

## **John Dewey and His Religious Critics**

Alan G. Phillips, Jr.

At a time when recommendations for educational reform are prevalent, some Christian writers often turn to American philosopher and educator John Dewey to assign blame for the many social ills that have plagued the nation's landscapes of learning. This is not surprising as there are many counts on which Dewey often disappoints both Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians who read his work. Dewey ardently embraced evolutionary naturalism, challenged classical conceptions of absolute truth and constructed a non-theistic image of God that hardly represents the personal Heavenly Father evoked in the Lord's Prayer. On top of this, Dewey's ongoing faith in the possibilities of scientific inquiry and democracy often bypassed theological questions about the persistence of human evil. Vigorous Christian debate over many Deweyan legacies seems reasonable given popular concerns about morality and ethics in education.

What surprises me personally, however, are the measures some of Dewey's religious critics have resorted to in their attempts to dissect and discredit his pragmatism. Frequently, I am left wondering why select Christian authors who profess a belief in unchanging truths and absolutes have been eager to distort and misrepresent the views of John Dewey and other humanistic intellectuals. At times, this critical approach threatens to turn militant in its zeal to destroy the character of opponents without publicly engaging the subtleties of their ideas. When religious critique takes this path, it often bypasses the spirit of compassion for enemies and opponents proclaimed in the New Testament Gospels.

Many Christian authors profess a love for truth, yet they fail to offer their public an honest, in-depth or coherent account of past humanistic ideas. As a result, such ideas are often cast in the worst possible light and associated with everything from the terrors of the Holocaust to the atrocities of Stalin's purges.<sup>1</sup> After reading the works of such authors, one might wonder if their tactics for winning a larger culture war are compromised by their strategies deployed in smaller skirmishes. Some Christian apologists may be vulnerable to the allegation that they are not sympathetically engaged with the humanistic authors they wish to criticize and that such superficiality is reflected in their popular writings. I would like to support this contention through the use of several examples. My intention here is

not to malign the character of the authors mentioned. Instead, I would like to make a general point about the need for more compassionate engagement and thoroughness in the service of an apologetics delivered to a general public. Specifically, I shall focus on some recent treatments of John Dewey's philosophy in some widely distributed Christian books.

The first example is drawn from the work of Tim LaHaye, best-selling co-author of the currently popular *Left Behind* series on the Biblical book of Revelation. In an earlier, less-popular work, *The Battle for the Mind*, LaHaye attempted to address the moral decay at work in America's public school system. An updated version of this polemic against humanist thought in education and society is developed in his recent book *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium*, which is co-authored with David Noebel. LaHaye represents Dewey as an atheist in both books, accuses him of advocating free student activity over discipline in education and blames the noted American philosopher for elevating an individual's experiential learning over both teachers and textbooks.<sup>2</sup> Such a polemic against Dewey seems to be part of LaHaye and Noebel's larger strategy of laying bare the roots of a secular worldview that permeates influential American sectors such as education, media, and the arts. Both men encourage a majority of Americans to become activists and to uphold the Christian worldview in all areas of life.<sup>3</sup>

In my opinion, LaHaye's laundry list of educational evils represents a clear example of a hasty distortion of Dewey. After all, Dewey himself presented atheism as one of two inadequate religious extremes in his small book entitled *A Common Faith*, and struggled against more radical liberals who wanted him to eliminate the word "God" from his characterization of the spiritual life. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey compares atheism to "traditional supernaturalism," arguing as follows:

Militant atheism [like supernaturalism] is also affected by lack of natural piety. The ties binding man to nature that poets have always celebrated are passed over lightly. The attitude taken is often that of man living in an indifferent and hostile world and issuing blasts of defiance. A religious attitude, however, needs the sense of a connection of man, in the way of both dependence and support, with the enveloping world that the imagination feels is a universe.<sup>4</sup>

