

A Common Faith for an Interdependent World
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 International Conference on “Dewey’s Second Mission:
 A Dialogue Between Deweyan Pragmatism and Confucianism”
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It is an honor and special privilege to be part of this dialogue on John Dewey and Confucianism at Beijing Foreign Studies University. We have much to learn from each other. I would like to express my deep appreciation to the organizers, Professor Ames, Professor Sun, Mr. Peng and Mr. Wang. I also would like to extend heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to Professor Zhao Xiufu for his commitment to Dewey studies and for the dedication and courage he showed in undertaking the demanding scholarly task of translating my study of Dewey’s life and thought.

We gather together for this conference at a critical moment in the evolution of human civilization. Humanity has entered a new age of global history facing the ecological and social imperative to make the transition to sustainable development. In the decades ahead, it is a matter of the greatest importance for China and the United States and for the world that our two nations build a good working relationship. If the dialogue between Confucian philosophy and Deweyan pragmatism can make even a small contribution to promotion of mutual understanding between the Chinese and American peoples and to cooperation for global sustainability and peace, we will have made an important contribution.

Responding to the invitation of the organizers, I would like to take this occasion to share with you some reflections on my research in recent years. Since my academic field of study is religion and ethics and related philosophical theory, my writing on Dewey and American philosophical traditions has continued to reflect these interests. Since publication of John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism, I have written several essays that provide an overview of Dewey’s philosophy of religious experience. I mention this because the publications in which two of these essays appear are especially noteworthy. One is published in a 550-page volume entitled Makers of Christian Theology in America (1997) that contains ninety-one profiles of the leading figures in the history of Christian theology in the United States beginning in the 17th century.¹ A second essay is being published in a new, five volume, encyclopedic History of Western Philosophy of Religion (2009) that covers over 2,500 years of western intellectual history and includes ninety-six profiles.²

The inclusion of Dewey in these two publications reflects a new level of appreciation among Western philosophers of religion and theologians of Dewey’s contribution as a creative religious thinker. At a time when Dewey’s religious and ethical thinking is generating growing interest in the East-West dialogue with Confucianism and

other Asian traditions, it is significant that it is also receiving fresh and increased attention in the context of the history and development of Western religious thought.

Professor Ames and many of you here have been leaders in promoting the dialogue between Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism. I am a relatively new participant in this promising conversation. However, I have been engaged in the dialogue between Dewey's evolutionary naturalism and religious humanism and Buddhist philosophy.

My introduction to Buddhism has come largely through the Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen traditions. It began in the 1960s at Columbia University with an intensive study of The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, the eighth century Chinese text that laid the foundation for the development of the Ch'an tradition. My engagement with Zen deepened as I underwent a number of years of formal training in Zen practice during the 1970s and 80s. My Zen teacher was Philip Kapleau who had been trained in Japan and who was based at the Rochester Zen Center in upstate New York. In 1980 Kapleau took about 20 of his students to China on a pilgrimage to major Ch'an sites, including a number of temples and sacred places that the Communist government had shut down or made off limits to foreign visitors. In addition, I had a number of encounters with Tibetan Buddhist philosophers and teachers that contributed to my deepening interest in Buddhism. Part of what attracted me to both Dewey and Zen is an emphasis on concrete experience and deep insight into the interdependence of self and world.³

My most recent engagement in this East-West exchange took place just last month in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Professor Hickman and I participated in a two-day conference and dialogue on Daisaku Ikeda's Mahayana Buddhist humanism and John Dewey's naturalistic and democratic humanism.⁴ What is especially noteworthy from the perspective of the philosophy of religion is that both Dewey and Ikeda endeavor to find a middle way between theism and moral authoritarianism on the one hand and an atheistic, secular humanism that involves an atomistic and materialistic individualism and subjective moral relativism on the other hand. In both cases their middle way supports a religious humanism that endeavors to break down the dualism of the sacred and the secular and to awaken people to the enduring meaning and value to be found in everyday life. Their religious humanism is not anthropocentric. It is grounded in a cosmological orientation that involves a keen awareness of the interdependence of humanity and nature and a deep respect for nature. Dewey's religious humanism and middle way also provide a basis for a meaningful conversation with the Confucian tradition, especially the New Confucianism of Qian Mu, Feng Youlan, and Tu Weiming.

