
Secular Religion as a Tool for the Realization of Democratic Citizenship. The Thesis of John Dewey (1859-1952)

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ABSTRACT: *This contribution aims to propose a critical reflection on a particularly complex theme for international pedagogical literature: religion. This will be done through a constant dialogue with John Dewey, a philosopher and pedagogue of American origin who, in addition to having dedicated himself to philosophical, political and pedagogical issues, has had interesting reflections on the religious phenomenon. Therefore, attention will be turned to such of his writings as Moral Theory and Practice of 1891, in which Dewey treated the religious question implicitly, wondering about human conduct and the need for it to be oriented by a morality that directed the individual towards the exercise of the collective good. Subsequently, interest will shift to writings such as Democracy and Education of 1916 and Common Faith of 1934, two works in which Dewey presented his concept of secular religion, giving it a civil connotation, since it is to be understood as a set of values capable of orienting human behavior towards a democratic life consisting of peace, solidarity and mutual respect. Finally, through a comparison with the societies of our time, the present contribution will reflect on the topicality of Dewey's thought and on the urgency, which has now become universal, to educate towards an 'open religion' in order to avoid any social inequalities and any form of cultural tension, whilst promoting the creation of democratic and multi-ethnic citizenship.*

KEYWORDS: *John Dewey, Religion, Secular Religion, Citizenship, Democracy.*

Introduction

John Dewey, an internationally renowned philosopher and pedagogue, has elaborated some interesting considerations regarding the religious phenomenon which represent stimulating ideas about the world of education. In this regard, I will point out how the author, as early as 1891 in a work entitled *Moral Theory and Practice*, first approached the religious question implicitly, analyzing man's conduct and reflecting on the need for human action to be oriented by a morality capable of giving direction towards the accomplishment of good; until, with the publication in 1916 of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey explicitly dealt with the theme of secular religion, giving it a civil connotation, to be

understood as a set of values that orient human behavior towards a democracy constituted by peace, solidarity and mutual respect (Rockefeller, 1991).

Finally, my attention will focus on a text that shows even more clearly the religious interest of Dewey: *A Common Faith* of 1934, in which the Burlington thinker, distinguishing the concept of religion from that of religiousness, clarified his idea of secular religion, whose values can belong to the conduct of each and every one, representing a fundamental resource for the democratic society not only of the past, but also of the present, consisting of multicultural scenarios in which it is necessary to educate not so much and only about religion, but also and above all about religious values, so that social peace is not a mere utopian slogan, but becomes a reality.

1. The first reflections on religion theme

John Dewey's interest in the religious question gradually matured: at first, his attention was focused on the conduct of man in support of the idea that some aspects of morality can better promote it. In an 1891 paper entitled *Moral Theory and Practice*, in fact, Dewey, influenced by pragmatism, reasoned on the practical value of morality, interpreting it as an aim of human action, unlike all such definitions which designated it as a set of abstract rules with no concrete purpose.

In detail, Dewey theorized a connection between 'moral' values and individual actions through which to guide man towards the realization of good, since «it is only as our moral ideas, our conceptions of this and that thing which needs doing, are reinforced and reconstructed by larger inquiries into the reality of human relationships that they are preserved» (Dewey, 1891, 196). The basic idea, as I will point out more fully in the following pages, was to believe that morality is constituted by religious values and that it can affect and characterize the life of any man, beyond dogmas and religious faith.

Dewey had also expounded similar ideas in *Democracy and Education* of 1916, focusing on the theme of civil religion, that is a religion defined as a set of values, such as solidarity, brotherhood and charity fundamental for that democratic life for which he has been longing. It was therefore a religion that did not separate but unified and directed towards virtuous actions aimed at the good of all.

Furthermore, firmly convinced that human action could be concretely regulated by morality and by a secular religion that directed each man in his daily life, in 1922 Dewey published *Human Nature and Conduct*, in which he reiterated the possibility that there is a morality capable of directing man's work and his daily life:

Morals is the most humane of all subjects. It is that which is closest to human nature; it is ineradicably empirical, not theological nor

metaphysical nor mathematical. Since it directly concerns human nature, everything that can be known of the human mind and body in physiology, medicine, anthropology, and psychology is pertinent to moral inquiry. [...] Moral science is not something with a separate province. It is physical, biological and historic knowledge placed in a human context where it will illuminate and guide the activities of men (Dewey, 1922, 295-6).

For this reason, morality can be counted among the 'human' faculties, as it does not concern the transcendent, but the action of the individual (De Maria, 1990). Furthermore, within the book *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey argued that religion has been lost in dogmas, cults and myths and that, for this reason

Consequently the office of religion as a sense of community and one's place in it has been lost. In effect religion has been distorted in a possession – or burden – of a limited part of human nature. [...] Religion as the sense of the whole is the most individualized of all things, the most spontaneous, undefinable and varied. [...] Yet it has been perverted into something uniform and unchanging. It was formulated in fixed and definite beliefs expressed in required acts and ceremonies (Dewey, 1930, 330-1).

The true meaning of the religious should not therefore reside in cults and myths, but in the relationship between people, trying to contribute all for the common good, without personal interests or selfishness of any kind.

1.1. 'Religion' and 'the religious': much more than a terminological difference

After reflecting on morality and on how man's conduct can be guided by it, Dewey, in 1934, finished writing *A Common Faith*, a book containing extremely interesting reflections on the subject of religion, in accordance with the writings previously published concerning the theme of morality.