No doubt, such a passage would hardly qualify Dewey as a Christian theist, as Dewey was consistent in his defense of a naturalistic and social faith that eschewed all supernatural concepts. One would be hard-pressed,

however, to find a ringing endorsement of atheism in Dewey's work. Raymond D. Boisvert concludes that neither the words "atheist" nor "theist" along with their implications were able to capture Dewey's approach to the religious life.<sup>5</sup> Other select commentators on Dewey's religious writings have examined the thin line that Dewey walked between radical atheism and theistic apologetic. In a recent essay entitled "Dewey's Philosophy of Religious Experience," Steven C. Rockefeller, a noted scholar focusing on Dewey's religious views, concludes that "Dewey's distinctive combination of empirical naturalism and a democratic-ecological spirituality that pursues a middle way between an otherworldly supernaturalism and a despairing atheism constitutes an American religious vision of enduring significance."<sup>6</sup> Along similar lines, in his book entitled *Pragmatic Theology*, Victor Anderson points out that Dewey never denied a basic dependence on forces beyond human control. Instead, he objected to the binding consequences of a primitive, supernaturalistic depiction of such powers.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of such observations, Both LaHaye and Noebel insist on portraying Dewey as a committed atheist.<sup>8</sup> One might wonder why they do not characterize Dewey as a thinker more akin to other naturalistic or pantheistic religious authors like Baruch Spinoza or Alfred North Whitehead. LaHaye and Noebel could have offered a fairer criticism of Dewey by pointing out that he bypassed classical, theistic depictions of God in *A Common Faith*. Instead, they choose to present him as a committed atheist, overlooking Dewey's clear rejection of this label. Furthermore, why did LaHaye or Noebel fail to mention a significant six month debate that began in 1932, one played out in the magazine *Christian Century*? Over this six month period, several scholars debated Dewey's written work about the nature of God. Later, in response to them, Dewey rejected theism, but he did not dispense with a naturalistic definition of God and embrace atheism.<sup>9</sup> LaHaye and Noebel choose to depict Dewey as a committed atheist when addressing the readers of their books *The Battle for the Mind* and *Mind Siege*, but they do not give their reading public a feel for the often complex historical debates over how Deweyan faith is to be characterized or understood by Christian thinkers.

On the educational front, LaHaye lays much of the blame for undisciplined, child-centered freedom at the feet of Dewey. Yet, on more than one occasion, Dewey explicitly condemned a misguided child-centered education that left teachers, discipline and subject matter out of the educational picture. For example, in *The Child and the Curriculum* Dewey cautions against novel approaches that elevate childhood interests over and above adult life. He states that "...it is the danger of the 'new education' that it regards the child's present powers and interests as something finally signifi-

cant in themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey points out how discipline and student interest can be complimentary. He explains:

Discipline is positive. To cow the spirit, to subdue inclination, to compel obedience, to mortify the flesh, to make a subordinate perform an uncongenial task—these things are or are not disciplinary according as they do or do not tend to the development of power to recognize what one is about and to persistence in accomplishment.<sup>11</sup>

Why didn't LaHaye expose his target audience to passages like this one? Was he unaware of such excerpts or did he intentionally bypass them? Contemplation of either possibility is not attractive. One alternative points to superficiality, the other to manipulation of sources in the service of a particular view of religious education. No doubt, along with some other readers of LaHaye's work, I am still left wondering about the motives behind his glaring detours around important Deweyan insights about learning and schools.

Pat Robertson, founder and chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network, places the responsibility for numerous, present social ills with John Dewey. In the process, he often manages to present a skewed image of this American philosopher. For example, Robertson accuses Dewey of being “a Communist sympathizer,” while failing to point out that Dewey wrote a piece entitled “Why I am Not a Communist” and developed criticisms of a Marxist worldview.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, this noted televangelist and former presidential candidate also presents Dewey's educational ideas in an unfavorable light, often resorting to hasty characterizations and unsupported conclusions in order to develop his larger critique of American liberalism. In his book entitled *The Turning Tide: The Fall of Liberalism and the Rise of Common Sense*,<sup>13</sup> Robertson accuses Dewey of valuing the student's “physical and emotional experience over reason and discernment,” yet he fails to mention Dewey's lifelong commitment to a coherent theory of scientific inquiry and intelligence made explicit in books like *How We Think* and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.<sup>14</sup> After reading Robertson's remarks, those who have not read Dewey might conclude that he is some sort of Romantic thinker who always elevates emotion and physical gratification over the healthy use of intelligent reflection. Clearly, this is not the case, as Dewey referred to “the disciplined, or logically trained, mind” as “the aim of the educative process.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to this caricature, Robertson presents Dewey as being responsible for a crude form of pragmatism in business that counsels doing whatever is immediately necessary, regardless of the consequences that ensue. Robertson even claims that Dewey's brand of thinking contributed to the moral and financial failings of people like Ivan Boesky and Michael Milken.<sup>16</sup> I will not take time here to muse over the dubious proposition that "Dewey made them (Boesky and Milken) do it!" However, I would like to address the charge that Dewey's philosophy counsels opportunistic action oblivious to outcomes.

