Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 154.

works, Dewey explicitly refused to endorse any conception of God which makes God responsible for guaranteed ideals and preserved values. In *A Quest for Certainty* Dewey only goes so far as to agree with Ames's long-time conviction that a person takes the religious perspective when one appreciates how humanity together with its cooperating environment creates a larger whole having intertwined human and divine characteristics. It only remained for Dewey in *A Common Faith* five years later to permit himself to use the term "God" to label the direction towards which one's religious attitude is oriented.

To best understand Dewey's long path towards his acceptance of the term "God," we must examine more closely his appreciation for the kind of religious experience that he labeled, perhaps inspired by Santayana, "natural piety." For Ames, and by 1934 for Dewey as well, God is not just another object inside or outside nature. God *is* nature, when nature is understood as the complex whole of "environment-humanity." On this conception of the divine, the divine would not exist without humanity, and humanity would not exist without the divine. The religious experience is a mature appreciation of this mutual dependency and mutual destiny. Dewey occasionally called this experience "natural piety" in several of his important writings. In 1908 Dewey wrote, "It is increased knowledge of nature which has made supra-nature incredible, or at least difficult of belief. We measure the change from the standpoint of the supranatural and we call it irreligious. Possibly if we measured it from the standpoint of the natural piety it is fostering, the sense of the permanent and inevitable implication of nature and man in a common career and destiny, it would appear as the growth of religion."[23]

In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) Dewey writes,

> The religious experience is a reality in so far as in the midst of effort to foresee and regulate future objects we are sustained and expanded in feebleness and failure by the sense of an enveloping whole. Peace in action not after it is the contribution of the ideal to conduct.[24]

Dewey's expression of natural piety appears again in his 1925 *Experience and Nature.*

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[23] *MW* 4: 176.
[24] *MW* 14: 181.

> Fidelity to the nature to which we belong, as parts however weak, demands that we cherish our desires and ideals till we have converted them into intelligence, revised them in terms of the ways and means which nature makes possible. When we have used our thought to its utmost and have thrown into the moving unbalanced balance of things our puny strength, we know that though the universe slay us still we may trust, for our lot is one with whatever is good in existence.[25]

In his 1929 *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey says,

> Religious faith which attaches itself to the possibilities of nature and associated living would, with its devotion to the ideal, manifest piety toward the actual. . . . Nature may not be worshiped as divine even in the sense of the intellectual love of Spinoza. But nature, including humanity, with all its defects and imperfections, may evoke heartfelt piety as the source of ideals, of possibilities, of aspiration in their behalf, and as the eventual abode of all attained goods and excellencies.[26]

Lastly, natural piety is prominent in *A Common Faith*, as this selection displays:

> Our successes are dependent upon the cooperation of nature. The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole. Natural piety is not of necessity either a fatalistic acquiescence in natural happenings or a romantic idealization of the world. It may rest upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive

[25] *LW* 1: 314.
[26] *LW* 4: 244.

> by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable. Such piety is an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life.[27]

In these passages Dewey explicitly connects the religious attitude of piety with religious attitude of faith. By noticing that these two religious attitudes are distinct but also connected, Dewey attempts to distinguish his own position on religion. In the quotation above from *A Common Faith*, Dewey says that natural piety is neither a fatalism nor an idealism. Natural piety is directed towards the environing conditions that *partially* control, together *with* human effort, both success and failure. Fatalism, whether arising from theological predestination or materialistic determinism, dismisses human effort as ultimately irrelevant to whatever values may be realized. Idealism similarly has no significant role for human effort, since its romantic orientation towards ideals is admirable yet irrelevant to the guaranteed existence of the ideals. Indeed, from Dewey's perspective, fatalism and idealism are united by their common conviction in the impotence of human effort. Fatalism emphasizes that tragedy cannot be avoided, recommends passive stoicism towards whatever happens in the practical world, and accuses the romantic of false faith in non-existent ideals. On its side, idealism emphasizes how the human spirit can rise above tragedy, recommends passionate conviction about things outside of the practical world, and accuses the fatalist of ignorance about supernatural values. Ultimately, both fatalism and idealism lead towards moral quietism: a resignation to the fact that no human effort can make a moral difference. Both fatalism and idealism sharply separate faith from human effort: for both, faith should intensify precisely when one's concern with practical affairs must fade.

