

Daisaku Ikeda and John Dewey: A Religious Dialogue

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BOOTH Daisaku Ikeda and John Dewey are religious humanists dedicated to dialogue as the supreme means for creating understanding and securing peace and happiness across all kinds of differences including those of culture, politics, race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. They preserve a role for the religious in daily life while seeking a “third way” between the dogmas of secular humanism on the one side and dogmatic religion on the other. Both believe novel meaning and value may emerge in discourse to transform our thoughts, feelings, and actions. In this the 150th anniversary of Dewey’s birth, let us begin a dialogue between him and Ikeda as well as Soka Gakkai and American pragmatism.

In his most metaphysical book, Dewey insists that “the philosophy here presented may be termed . . . naturalistic humanism” (LW 1: 10). Ikeda too has a deep commitment to humanism. He states, “The SGI is a humanistic organization” (I, 135). He is serious about this. “Perhaps,” Ikeda proclaims, “we could call this teaching of the Lotus Sutra a ‘cosmic humanism’” (I, 15). Furthermore, Ikeda does not appeal to a supernatural realm beyond everyday life. Instead, he asserts: “The attainment of Buddhahood in this lifetime means to achieve enlightenment within this actual world and this life” (WLS I, 180).¹ Ikeda also advocates “naturalistic humanism.” It seeks to *intervene* in this world to secure compassionate amelioration rather than *supervene* from outside this world to offer a reward in heaven for suffering on earth. Ikeda believes that the “true essence of humanism lies in our compassion” (I, 135). The goal is to transform reality here and now to assuage present distress. Ikeda states:

The truth (true entity) of things is not found in some far distant realm removed from reality. In this unwavering focus on the true form (true entity) of everyday reality, never moving away from real things and

events (all phenomena) we can discern the true brilliance of the Buddha's wisdom (WLS I, 170).²

The Mystic Law of cause and effect governs both spiritual and material existence, which we must comprehend nondualistically. Both Ikeda and Dewey are religious not secular humanists and, of course, Dewey is famous for his nondualism.³

Ikeda and Dewey agree humanity participates in the doings of a dynamic, continuously creative, endlessly evolving, and pluralistic universe. In his essay, "Creative Life," Ikeda asserts:

The Lotus Sutra, the core of Mahayana teaching, describes the dynamism of creative life In one respect, creative life is free of the bounds of time and space, free to expand and grow [A]ll phenomena are condensed within our life, and at the same time our life pervades the universe On the level of our everyday activities, creative life propels us to the uninhibited realization of self-perfection [I]t places the quest to realize the Way of the Bodhisattva right here, in the midst of the troubled mundane world. It leads us to elevate ourselves, transcend our "lesser self," and affirm the universal self here, now, in the middle of ordinary reality. (NH 8–9)

We are created creators who, in our creative acts, continue the creation of cosmos out of chaos. "Art," according to Ikeda, "is the irrepressible expression of human spirituality" (5). He further proclaims:

Art is to the spirit what bread is to the body What is this quality of art that has ordained it to play such an elemental and enduring role in human life? I believe it is the power to integrate, to reveal the wholeness of things [A]rt becomes the elemental modality through which humans discover their bonds with humans, humanity with nature, and humanity with the universe. (4–5)

In artistic creation, the lesser self participates in the dynamic, creative life of the universe thereby opening up to the larger self, the basic principle of the universe, "the [Mystic] Law that generates the many manifestations of and activities in human life" (NH, 123).

Dewey connects the embodied struggle for life with the unique artistic expressions of the spirit that he calls "ethereal things," a term borrowed from the poet John Keats to designate things that have never before existed. Examples include the currently heaviest element in the

periodic table, “Ununocium,” the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the rock garden of the Ryoanji Temple. These would not exist without humanity. Human creations are part of the endless unfolding of possibilities within an unfinished, continuously evolving universe dependent characterized by dependent origination. Ikeda mentions the “strong esthetic dimension in Japanese religiosity” (5). There is also a strong aesthetic dimension in Dewey’s pragmatic religiosity. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey writes:

A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact, I think, is the explanation of that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with esthetic intensity. It explains also the religious feeling that accompanies intense esthetic perception. We are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves. I can see no psychological ground for such properties of an experience save that, somehow, the work of art operates to deepen and to raise to great clarity that sense of an enveloping undefined whole that accompanies every normal experience. This whole is then felt as an expansion of ourselves Where egotism is not made the measure of reality and value, we are citizens of this vast world beyond ourselves, and any intense realization of its presence with and in us brings a peculiarly satisfying sense of unity in itself and with ourselves. (LW 10: 199)

Human creative expression and aesthetic appreciation is part of the creative life of the universe. It is how the lesser self becomes aware of the greater self and the larger whole of which we belong for Dewey as much as Ikeda.