Throughout his vast corpus, Dewey contrasts his pragmatic instrumentalism with other varieties of philosophy that counsel action apart from the reflective consideration of long-term consequences. In *The Quest for Certainty* he says, "standards and tests of validity are found in the consequences of overt activity, not in what is fixed prior to it and independently of it."<sup>17</sup> Later, in his *Logic*, Dewey examines the significance of concepts in terms of their short and long-term consequences. He explains:

Just as the validity of a proposition in discourse, or of conceptual material generally, cannot be determined short of the consequences to which its functional use gives rise, so the sufficient warrant of a judgment as a claimant to knowledge (in its eulogistic sense) cannot be determined apart from connection with a widening circle of consequences.<sup>18</sup>

Some distortions are not so blatant as the ones just mentioned. Nevertheless, they are still misleading in their vindictiveness and attempts to cast blame in Dewey's direction. These efforts misrepresent Dewey by omitting vital information or revealing limited portions of his complex ideas. For example, consider the following passage from Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey's recent book *How Now Shall We Live?* In this work both authors maintain that Dewey's viewpoints led to the relativism popular in current teaching methods. They discern a common pattern in these newer methods that leave vital decisions up to students who receive no adult guidance. They say, "Students' choices are considered acceptable not because the choices agree with a transcendent standard but because the students have gone through the required process—regardless of the outcome."<sup>19</sup>

For starters, the claim that Dewey's work *inspired* undesirable pedagogical methods and practices should not be mistaken for the assertion that his work actually *caused* these dreadful results. After all, it would not be a stretch to argue that the Bible has *inspired* and been used to support undesirable practices like slavery and religious wars. But would all committed

Christians want to blame sacred scriptures for *causing* these things? I do not think so, as many of them would counter that ongoing misapplication of Christian tenets is not grounds for dismissal of valid Biblical insights.

Furthermore, to imply that newer teaching methods denying the directive role of adults are commensurate with Dewey's approach is misguided, as Dewey made it abundantly clear at many junctures that his theory of learning avoided the extreme of student-centeredness and presumed mature adult guidance. As Richard Rorty explains:

There is a standard caricature of Dewey's views that says Dewey thought that kids should learn to multiply or to obey the cop on the corner only if they have democratically chosen that lesson for the day, or only if this particular learning experience happens to meet their currently felt needs. This sort of nondirective nonsense was not what Dewey had in mind.<sup>20</sup>

The work of Lawrence Cremin supports this point when it examines Dewey's periodic disdain for approaches minimizing the significance of mature direction. He observes the following in his noted history of the Progressive Era entitled *The Transformation of the School*:

As early as 1926, for example, he [Dewey] attacked the studied lack of adult guidance in the child-centered schools with a sharpness uncommon in his writing. 'Such a method,' he observed, 'is really quite stupid. For it attempts the impossible, which is always stupid; and it misconceives the conditions of independent thinking.' Freedom, he counseled, is not something given at birth, nor is it bred of planlessness. It is something to be achieved, to be systematically wrought out in cooperation with experienced teachers, knowledgeable in their own traditions. Baby, Dewey insisted, does not know best!<sup>21</sup>

I fail to see how this image of Dewey would be compatible with the kind of depiction Colson and Pearcey leave behind for their contemporary audience, one which links Dewey to the sort of anomic chaos existing in some public and private school classrooms today. Perhaps, Colson and Pearcey, like Robertson, LaHaye and Noebel, should refocus their energies on someone who is more child-centered and less committed to the active role adult teachers and mentors play in the lives of children. If they adopted

this strategy, I think that they could avoid the allegation that they are using a prominent thinker as a convenient scapegoat for a multitude of excesses in elementary and secondary education.