Dewey's religious humanism is the outcome of a radical, liberal reconstruction of Christianity that reflects the influence of Hegel and American democratic culture. Early in his career Dewey reached the conclusion that the true essence of Christianity is its ethical humanism and that in the modern world a Christian ethical humanism means the ethics of democracy. The poet Walt Whitman helped to convince Dewey that democracy should be understood first and foremost as a great ethical ideal and that the religious life

should be identified with the democratic way of life. He views democracy, then, as fundamentally a form of moral and spiritual association.

From Dewey's perspective, the only secure foundation for political democracy is a culture of moral and spiritual democracy that influences the formation of character, shapes attitudes and values, promotes growth of the self, and determines the quality of all human relations. Dewey associates the democratic ideal with a deep respect for the dignity and equal worth of every person, a basic faith in the possibilities of human nature, progressive education, intellectual autonomy, free and open communication, wide sympathy, respect for diversity, non-violent conflict resolution, and intelligence guided by experimental inquiry. A democratic society flourishes, Dewey believes, when it is guided by intelligent sympathy and its people are primarily concerned with being more rather than having more. In his mid-thirties, Dewey left the Christian Church convinced that the true sacred community is the larger, inclusive democratic community.

A faith in the democratic ideal and way of life lies at the heart of Dewey's entire philosophical undertaking. For example, his pragmatism or instrumentation is designed to equip human intelligence with the tools needed to guide moral deliberation and social planning in a free society. Further, it is Dewey the philosopher of the democratic way of life that can be regarded as a kind of twentieth century, American Confucius.

This leads me to share with you recent efforts to develop and implement on a worldwide basis Dewey's concept of a common faith. First, it is useful to clarify Dewey's naturalistic theory of the general nature and role of faith and his idea of a common faith. Thinking in very broad terms, Dewey's overarching concern as a philosopher and social reformer is to develop the intellectual tools and practical strategies for unifying the ideal and the real. In this regard his psychology, social theory, ethics, and philosophy of religion all culminate with his concept of a unifying faith in an inclusive, integrated vision of the ideal. Dewey understands authentic ideals to be natural possibilities projected by the human imagination. He uses the term faith to mean moral conviction, not belief about matters of fact. A faith in the ideal possibilities of life means, he explains, "being conquered, vanquished, in our active nature by an ideal end."⁵

Dewey points out that when a faith in an inclusive ideal is widely shared, it can unify society, providing direction and inspiring cooperative effort in support of social change. In addition, when an inclusive vision of the ideal takes hold of a person's being, it can unify the self and lead to a deep enduring adjustment of self and world, awakening cosmic trust, inner peace, and an abiding sense of meaning. When a moral faith has this effect, it gives to experience what Dewey calls a religious quality.

It is Dewey's argument that a moral faith in the attitudes, values and ideals that a society holds to be sacred "has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind."⁶ Such a faith, he contends, is imbedded in the myths, symbols, rituals and creeds of the great religions. Historically, societies have projected their ethical ideals upon a god or supernatural realm for safekeeping and sanction. However, Dewey urges recognition that the ethical ideals celebrated in the world's religions are in actuality idealizations of

values characteristic of natural human relations and relations with nature. There are, of course, variations as well as common themes in humanity's visions of the ethical ideal, and these visions continue to evolve.

However, if a society, and eventually the whole human family, including the world's religions, were to come to the realization that the common faith of humanity is a moral faith in the ideal, then it would be possible, Dewey argues, to channel and focus enormous energy on the task of cooperatively developing humanity's moral faith, leading to emergence of a widely shared faith. Such a development would require the abandonment of dogmatism and fundamentalism and the spread of a democratic respect for free and open communication. Dewey envisions people of goodwill throughout the world coming together, engaging in deep dialogue, sharing experience, utilizing all the resources of experimental inquiry and finding common ground in the midst of their cultural diversity. The goal is a unifying moral and social faith that guides humanity in building a just and peaceful global community that respects nature.