Dewey's philosophy of religion, opposed to both fatalism and idealism, instead holds that faith in ideals is only appropriate where it energizes one's efforts with practical affairs. Of course our practical efforts will fail more often than not; yet devotion to ideals is religious *because* frequent failure does not extinguish one's devotion. If disappointment with practical efforts instead dominates, natural piety could degenerate into either submissive prostration to the all-powerful, or aesthetic absorption with the good, true, and beautiful (or both

[27] *LW* 9: 18.

combined, as in the later writings of Santayana). These degenerate forms of natural piety are not genuinely religious, according to Dewey, no matter how many religions have encouraged them. The only form of natural piety that deserves to be respected as religious is a natural piety towards that sphere of nature-human engagement in which ideals are partially and gradually realizable despite temporary setbacks and ultimate catastrophe.

The frequently-heard accusation that Dewey fails to acknowledge the tragic, and hence fails to appreciate religion's power, is made in ignorance of Dewey's sophisticated treatment of religious experience. Dewey is labeled as an "optimist" by those fixated by tragedy as if Dewey were assured of the eventual victory of human trials, but no such assurance ever appears in his writings. Dewey not only eloquently attests to the tragic, but furthermore, only an approach like Dewey's is capable of an intelligent appreciation of the full reality of tragedy. Admirers of the tragic who want to go in a quite different direction have only fatalism or idealism to choose from; both paths fail to do justice to genuine religious faith in ideals.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey says,

> Moral faith has been bolstered by all sorts of arguments intended to prove that its object is not ideal and that its claim upon us is not primarily moral or practical, since the ideal in question is already embedded in the existent frame of things. It is argued that the ideal is already the final reality at the heart of things that exist, and that only our senses or the corruption of our natures prevent us from apprehending its prior existential being. Starting, say, from such an idea as that justice is more than a moral ideal because it is embedded in the very make-up of the actually existent world, men have gone on to build up vast intellectual schemes, philosophies, and theologies, to prove that ideals are real not as ideals but as antecedently existing actualities. They have failed to see that in converting moral realities into matters of intellectual assent they have evinced lack of moral faith."[28]

[28] *LW* 9: 15-16.

Traditional religion's demand for their ideals' existence expresses a conviction in the powerlessness of our moral devotion. Instead of energizing moral energy, the demand for faith in guarantees only drains our energy. For a few, it is true, who believe that they act in accord with the divine way, they can feel immense energy for direct action. But since their energy rises in proportion to their conviction in divine victory, they are trapped in a contradiction that can only be relieved by confessing that after all they have been merely an instrument of divine power. The faith of those who instead believe that they might make a real difference themselves is a faith in the worth of ideals regardless of any assurance of success. We are devoted to ideals because of their worth, and not because our ideals' fulfillment is a certainty.

The religious, according to Dewey, do not surrender their ideals and moral convictions in the face of tragedy, and neither do they repose in certainty about guaranteed ideals. The religious do not live in a world where ideals are irrelevant to practical, material conditions. Dewey explained this view to his atheist friend Max Carl Otto in a letter:

> I feel the gods are pretty dead, tho I suppose I ought to know that however, to be somewhat more philosophical in the matter, if atheism means simply not being a theist, then of course I'm an atheist. But the popular if not the etymological significance of the word is much wider. It has come to signify it seems to me a denial of all ideal values as having the right to control material ones. And in that sense I'm not an atheist and don't want to be labelled one.[29]

A Personal God?