On top of this, to link the haphazard, individual choices of immature students with the social democratic commitments of Dewey is another mistake. Dewey did not ground his ethical stance in a rugged individualism oblivious to consequences for a larger social context. In fact, he devoted a considerable portion of *The Public and Its Problems* to supporting the assertion that "...the human being whom we fasten upon as individual *par excellence* is moved and regulated by his associations with others; what he does and what the consequences of his behavior are, what his experience consists of, cannot even be described, much less accounted for, in isolation."<sup>22</sup> One might wonder how such an insight could be reconciled with their depiction of him as an advocate of blind individualism.

Finally, as noted already, to insinuate that Dewey was content with a process regardless of its outcome is an outright distortion of his philosophy, which focuses on long and short-term consequences, and the *quality* of any experienced process. Once again, in the work of Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, there seems to be a zeal for showing the reader a distorted portrait of Dewey while hiding the larger pragmatic picture far from view. All of this seems to be done in the service of bolstering their contention that "Dewey's pragmatic philosophy is the source of much of the relativism that has gutted both academic and moral education today."<sup>23</sup>

I am not about to contend that Dewey is immune from serious criticisms generated by a variety of Christian domains. It is not my intention here to act as another apologist for the Deweyan legacy and side step the nagging pitfalls of his pragmatism. For example, Dewey's contemporary, Reinhold Niebuhr attacked him for being more optimistic and oblivious to human evil than other Enlightenment thinkers before him. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr placed Dewey within a long tradition of naturalistic thinkers who sought to find a space for objective, disinterested reason, while, at the same time, acknowledging human reason's confinement to the same natural conditions that produce superstition, violence and cruelty.<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr even questioned Dewey's presumption that "cultural lag" or traditional education was the only source of the kind of evils that came to fruition in the Second World War.

This inability to offer a naturalistic account for how reason might enter into human affairs led C. S. Lewis to be highly critical of all naturalists who rejected supernatural explanations. Such criticism was rooted in his own conversion experience from atheism to Christian belief. Without mentioning John Dewey, Lewis raised serious questions about any philosophy that

falls back on reason, yet fails to account for how the “natural” conclusions of reason are to be preferred over the “natural” yet irrational conclusions of habit or whim. In his book entitled *Miracles*, Lewis concluded, “The Naturalist cannot condemn other people’s thoughts because they have irrational causes and continue to believe his own which have (if Naturalism is true) equally irrational causes.”<sup>25</sup> This conclusion led to Lewis’ firm yet sympathetic effort to ground rational thought in something beyond nature and proceed to argue, in the same work, that God is behind the human ability to transcend local circumstances through rational inquiry.

There are similar Christian polemics aimed at humanistic thinking in general and Dewey in particular, yet these are animated by a sense of beneficence, academic responsibility and charity that seems, in my opinion, to be noticeably absent from the works of LaHaye, Noebel, Robertson, Pearcey or Colson. In his book *Contours of a World View*, Arthur F. Holmes reminds Christian thinkers that “. . . it is by no means the case that a Christian view of things will differ from other views at every point”.<sup>26</sup> Later, in the same work, Holmes briefly commends aspects of Dewey’s theory of knowledge while, at the same time, pointing out where such a pragmatic theory falls short of his own foundational understanding of Biblical truth. Anthony Campolo takes a similar approach to Holmes when he confronts and, yet, defends aspects of various humanistic and scientific philosophies in his book *A Reasonable Faith*. He argues that many insights of science and humanism do not have to be viewed in opposition to all Christian truth and practice.<sup>27</sup> Instead, they can strengthen and augment one’s faith in God and the inspiration of Scripture.

Perhaps, authors like LaHaye, Noebel, Robertson, Pearcey and Colson are assuming that a complete and total repudiation of an opponent is all that will satisfy their reading public and defend Christian faith in the long run, or maybe their limited depiction of Dewey has come to them solely through second and third-hand treatments. Whatever the case may be, future attempts at popular apologetics could benefit from deeper engagements with the primary works and biographies of past thinkers, an evident spirit of Christian compassion for philosophical opponents, and an ongoing sense of responsibility for the education of sincere people of faith who may have neither the time nor inclination for reading philosophy in the busy course of their daily lives. One may wonder how public Christian apologetics can retain its validity if it is content with shallow depiction, undisguised hostility, and minimal engagement with serious scholarly work.