Partly inspired by Dewey's concept of a common faith, I have become deeply interested in global ethics and interreligious and intercultural dialogue. My interest in this field was intensified by the realization that as our world becomes increasingly interdependent under the impact of modern technology and economic globalization, no nation can solve its major environmental, economic and social problems by acting alone. International cooperation is essential and effective cooperation requires common goals and shared values. This means global ethics.

These concerns led me to become engaged in the international effort to draft, disseminate and implement the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter is a declaration of global interdependence and universal responsibility that sets forth fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world. The Charter is the product of a decade long, worldwide, cross cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values that involved the most open and participatory process ever associated with the drafting of an international declaration. The project began as an initiative of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), but it was carried forward and completed by a global civil society initiative led by Maurice Strong, the Secretary General of the Rio Earth Summit, and Mikhail Gorbachev in his capacity as president of Green Cross International. The Earth Charter was launched at the Peace Palace in The Hague in 2000. The Earth Charter International Secretariat is based at the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica. The legitimacy of the document has been enhanced by its endorsement by over 4,800 organizations, including UNESCO and the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

Among the many scholars and philosophers who participated in the Earth Charter drafting process was Professor Tu Weiming, the former head of the Harvard-Yenching Institute and a leading Confucian scholar who is currently teaching at Peking University. During the drafting process Professor Tu shared with us a Confucian symbol that is a diagram of the Confucian worldview. It involves concentric circles radiating outward from a center point and a cross overlays the concentric circles. The center point

represents the self and the concentric circles represent the ever larger communities to which the self is related from the family to the greater community of life and the universe. The horizontal arms of the cross represent the interdependence of the self and the community. The vertical arms represent the interrelation of Heaven and Earth, the divine and the human, the cosmic and social. At the heart of this image is a world affirming, relational spirituality that invites us to identify ourselves with and extend our sympathy and compassion to all peoples and to all living beings and to share responsibility for the future of our world.

What is especially significant from the perspective of this conference is that this Confucian symbol of the interconnectedness of the self, the community, nature and Heaven or the ideal can be used to describe John Dewey's naturalistic worldview and religious humanism. Furthermore, I often use this Confucian diagram when presenting the worldview embedded in the Earth Charter. While there will be some variations in how a Confucian scholar, a Deweyan pragmatist and an Earth Charter activist interpret the meaning of this Confucian symbol, there will also be a convergence of viewpoints and common ground.

This convergence points to the great potential of the dialogue between Confucianism and Deweyan pragmatism. The dialogue can deepen and expand the vision of both traditions and enrich American and Chinese culture. This convergence also indicates that Confucianism as well as Dewey's religious humanism has much to contribute to the ongoing quest for a new global ethics and common faith. In this regard the Earth Charter can be used in the dialogue to focus attention on the critical issues that confront all philosophical and religious traditions today. The deeper significance of the dialogue is the contribution it can make to the evolution of humanity's spiritual and ethical consciousness in an age of globalization.

¹ Mark G. Toulouse and James O. Duke, editors, Makers of Christian Theology in America (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1997). The volume is edited by two professors who teach at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, and who worked with an advisory team of twenty-four scholars in selecting the historical figures to be included.

² Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis, editors, The History of Western Philosophy of Religion (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2009). The editors are two faculty members at Monash University in Australia.

³ I first endeavored to put my thoughts on this topic into writing in the late 1980s by joining a group of Japanese and American scholars in contributing an essay to a volume edited by Taitetsu Unno and entitled The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), Nishitani is an influential 20th century Japanese Zen philosopher. The essay is entitled “Nishitani and John Dewey’s Naturalistic Humanism.”

⁴ Daisaku Ikeda is the President of Soka Gakkai, a relatively new religious organization with roots in the Japanese Nichiren tradition of Buddhism and The Lotus Sutra.

⁵ John Dewey, A Common Faith in John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), Vol. 9, p.15.

⁶ Ibid. p. 58.