Although the religious do not believe in any supernatural gods, since they take no comfort in guarantees, the religious are the faithful to what is really important: the ideals themselves. As Dewey complained to liberal theologians still seeking a righteous God, either we find God

[29] John Dewey to Max Carl Otto, *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 3: 1940–1953*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, VA.: Intelex Corporation, 2005), #08049, 14 January 1935.

and then commit to whatever he instructs, or we use our prior commitments to ideals to judge which sort of god ought to exist. The first option assumes a sudden ability to forget one's morality and values whenever one thinks that a god approaches (an ability that one should neither want for one's self or one's neighbors). The second option is a frank admission that we are constructing a useless god: if we already have a strong religious commitment to ideals in the first place, adding a god is at minimum superfluous and could potentially lead towards the moral quietism of idealism. Liberal theology must therefore logically proceed to religious naturalism.[30]

Of course, Dewey realized that his dilemma for liberal theologians applies to himself. In *A Common Faith* Dewey does not offer a useless god. While Dewey's God neither commands moral rules nor guarantees the preservation of ideals, this God has a pragmatic meaning in the living faith of those who are devoted to ideals in a hazardous universe. Dewey first offers the label of "God" to indicate a set of coordinated ideals to which a person has the highest devotion.

> Suppose for the moment that the word "God" means the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity. If we make this supposition, the issue will stand out clearly in contrast with the doctrine of religions that "God" designates some kind of Being having prior and therefore non-ideal existence.[31]

While somewhat different for each person, coordinated ideals are unified for a person in a double sense. These ideals are mutually adjusted to each other, so that the pursuit of one ideal does not demand the violation of another (although adjustment requires that an ideal may never be fulfilled to its fullest extent if considered in the abstract and separate from the rest—e.g., pure justice won't be possible where love

[30] Dewey constructs this dilemma for liberal theology in his review of *Is There a God? A Conversation*, by Henry Nelson Wieman, Douglas Clyde Macintosh, and Max Carl Otto (Chicago and New York: Willett, Clark and Co., 1932), in *LW* 9: 213-22.
[31] *LW* 9: 29.

for children is involved). A person's ideals are also unified in the sense that devotion to them brings that person closer to having a unified self.

However intriguing this conception of God may be, Dewey soon revises it.

> But this idea of God, or of the divine, is also connected with all the natural forces and conditions—including man and human association—that promote the growth of the ideal and that further its realization. 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."[32]

Here Dewey depicts a God consisting of the organic whole of human strivings and those portions of nature supporting those strivings. This view of God is neither pantheism nor panentheism, as some Dewey critics and commentators have supposed, since much of the universe will always be coldly indifferent and irrelevant to life. But since part of nature is part of God, Dewey's God is far more than merely one's personal ideals—if God were only that, it would be a personal God indeed! To be religious, persons must experience a relationship with something beyond themselves. Few would dispute this observation. However, Dewey's God exists only because the faithful exist, which obviously contravenes supernaturalism. Yet the God-human relationship was after all designed by Dewey, as it was by Ames before him, to ensure that God is conceived as living within a social relationship with humanity. In social relationships, people play mutual roles: a person is my friend because I am her friend; that person is my father because I am his son; and so forth.

Dewey's God has objective existence since nature-humanity relations are objectively real and recognizable even by those uninterested in being religious themselves. Dewey's God can be studied and understood, although it will not be the same thing for all people. An

[32] *LW* 9: 29.

analogy is available in aesthetics: consider the example of studying how peoples have used horticulture and terraforming to create elaborate gardens and landscapes in accord with their ideals of beauty. Nature is obviously involved as an active (though unaware) collaborator in such human efforts, and the ideals of gardeners are also available for study (even by those who dislike gardening themselves) since these ideals become evident through understanding the purpose and appreciation of the work. Furthermore, a gardener can enjoy a richly satisfying (while often frustrating!) relationship with nature through gardening, not diminished by the fact that nature's beauty is elicited only through the application of the gardener's own ideals of beauty.