#### *Acknowledgment*

I would like to thank Walter Feinberg for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Notes

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3. LaHaye, T. and D. Noebel. *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium*, 204.
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25. Lewis, C. S. "Miracles." *The Best of C. S. Lewis*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House Books, 1969), 220.
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## Pat Robertson Responds

In his zeal to defend John Dewey, Mr. Phillips makes statements about me which are not true. He starts by saying that I have accused Dewey of being a "Communist sympathizer." I am unable to find in any of my writings or statements that phrase, and I am not sure that I ever made it. Nevertheless, I am keenly aware that John Dewey was one of the moving intellectual spirits in the drafting of the *Humanist Manifesto I*. In that Manifesto signed by Dewey we find these words, "The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end of that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible." This is a clear statement in support of socialism. To my knowledge, I have not said that John Dewey was a "communist," but communism and fascism are extreme forms of state socialism.

As to Mr. Dewey's atheism, his *Humanist Manifesto I* says, "We are convinced that the time has passed for theism, deism, modernism, and the several varieties of 'new thought.'" The Manifesto goes on to say, "It fol-

lows that there will be no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes of the kind hitherto associated with belief in the supernatural." "Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values."

In my book *The Turning Tide* cited incorrectly by Mr. Phillips, I said the following:

"We cannot begin to understand the full complexity of the problems in the schools unless we understand the theories and legacy of John Dewey, who followed the pattern of the earlier radical educators. Dewey was an ardent believer in what the nineteenth-century philosopher William James called 'pragmatism,' which holds that the best choice is always the most practical choice...

"Dewey applied this concept to education by teaching that learning comes through doing. This is the perspective that values physical and emotional experience over reason and discernment. It is this kind of learning that leads to a repudiation of the importance of history and tradition. It denies existing cultural values in favor of change and other radical new agendas... The impact on higher education brought about by Dewey's long tenure at the Columbia Graduate School of Education is being seen today throughout our nation's universities.

"The newest application of Dewey's model is outcomes-based education (OBE), which holds that it doesn't matter whether or not children know any specific facts so long as they feel good about themselves and develop 'tolerance for cultural diversity.' If students can get a basic job and make a basic living, some educators feel that is enough. This form of behaviorism has wreaked havoc with every level of achievement in American public school students.

"This issue brings to mind Allan Bloom's classic comment in his bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind* when he said that American high school graduates are among the most sensitive illiterates in the world. In all the standardized achievement tests comparing the educational attainments of U.S. students with young people of the same

age from other countries, American students had by far the highest levels of self-esteem, but they consistently placed near the bottom in every academic category. They are incredibly sensitive and pathetically ignorant.”

In my opinion, it takeschutzpah of the highest magnitude to defend the father of cultural relativism, the clearly failed progressive education, and the socialist irreligious declarations of the *Humanist Manifesto*.

I am the president of a graduate level university with a program which is training hundreds of teachers in master's level and doctoral courses in education. I hope somehow along the way that American educators will wake up to the tragic wreckage of our once proud educational system and exert their efforts to eliminate the deleterious influence of the man who Mr. Phillips seems to admire with such intensity.

## **Charles Colson Responds**

I have received your letter of February 4<sup>th</sup> and read the article attached by Alan Phillips. I found it fascinating reading and quite informative. If Professor Phillips' thesis is correct, then I for one would rejoice. It would be wonderful to learn that Dewey is on the side of reason and sense after all (defined I suppose as the side I'm on). Over the years, I have read much that assigns to Dewey responsibility for our contemporary educational failures. Admittedly, these are secondary sources, but they are well respected. If Professor Phillips is right however, I wonder why he singles out Pat Robertson Tim LaHaye and me. Why not go to all those "secondary" sources upon which I'm sure Robertson and LaHaye relied on - as did I, and on which so many others rely today.

I think there may be an explanation for differing views about Dewey. Like all great thinkers, Dewey was prolific, writing extensively on many issues as well as education. It's inevitable when one looks over a lifetime of work that one finds a thinker or writer expressing views on various sides of issues. I have certainly discovered this in my own life writing seventeen books and doing a daily radio commentary for ten years. Some years ago, for example, I shifted from my position opposed to capital punishment because I realized that there are some cases in which no other punishment will satisfy the demands of justice. I issued a lengthy paper at the time; yet find myself today cited on both sides of the argument by others. It's entirely possible that this is what's happened with Dewey.