Ikeda himself recognizes the important similarities between Soka Gakkai and Dewey’s pragmatic religious humanism. In Ikeda’s lecture “Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first-Century Civilization,” he asks the troubling question: “Does religion make people stronger, or weaker?” (NH, 157). Ikeda seeks “a third path,” or middle way, between “faith in ourselves and recognition of a power that is greater than we are” (158). It is in this context that Ikeda turns directly to Dewey as an ally:

Similarly, John Dewey, in *A Common Faith*, asserts that it is “the

religious,” rather than specific religions, that is of vital importance. While religions all too quickly fall into dogmatism and fanaticism, “that which is religious” has the power to “unify interests and energies” and to “direct action and generate the heat of emotion and the light of intelligence.” Likewise, “the religious” enables the realization of those benefits that Dewey identifies as “the values of art in all its forms, of knowledge, of effort and of rest after striving, of education and fellowship, of friendship and love, of growth in mind and body.”

As Dewey understood, and as the sad outcome of people’s self worship in modern times has demonstrated, without assistance we are incapable of living up to our potential. Only by relying on and merging with the eternal can we fully activate all our capabilities. Thus, we need help, but our human potential does not come from outside; it is, and always has been, of us and within us (158).⁴

What Ikeda affirms here is a strong statement of Dewey’s religious humanism. We find many of the common themes shared by Ikeda and Dewey either explicitly mentioned or at least hinted at in the foregoing passage. These include creative life, growth, appreciation for the possibilities of existence, the greater and lesser self, eclipsing while not eradicating the individual ego, unique human potential that is nonetheless dependent on others for actualization, unified artistic expression as the workings of humanity toward achieving harmonious unity, and more. What we will explore on this occasion is Dewey’s distinction between “religion” and “the religious” along with the notion of a third path or the middle way.

Let us begin with the third path. Ikeda seeks something between completely secular over-confidence in human free will, rationality, and “excessive faith in our own powers” on one hand and extreme belief in determinism, grace or “dependence on some external authority” such as a theistic God on the other (158). Ikeda makes this critical comment: “Perhaps because our Buddhist movement is so human-centered, Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School has described it as an effort to define the humanistic direction of religion” (159). He says that “everything, including religion, exists ‘for the human being’” (85). What he means here is that religion should help every individual actualize their unique potential while finding their greater self such that they may appreciate the possibilities of existence and enter into the creative life of the universe to relieve suffering and bring about peace and happiness. Ikeda means that religion should help individuals to achieve their full Buddha nature. He does not mean the glorification of the egotistic lesser

self and its powers.

For Dewey, the third path involves the poet William Wordsworth's notion of "natural piety" toward the universe that sustains us:

The fact that human destiny is so interwoven with forces beyond human control renders it unnecessary to suppose that dependence and the humility that accompanies it have to find the particular channel that is prescribed by traditional doctrines. What is especially significant is rather the form which the sense of dependence takes For our dependence is manifested in those relations to the environment that support our undertakings and aspirations as much as it is in the defeats inflicted upon us. The essentially unreligious attitude is that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows. 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 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. (LW 9: 19)

Enlightenment and moral amelioration is achieved neither solely through one's own efforts alone, nor solely through the power of Nature, God, or the Buddha.

The primary difference between "religion" and "the religious" for Dewey is that religion confines itself to a special domain of human experience usually associated with the supernatural and, therefore, does not *intervene* to alter the affairs of daily living. Even at its very best, dogmatic religion only *supervenes* to provide solace, support, and comfort in times of need, but it never moves forward to restore the wholeness of the self through right relationships of dependent origination within the world. At worst, it leads to fanatic dogmatism. Meanwhile the religious may arise in all domains of human experience, is entirely natural although numinous, and most importantly, intervenes in the course of daily affairs to achieve a "better adjustment in life" (11). It often begins by providing compassionate support, but it moves on to restore harmonious relationship.

The difference between “*a religion*” and “the religious” is the difference “between anything that may be denoted by a noun substantive and the quality of experience that is designated by an adjective” (LW 9: 4, emphasis in original). Adjectives, verbs, and adverbs capture the religious quality of experience. Those that have “the religious” experience feel the desire to engage the world to transform it and make things better while experiencing a sense of being sustained by the larger whole that they serve. Those devoted to a religion may well resign themselves to the way things are and hope for a reward in the afterlife while egotistically demanding all others obey their rigid dogma. The genuinely religious seek happiness, peace and justice in the here and now and not in some realm beyond nature. They are value creators. For Ikeda and Dewey, “the religious” means religious humanism where human beings experience an intimate relation with the universe wherein their creative actions matter because they intervene in the course of events to make things better.

