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Hope, War, and Education: A Deweyan Analysis

Abstract

2016 is the 100-year anniversary of the publication of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. In honor of this centennial, this paper explores the significance of this book for religious educators who seek to generate hope in a conflicted world. An analysis of how a wartime context shaped Dewey’s remarkable text is followed by an examination of Dewey’s on-the-ground work with teachers immediately following the publication of *Democracy and Education*. Deweyan pedagogy offers a realistic account of how teachers can generate hope in seemingly hopeless times.

Paper

The Religious Reception of *Democracy and Education*

2016 is the 100-year anniversary of the publication of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. John Dewey claimed this book contained a summary of his “entire philosophical position.” The book was revolutionary when first published and remains in-print today. In this book Dewey envisions a moral ideal for society and a social ideal for morality. More than a form of politics, democracy is a spiritual-cum-intellectual-cum-cultural form of “associated living” in which the interests of the individual and group are mutually enhanced. In honor of this centennial, the paper explores the significance of Dewey’s *magnum opus* for religious educators who seek to generate hope in a globalized world.

The Religious Education Association Annual Meeting provides an apposite context for commemorating this book. *Democracy and Education*’s favored metaphor of growth is imagery that had been employed years earlier at the first Annual Meeting of the REA. In that February 1903 address, held in Dewey’s own Chicago, he referred to the “germinating seed, growing leaf, [and] budding flower” of religious development, an idea that would be developed in the 1916 text which compares educators to farmers, experiences to budding plants, and social advancement to biological growth.
Dewey’s book was not received with universal acclaim. The conservative magazine *Human Events* famously rated *Democracy and Education* as one of the five “most harmful” books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—alongside *Mein Kampf, The Communist Manifesto,* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao.* Such concerns were fuelled by religious fundamentalism which pitted Dewey as a friend of religion. In his day Dewey was popularly branded as “godless,” “completely atheistical,” “pagan,” and “anti-Christian.” This continues into the present with influential Christian commentators commonly blaming Deweyan pedagogy for a host of social ills.

There is, however, another strand of interpretation which recognizes a very different Dewey—a Dewey whose educational insights are rich in religious significance. To give one example, the Jesuit Alberto Hurtado wrote an appreciative doctoral dissertation titled “El Sistema Pedagógico de John Dewey Ante las Exigencias de la Doctrina Católica” (John Dewey’s Pedagogical System Facing the Demands of the Catholic Doctrine). The young Chilean’s reading of Dewey did not anathematize him: Padre Hurtado, one-time Dewey scholar, was canonized as Saint Alberto in 2005.

Religious educators can continue to draw inspiration from Deweyan pedagogy. One way is to follow Dewey is by resisting instrumental valuations of educational work. Contrary to caricature, Dewey was no callous utilitarian. Educational values (a title of one of *Democracy and Education*’s later chapters) are not isolated from intrinsic values. The nuts and bolts of curricula and pedagogy are connected to what we value most deeply. Indeed, in his 2015 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion, Thomas Tweed cited *Democracy and Education* in support of the position that defences of the place of religion (as an academic field of study) in the curriculum can be based on the inherent value of understanding religion. When Dewey says “there is something that is intrinsically good, good for itself” he may offer aid to religious educators and scholars of religion who seek to demonstrate the innate meaning of their work.

A Context for *Democracy and Education*

In large part this RIG will focus on situating *Democracy and Education* within its cultural and philosophical context. The first section gives particular attention to the text’s relation to the First World War. “As this is written, the world is filled with the clang of contending armies,” Dewey writes. Although it would be a mistake to confine the meaning of *Democracy and Education* to its immediate milieu, it must also be recognized that Dewey’s “democratic criterion of education” was all the more relevant in the face of this particular global exigency. He understood that “the horrors of war” as well as “international jealousy and animosity” were not considerations remote to his educational philosophy.
It is no mistake that these last comments appear in the chapter on “The Democratic Conception of Education” where Dewey observes that “the existing situation of human intercourse” in which “each nation lives in a state of suppressed hostility and incipient war with its neighbors” was bred by a confusion of social ideals with national aims. Nationalism threatened true democracy, still Dewey held out pragmatic hope based on the principle that conflict ameliorates thought. Thus he noted that war had an unintended positive benefit: “conflict of peoples at least enforces intercourse between them and thus accidently enables them to learn from one another…”