I did consult with two very good friends on this question, Michael Novak who is a fine scholar, and Bill Bennett who, when he was a graduate student, attempted to find grounds for reconciliation between Kant and Dewey. Bill concluded in a thesis he prepared that Dewey was a pragmatist but not everything was up for grabs. Part of the difficulty, Bennett discovered in his studies, was that Dewey was trying to move from German idealism, which was strong on absolutes, to a question of practical necessities. Bennett can speak for himself, but as he explained it to me, he did not believe that Dewey sacrificed all fundamental good in an effort to find those things that would work best. Nonetheless, no one would deny that Dewey was instrumental in developing the American school of pragmatism.

In any event, I would hope that Professor Phillips would direct his efforts at those secondary sources he refers to, the scholars who down through the years have given us something of a consensus as to Dewey's formative role in modern American education. If they're wrong, it would be a worthy task to clarify the record; and I for one would be glad to quote Dewey on the other side.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond.

## **Alan G. Phillips' Rejoinder**

In a day and age when many public speakers and writers are pressed for time and attention, I am grateful for the consideration that both Pat Robertson and Charles Colson have given to my article. By doing this, they contributed to a much needed bridge between both academic and public examination of American philosophy and its impact on current religious issues. As a Christian thinker and scholar, I am appreciative of their efforts and hope that they will accept my sincere thanks for replying to my article. Before I leave some of my central concerns for other times or venues, however, I would like to respond to both men.

At the beginning of Mr. Robertson's response he states the following: "Mr. Phillips makes statements about me which are not true. He begins by saying that I have accused Dewey of being a 'Communist sympathizer.' I am unable to find in any of my writings or statements that phrase, and I am not sure that I ever made it."<sup>1</sup> On page one hundred fifty-eight of *The New Millennium* he *does* use the phrase "communist sympathizer" to describe and characterize Dewey.<sup>2</sup> Later, in his brief reply to my work, Robertson emphasizes Dewey's support for socialism then quickly points out how facism

and communism are extreme forms of this ideology. Dewey embraced neither of these extremes. Furthermore, noted Dewey biographer George Dykhuizen points out that early in his career Dewey sided against socialism in the debate over how to make industry more democratic. This stance of Dewey's continued well into the 1920's and 30's, and Dykhuizen points out the following in *The Life and Mind of John Dewey*:

Despite his respect for the Socialist party and for many of the measures it advocated, Dewey never became a confirmed socialist embracing socialist dogma. His pragmatic approach to social problems precluded his commitment to socialism or any other "ism."<sup>3</sup>

It seems as if this facet of Dewey's political thought is glossed over or ignored in Mr. Robertson's comments about my article. His slippery slope argument about Dewey and socialism does not seem compatible with someone who had a documented, life-long commitment to examining the details of social and economic policy over and above prior commitment to partisan politics.

The two quotes from the *Humanist Manifesto I* (a work that Dewey himself did not compose) cited by Mr. Robertson in order to highlight John Dewey's atheism do not address the larger context of religious ideas in works like *A Common Faith*. As I pointed out in my article, "Dewey was consistent in his defense of a naturalistic and social faith that eschewed all supernatural concepts."<sup>4</sup> My recognition of this in the original article should indicate that I hardly consider Mr. Robertson's chosen excerpts to be a new revelation. Instead, passages like those mentioned from *Manifesto I* are consistent with what I already expressed about Dewey's philosophy of religion. What Mr. Robertson and others may want to consider is the extent to which a thinker can affirm the reality of God without using adjectives like "supernatural" or "theistic." In other words, is it possible to construct a defensible faith in God that cuts between the extremes of radical atheism and theism, or naturalism and supernaturalism? It seems that Dewey was trying to make room for such a nontheistic possibility, so many people of sincere faith and intellectual commitment would not be dismissed as thoroughly irreligious.

When Mr. Robertson claims that I have cited his book *The Turning Tide* "incorrectly," I am not quite sure what he means, as he did not point out the specific error in question. At this point in my article, I was attempting to understand how Mr. Robertson was linking Dewey's pragmatic emphasis on "learning by doing" to an educational view that elevates current

emotions over the benefits of problem solving and past experiences. After reading Mr. Robertson's statements on this matter, I was left with the impression that he had a partial understanding of how Dewey tries to integrate action and thought throughout his educational theory. If my impression was misguided here, perhaps, in the future, Mr. Robertson could do more to address his understanding of Dewey's problem-solving approach in the acquisition of *both* new and old knowledge.