Ames, unlike Dewey, was prepared to say that this pragmatist God should be considered as personal in a carefully qualified sense. His reasoning proceeds from a naturalistic understanding of humanity's own capacity for personality. Since human personality is natural, nature (as taken to include humanity) likewise has personality features. Furthermore, human personality is generated and sustained through social relationships, and since societies too are natural entities, nature possesses sociality. He concludes: "When nature is itself humanized by the inclusion of man, personality and the social process become legitimate in defining the entire picture."[33] However persuasive this argument might be, Ames is not trying to portray God as an *independently* existing personality, of the sort that traditional theism requires. Dewey wanted to use the term "God" as Ames did, but showed no interest in attributing personality. Therefore Ames's interest in a "personal" God is only superficially different from Dewey's stance on God. Neither pragmatist was trying to borrow from traditional supernaturalism the idea that God is a personal being that can exist independently from humanity.

Dewey was well aware that applying "God" to his conception of the object of religious devotion would inevitably arouse controversy. Although Dewey's God has objective existence enough to satisfy the most ardent naturalist, he offered "God" as a name in the most tentative and humble manner: "I would not insist that the name must be given. There are those who hold that the associations of the term with the supernatural are so numerous and close that any use of the word 'God' is sure to give rise to misconception and be taken as a concession to

[33] Ames, *Religion*, 170-71.

traditional ideas. They may be correct in this view. But the facts to which I have referred are there, and they need to be brought out with all possible clearness and force."[34] The liberal Dewey was not going to get sidetracked by names for the divine. He sought an idea of God that is at minimum implied by and embedded within all of the world's religions.

> In a distracted age, the need for such an idea is urgent. It can unify interests and energies now dispersed; it can direct action and generate the heat of emotion and the light of intelligence. Whether one gives the name "God" to this union, operative in thought and action, is a matter for individual decision. But the function of such a working union of the ideal and actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God in all the religions that have a spiritual content; and a clear idea of that function seems to me urgently needed at the present time.[35]

Conclusion

The hypothesis that Ames influenced Dewey's later conception of God has much evidence in its support. Although Ames and Dewey had long shared many views on religion, it was Ames who articulated a pragmatic theory of religion as early as 1910 while Dewey allowed his silence on God and his hostility towards organized religion to be signs of a staunch naturalistic atheism for several decades. It is reasonable to conclude that Dewey consistently found in Ames helpful pragmatic approaches to the questions of religious experience and the reality of God.

Going beyond the question of intellectual partnership, one might wonder, as Kallen did, whether Dewey actually was heavily obligated to Ames for original theories about religion or God. There is insufficient evidence to establish this hypothesis, however. Although Dewey occasionally references Ames's writings, nowhere does Dewey credit Ames with originality on these topics. As we have seen from examining their writings about religion, it is clear that Dewey could have arrived at his own conclusions about religion and God

[34] *LW* 9: 35.
[35] *LW* 9: 35.

independently. However, Dewey did read Ames's work and appreciated its pragmatic credentials. By locating the divine within the transactional human/nature relationship, Ames's theory of the divine represents a pragmatic development of the Hegelian absolute that Dewey had sought early in his career. By also following that suggestive path of transforming absolute idealism into a transactional naturalism, Dewey retained a prominent role for religious experience. By retaining religious experience while rejecting supernaturalism, Dewey was able to show how religious experience is no mere imaginative fantasy or delusion, but really can have a naturalistically legitimate object worthy of devotion.

Dewey's proposal for philosophically reconciling religion and naturalism was a major contribution to that exciting period of speculation about the possibilities for a religious humanism or a religious naturalism during the first half of the twentieth century. While Dewey himself rejected the label of "humanism" for his philosophy,[36] he was usually comfortable with his association with other religious naturalists, especially those at the University of Chicago. No adequate account of the thought of such prominent figures as Edward Scribner Ames, Henry Nelsen Wieman, Bernard Loomer, or Bernard Meland, or many of their students, could omit Dewey's impact.

[36] As Dewey explained to Corliss Lamont, the term "humanism" has already been used by various philosophers with divergent meanings. John Dewey to Corliss Lamont, *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 3: 1940–1953*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, VA.: Intelex Corporation, 2005), #13667, 6 September 1940.