One way of comprehending the difference between a religion that merely supervenes and the religious that intervenes is that the former presupposes an already fully actualized substantial being, a God, an external power that human beings must docilely obey in the hopes of securing support in life and perhaps a reward in the afterlife. Dewey distinguishes two different meanings of the word “God”:

On one score, the word can mean only a particular Being. On the other score, it denotes the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and actions. Does the unification have a claim upon our attitude and conduct because it is already, apart from us, in realized existence, or because of its own inherent meaning and value? (29)

The first meaning of the word “God” is that of “a particular Being” that supervenes in the world and whom we must petition for support since we cannot rely on ourselves. The second meaning is simply a synonym for those ideal values that awaken desire and guide human action that intervenes in the world. The former leads to dogmatic religion while the latter leads to religious humanism. The problem with an already complete, fully realized God, especially when assumed to be omniscient and omnipotent, is that it makes it very difficult to account for evil in the world unless the Being itself is evil (see LW 9: 31). Dewey writes:

[W]hat I have been criticizing is the identification of the ideal with a particular Being, especially when that identification makes necessary

the conclusion that this Being is outside of nature, and what I have tried to show is that the ideal itself has its roots in natural conditions; it emerges when the imagination idealizes existence by laying hold of the possibilities offered to thought and action. There are values, goods, actually realized upon a natural basis--the goods of human association, of art and knowledge. (33)

For Dewey, an alleviating ideal emerges from the earth (it “has its roots in nature”) through our imagination that grasps the ideal possibilities of actual everyday existence. Still, we must strive to secure these ideals by intervening in the course of events. The power of imagination to envision otherwise unseen possibilities is so magnificent, we may understand why some experience it as supernatural.

Ikeda also rejects the identification of our highest ideals with a completed Being, much less an omniscient and omnipotent creator, outside nature:

Neither the state nor ideology is sacred, nor is any superhuman Buddha or deity. The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are in fact Buddhas. But the term *Buddha* is inevitably taken to mean a being somehow transcendental or superior to ordinary human beings. The Bodhisattvas of the Earth thoroughly devote themselves to the way of bodhisattvas as people who carry out Buddhist practice. They thoroughly devote themselves to the way of human beings. This point is tremendously significant. The restoration of trust and belief in humanity will be the key to religion in the twenty-first century . . . (WLS III, 272, emphasis in original)

Dewey would approve this powerful statement of religious humanism. He complains: “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” (LW 9: 31). Religious humanism demands that every human being exercise their full powers and take responsibility for securing the ideals of peace, righteousness, and compassionate mitigation.

In dogmatic religion, humankind sacrifices itself to an already fully actualized supernatural Being. This path leads to religious oppression and warfare. Many people postulate an anthropomorphic God that is just a projection of the lesser self’s egotistic desires. In contrast, “the religious” frees human beings to strive creatively to secure ideal possibilities in cooperation with the larger community of humankind, other living creatures, and even physical nature. Here is Dewey’s definition of

the religious:

Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality. Many a person, inquirer, artist, philanthropist, citizen, men and women in the humblest walks of life, have achieved, without presumption and without display, such unification of themselves and of their relations to the conditions of existence. It remains to extend their spirit and inspiration to ever wider numbers. (19)

The foregoing passage echoes Dewey's notion of the "soul" as activities "organized into unity" (LW 1: 223). Dewey states:

To say emphatically of a particular person that he has soul or a great soul is not to utter a platitude, applicable equally to all human beings. It expresses the conviction that the man or woman in question has in marked degree qualities of sensitive, rich and coordinated participation in all the situations of life. Thus works of art, music, poetry, painting, architecture, have soul, while others are dead, mechanical. (223)

A soulful person recognizes and responds to every new life situation creatively, uniquely, harmoniously, richly, and compassionately. Dewey's notion of soulful persons resembles Ikeda's idea that anyone may awaken to their Buddha nature and undergo human revolution.