Later, toward the end of his response, Mr. Robertson says, "In my opinion, it takes chutzpah of the highest magnitude to defend the father of cultural relativism, the clearly failed progressive education, and the socialist irreligious declarations of the *Humanist Manifesto*."<sup>5</sup> I do not think it takes a tremendous amount of nerve or effrontery to debate Dewey's ideas since he can no longer respond to such disagreements about his work. Besides, there are several noted and highly persuasive interpreters of Deweyan ideas today—Raymond Boisvert, Steven Rockefeller or Richard Rorty—that could be cited as three prominent examples in a long list.

Besides, why does Mr. Robertson think my intent was to write yet another apologia for John Dewey? In my article I clearly stated, "It is not my intention here to act as another apologist for the Deweyan legacy and side step the nagging pitfalls of his pragmatism."<sup>6</sup> Then I proceeded to summarize a few noted religious criticisms of Dewey and pragmatism in some Christian literature. I am a bit perplexed about how Mr. Robertson failed to grasp this major aspect of my article. If my major intent had been to defend Dewey, why did I leave so many doors of theological criticism open at the end?

Another thing that puzzles me is how Mr. Robertson can imply that Dewey is "the father of cultural relativism."<sup>7</sup> This seems to indicate a major blind spot in his philosophical underpinnings. If he is thinking about the origin of relativism as a philosophical option, then even a brief historical survey of philosophical thought would reveal many more suitable candidates for this label. Dewey followed a long line of predecessors who have earned the label "relativist." Some would trace that label back to Protagoras and the ancient Greek Sophists of the fifth century B.C. However, even if one's philosophical background does not reach that far back in the past, other thinkers in the nineteenth century, like Friedrich Nietzsche or G. W. F. Hegel, would certainly have to compete with Dewey for Robertson's label. It is questionable historical method to attribute a major trend of social thought to one person. Furthermore, Mr. Robertson does not specify the extent to which he is referring to cultural, ethical, perceptual or other varieties of philosophical relativism when he makes his charge.

Finally, Mr. Robertson's reference to "the clearly failed progressive education" resembles a kind of special pleading for the quick demise of

educational views that he attacks. I say “views” in order to highlight his apparent presumption that “progressive education” is one thing. Instead, I think one could speak of “progressive *educations*.” There are many different versions of progressive education all over the world, whether in public, private or home school contexts. Some work well, while others need to be reevaluated. Even in his own time period, John Dewey was critical of some educators that used the label “progressive,” yet failed to offer crucial educational experiences for young learners. Dewey noted, “. . .the fundamental issue is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*.”<sup>8</sup> To me, this quote does not characterize a man who would be satisfied with a troubled educational system, whether it’s under the banner of progressive or traditional.

Like Mr. Robertson, I have also been involved with the education of many future teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels. However, I am hoping that future ranks of educators will not eliminate the significant influence of a great American philosopher. Instead, I hope they will learn that any noted historical figures who they admire can prove to be inadequate on some fronts, yet brilliant on others. As an educator I do admire aspects of John Dewey’s life and work. I believe he is to be commended for his uncompromising commitment to democratic ideals, social justice and a belief in the power of intelligent thought in action. As a committed Christian, I am often disappointed by his religious vision which seems to pale when compared to more robust and concrete depictions of a personal God who sent His only Son for the purpose of redemption. Can Christians today learn to balance their admiration with disappointment in academics? I sincerely hope so.

With regard to Mr. Colson’s letter, I will respond to some of the excellent points he raises, beginning with his good question about why I focused on Mr. Colson’s writings, along with the works of Robertson and LaHaye. Many have weighed in with critiques of Dewey. I chose to focus on these three public figures because, in my opinion, they represent three of the most widely influential Evangelical Christians at work in the public square today. I am a Christian scholar who has also been active in the church and notice that I can hardly circulate very long in Evangelical churches before I encounter people regularly influenced by “Break-Point,” the “700 Club” or films like *Left Behind*. This connection with mass media leads many Christians to gravitate toward the books of Robertson, Colson and LaHaye. Are there other prominent Christian thinkers I could have cited about Dewey commentary? Absolutely! Given the time and exigencies of publishing, however, I opted for selective retention, realizing as I wrote that this would

not be an exhaustive treatment of how all contemporary Christian apologists represent Dewey's work.