A Philosophy for Conflict

Democracy and Education’s philosophical context will be sketched, especially with reference to the influence of Darwinian principles on Dewey’s metaphor of growth. It will also be shown that the thinking-is-bred-by-conflict theme of Democracy and Education is augmented in Dewey’s later philosophical works. Epistemological insights forged in wartime classrooms were existentially extended. This will be illustrated with reference to his discourse on “Existence as Precarious and as Stable” within Experience and Nature (1925). There Dewey argues that human learning occurs best amidst difficulty: “Reflection only occurs in situations qualified by uncertainty, alternatives, questioning, search, hypotheses, tentative trials or experience which test the worth of thinking.” Because the world is contingent, we cogitate. Because of mortality, we muse. “The ultimate evidence of genuine hazard, contingency, irregularity and indeterminateness in nature is thus found in the occurrence of thinking.”

Taking the Message to Teachers

The years following the publication of Democracy and Education saw Dewey issue a flurry of thought-pieces and civic talks on the topic of war and education. Dewey earned his stripes as a public intellectual by demonstrating how a naturalistic outlook translated socially. To teachers unions and socialist organizations, in magazines and on university campuses, Dewey posed a question: what can the War teach us about education?

Dewey’s pragmatic hope was “forged in the context of devastating personal losses” and failures in the outcomes of some of his public initiatives. The final major section of the paper examines specific ways Dewey applied Democracy and Education’s argument to educators working “on the ground” in an era of global conflict. His addresses to organizations of educators much like the REA (Vocational Education Association, California Teachers Association, etc.) addressed practical ways educators could harness the “social idealism” generated by war for times of peace.

While war was tragic, Dewey believed it held residual benefits for education. For example, when patriotic fervour was leading to a requirement for universal military training, Dewey advised that educators pin their hopes on something other than nationalism. Truly inclusive, democratic education was vital in case “some other social catastrophe, if possible even greater than the present one, shall overwhelm us.”

100 years later, this insight has not gone stale.

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Generating Hope

The 2016 Annual Meeting explores ways educators can generate hope in a globalized world. Educators must be intentional about hope-generation because globalization often works against goodwill. Our interconnected world is a conflicted world, a postcolonial domain more often at battle than at peace. If religious educators are to teach hope it will not done be in a halcyon vacuum. Hope is experienced amidst despair; social progress is gained in spite of inevitable conflict. Freire’s “pedagogy of hope,” for example, was an act of resistance to a “slavocratic past” and a neoliberal present.\textsuperscript{ix}

Hope is not self-spawning, and thus it is helpful to locate guides for confidently finding ways forward. Indeed, one question this Meeting considers is “What can we learn from other disciplines, such as sociology and psychology of religion, educational sciences, learning theories, etc., on the role of the educator/teacher?” While there are many ways of facing an instable world with courage, what is the particular contribution educational theory makes to hope-generation? These questions of 2016 are addressed by a book of 1916—to wit, the purpose of this Research Interest Group session is to initiate scholarly conversation regarding the relevance of John Dewey’s educational philosophy to the theory and practice of religious education. By responding to existential precariousness and international combat Dewey offers a realistic account of how religious teachers can educate hopefully in times which seem hopeless.

Works Cited


\textsuperscript{i} See these two REA webpages: http://old.religiouseducation.net/Org/reahistory.htm and http://old.religiouseducation.net/Publications/historicalArticles.html.

iii I explore the positive and negative reception of Dewey by religious writers more fully in my *John Dewey among the Theologians* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).
iv Thomas Tweed, "Valuing the Study of Religion: Improving Difficult Dialogues within and Beyond the Aar's 'Big Tent,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2 (2016).