Dewey and Ikeda agree on the importance of ideal values that unify a person's life as they strive to secure peace and justice in their world. Ikeda insists:

To escape from reality is not the spirit of the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra teaches how to make reality ideal Some might think it shallow to speak of attaining benefit in the present life, but I believe a religion that does not enable people to transform their lives is powerless Creating value in daily life is the heart of the Lotus Sutra. (WLS VII, 103)

Like Dewey, Ikeda thinks the religious intervenes in life through free exercise of the imagination to envision ideal possibilities beyond the actual that it is our responsibility to actualize through our creative actions. Soka Gakkai means value creating society. The notion of value creation, the activities of creatively transforming everyday reality into

an idea value, is critical to both Ikeda and Dewey.

Initially, the power of ideals is merely an imaginative projection of harmonizing possibilities within the larger whole of the universe. Dewey proclaims:

The connection between imagination and the harmonizing of the self is closer than is usually thought. The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection. Neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole. The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe . . . operates only through imagination The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe. (LW 9: 14)

Imagination, however, must not become a means for anthropomorphically constructing escapist fantasies of a hypostatized, already fully actualized God, or Buddha, that does all the work for us if only we will believe in them and passively obey. Instead, actualization of the ideal value requires active human intervention in the affairs of existence.

“Human beings,” Ikeda reminds us, “are wellsprings of creativity” (WLS 1, 202). If we truly understand the nature of dependent origination, emptiness, and nonsubstantiality then we would understand that all phenomena are fleeting and why Ikeda would say that “our destiny is to stay in continuous flight, ever moving forward to the next creation” (NH, 41) It is not what we have done, but what we are yet to do that detains us upon this planet. “The essential teaching (second half of the Lotus sutra),” Ikeda indicates, “is about actualization” (WLS VI, 253). There are ideal values that we only first perceive in creative imagination. We must then strive to actualize the ideal that it may intervene in our everyday life.

For Ikeda, religious humanism demands that we imaginatively perceive ideal possibilities that lie beyond the actual, but then we must act passionately to secure those ideals through the exercise of intelligent action. What we want from imagination are real, actualizable possibilities to guide action, and not escapist fantasies that yield a religion that merely supervenes upon events from some supernatural realm. Dewey states: “It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I

would give the name ‘God’ ” (LW 9: 34). I believe Ikeda would agree that we could almost substitute “the Buddha” for “God” so that this passage reads: It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name the “Buddha.” Dewey affirms:

[T]he *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, emphasis in original)

Ikeda and Dewey are both religious humanists that strive to create the values that sustain peace and justice while relieving suffering. In Dewey’s sense of the religious, the word “God” and the word “Buddha” are surprisingly similar.⁵

References

- Citations of the works of John Dewey are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volume and page numbers follows the initials of the series. Abbreviations for the critical edition are:
- EW *The Early Works* (1882–1898)
 MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924)
 LW *The Later Works* (1925–1953)
- Ikeda, Daisaku (1995). *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda*. New York: Weatherhill. Abbreviated NH.
- Ikeda, Daisaku, Saito, Katsuji, Endo, Takanori, and Suda, Haruo (2001). *The Wisdom Of The Lotus Sutra: A Discussion* in six volumes. Santa Monica, CA: World Tribune Press. Abbreviated WLS followed by volume number. I only cite from president Ikeda’s contributions to the dialogue.
- Ikeda, Daisaku (2001). *Soka Education: A Buddhist Vision for Teachers, Students and Parents*. Santa Monica, CA: Middleway Press. Abbreviated SA.

Notes

¹ Elsewhere, Ikeda claims: “Buddhism lies close at hand in the here and now. It exists in daily life, in human existence, in society. To present Buddhism as belonging to some realm removed from life and reality is a deception” (WLS 1, 3).

² Ikeda writes:

“True aspect” refers to the true reality of life as viewed from the enlightened state of the Buddha, who has broken free of all delusion. Here, all things are equal, transcending distinctions and differences between subject and object, self and others, mind and body, the spiritual and the material. (WLS I, 173)

Dewey would approve of this antidualistic insight.

³ Dewey distinguished his emergent naturalism from reductionist materialism by stating that “there is involved in this view a metaphysical theory of substance which I do

not accept; and I do not see how any view can be called materialism that does not take ‘matter’ to be a substance and to be the only substance—in the traditional metaphysical sense of substance” (LW 14: 87). He goes on to observe that even terms in physics such as “mass” merely “name a functional relation rather than a substance” (88). Dewey replaced the metaphysical notion of substance with a functionalist naturalism.

⁴ All references to Dewey in this passage are from *A Common Faith* (LW 9: 34–36).

⁵ I would like to thank Virginia Benson, Jeff Farr, Kanako Ide, and Angella Kawashima and for their helpful comments. Errors that remain are entirely my own.