Mr. Colson's point about Dewey's prolific career is a very good one, and I think his comparison between his *own* challenges with critics and Dewey's challenges is well-stated. In his biography of John Dewey, George Dykhuizen mentions in passing that this American philosopher produced forty books and over seven hundred articles.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Colson is correct when he points out that one can scan the Dewey corpus and cite opposite sides of current arguments. For example, Dewey has been cited in defense of home schooling, yet he has also been used time and again to defend public education. Some choose to focus on Dewey's pragmatism, yet others concentrate on his deep personal commitments to democracy and fairness in an effort to combat short-sighted expediency. The Deweyan corpus is vast, and one can discern development from one time period to the next. I know from my own study that I was struck by how the John Dewey who was committed to the concrete could be the *same* man who would later construct an account of metaphysics in *Experience and Nature*.

For this reason, Mr. Colson's foray about discussing Dewey with noted friends William Bennett and Michael Novak left me fascinated and intrigued. After all, Dewey wrote an unpublished doctoral dissertation on Kant's philosophy, even though both Hegel and Darwin exerted more influence on his philosophical development as he moved further away from his graduate school days. I think Mr. Colson's recognition of Bennett's idea that Dewey retained absolutes in his movement toward pragmatism is worthy of further consideration in future philosophical scholarship, as it points to the complexity of a philosophical position that brings together strands that would, otherwise, be incompatible in most approaches.

Finally, on the matter of devoting more time and effort to the secondary sources that have contributed to a skewed portrait of Dewey, I would respond by saying that my article was not written in an attempt to correct all of those treatments. I chose to focus on public Christian depictions of Dewey's work. When Mr. Colson refers to a "consensus as to Dewey's formative role in higher education,"<sup>10</sup> he could have helped me immensely by identifying who is placing in this group. I know there are prominent educational critics like E. D. Hirsch<sup>11</sup> who have led a sort of educational movement away from Dewey's ideas, yet there are others like Howard Gardner<sup>12</sup> who seems to be moving back. At present, it seems to me that there is more than one consensus on Dewey's status in both education and religion, and it may remain that way.

In closing, I would like to point out that I believe both Mr. Colson and Mr. Robertson are wise to retain many of their deep misgivings about where

Deweyan thought has led some religious and educational programs on the American scene. If, as a committed Christian thinker, I have unintentionally set myself up as an arch defender of some ideas that really bother me at the end of the day then I should correct this misperception right here. Personally, I do find many theistic depictions of God quite plausible and convincing, but this is not the place to explore this issue.<sup>13</sup> Having been involved personally in part-time ministry, I can honestly say that the God to whom I have introduced others is far more personal and involved than the one that Dewey tries, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, to depict. Also, I do agree that what some of Dewey's zealous educational "followers" have done to curriculum and schooling in his name is downright indefensible. Nevertheless, I think it is essential for Christians to prevent public dialogue about complex ideas from becoming rigidified and static when there are many subtleties and facets that remain unexplored or end up forgotten. It is my hope that the article I wrote, along with the give and take that has followed, contributes to healthy and productive public examination of religious ideas.

*Notes*

1. Robertson, P., "Pat Robertson Responds," *Religion and Education* 29, 2 (2002): see page 40.
2. Robertson, P., *The New Millennium*. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990).
3. Dykhuizen, G., *The Life and Mind of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973).
4. Phillips, Jr., A. G., "John Dewey and His Religious Critics," *Religion and Education* 29, 2 (2002): see page 32.
5. Robertson, P., "Pat Robertson Responds," see page 42.
6. Phillips, Jr., A. G., "John Dewey and His Religious Critics," see page 37.
7. Robertson, P., "Pat Robertson Responds," see page 42.
8. Dewey, J., *Experience and Education*. (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 115.
9. Dykhuizen, G., *The Life and Mind of John Dewey*, xvi.
10. Colson, C., "Charles Colson Responds," *Religion and Education* 29, 2 (2002): see page 43.
11. Hirsch, E. D., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. (New York:Doubleday, 1996).
12. Gardner, H., *The Disciplined Mind*. (New York: Penguin, 2000).
13. For examples see: Hartshorne, C. & Reese, W. L., *Philosophers Speak of God*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) and Donnelly, J. (ed.) *Logical Analysis and Contemporary Theism*. (New York: Fordham Press, 1972).