A Common Faith was born from three lectures given by Dewey at Yale University in New Haven and, despite its small number of pages, it represents a very interesting and contemporary work with a strong pedagogical value. The book represents an attempt to reflect on the theme of secular religion, a topic that, as I previously pointed out, Dewey had already addressed in *Democracy and Education*, but which he decided to retract in the 1930s, a period in which new sciences spread, such as psychology, biology and geology, which have helped to inspire the human mind with doubts and questions, away from a passive and non-critical acceptance of myths, legends and religious confessions. Dewey, in fact, stated that the early years of the twentieth century were characterized by an intellectual revolution that awakened the mind of man.

The aim of the volume, however, was not to address the social and cultural situation of those years, but to offer the reader food for thought that could improve it. In order to pursue this aim, Dewey explained the meaning of secular religion through the distinction between the concept of 'religion' and that of 'religious'. Regarding the word 'religion' Dewey wrote that «religion always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or right» (Dewey, 1934, 9); while Dewey considered the term 'religious' as an adjective, that

Denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal (Dewey, 1934, 9-10).

In other words, the term 'religious' is used to indicate a faith that is more moral than dogmatic, through which each individual can act towards a common good that has a religious value, albeit separate from a doctrine. The risk of failing to distinguish between these two terms is that of reducing religious values to a conceptual formalization that was destined to remain no more than that. In Dewey, therefore, the intention was clearly to promote a secular religion of a practical nature which, understood as a set of values and moral principles and beyond any religious dogma, concretely orientates man and his community life, so that religious «can and should be liberated from organized religion» (Baurain, 2011, 83). In doing this, no one was to be excluded, since it is a question of a religion that does not respond to an axiom, but only to the common good and that cancels out any form of selfishness.

Realizing the religion (or religious consciousness) promoted by Dewey would also mean constituting a democratic society not intended as a mere form of government, but as a way of life (Spadafora, 2015), that is a way of life that involves associationism and respect among citizens for the common good (Tröhler, 2000). A democracy of this type would need religion as it was defined by Dewey, that is, a way to get out of the trap of institutional religions that separate in favor of a religion that is a set of moral values capable of holding together without dividing ; a sort of 'moral faith', in short, which opposes the «intellectual assent to creeds and customs required by traditional religions» (Baurain, 2011, 80). It seems clear, therefore, that in the Deweyan imagination religion must be more than a simple sum of beliefs, as it must rather be «a way of living», which means that «religious faith is therefore significant not because it is embedded in knowledge statements which are 'true' but rather they are personally important end-purposes which determine our conduct and way-of-being in all of

our experiences» (Webster, 2009, 624). In *A Common Faith*, therefore, Dewey

Recognizes that our religious experiences and the conduct that they inspire often have great value. That they can also have negative aspects is something he is well aware of, from, for example, his struggle with the tortured feelings of guilt that he suffered in his youth [...], and from his disappointment at the fact that in his lifetime organized religions so often sided with the powers that be at times of social protest. Indeed, organized religion is not something Dewey ever came to favor. But in *A Common Faith* Dewey views God as a human protection that embodies our highest ideals (Nagl, 2011, 126).

It is evident, then, how he perceived religion as a set of values that go beyond the differences and facilitate the rapprochement between parties, contributing to the creation of a democratic society. This, however, only if «religion» transforms «into the religious, into a human quality that is able to accompany all our dedicated actions, be they in the sciences, in the arts, or in social life» (Nagl, 2011, 127).

2. War, corruption and brutality as examples of a lack of religiosity: the role of education

As explained by Dewey, in the life of everyone there is often an absence of the religious, or a theorization of religious principles which, however, is destined to remain so, causing wars, corruption, racism and social tensions of various kinds. An example of this are current societies, in which cultural and religious affiliations are often a reason for conflict, determining real forms of hatred that flow into wars and social conflicts of various kinds. These episodes, still present all over the world today, demonstrate how the concept of the religious expounded by Dewey is not rooted in men and how fundamental it is to educate towards a religious awareness, or towards a common faith that determines «the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desired and choices» (Dewey, 1934, 33).

Although in *A Common Faith* Dewey did not address the issue of religious education explicitly, it can still be concluded that his concept of religion requires an educational intervention, since it would not be an innate attitude. However, religious education, far from being a mere notionistic transfer of principles, would represent the transmission – not dogmatic – of those values inherent in the various religions through, for example, laboratory activities, capable of giving each citizen of the future an experience of the importance of meeting others, cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid, thus contributing to the fulfilment of a peaceful solidarity and democratic reality. An education of this type

would allow each man to understand God not as the one who separates, who generates tensions, enmities and social injustices as a representative of a religious denomination, but as an entity capable of uniting, as a unification of shared values within everyone's reach (Bertin, 1989). Furthermore, Dewey's God is not an entity separate from the earthly world to which reference is made in dramatic or problematic situations and which, for the rest of the time, remains far from human and tangible affairs, but is a set of ideals that orient choices, thoughts, actions and daily life, giving them a moral meaning. The presence of the divine, then, would not reside in mystical and transcendental experiences, but in daily work based on cooperation between people and on the use of one's own intelligence (Colonello, Spadafora, 2002). This perception of the religious on closer inspection, would make man responsible and detach him from the belief that it is God who must solve a problem, give answers to certain questions and lead in difficult and complex circumstances; for Dewey the only architect of human actions is man, it is up to him to practice religious values contributing to the well-being of the community:

First, with regard to the orientation toward present social life, Dewey represents religious believers as putting their hope in a future heaven and being uncommitted to the present. They blame sin for the evils and sufferings of this life and wait for God to do something about it rather than engaging in the present struggle for human betterment. Such pie-in-the-sky charges of escapism are not new and unfortunately there are and have been Christians who match this description. Yet much of the tide of church doctrine and history runs in the opposite direction (Baurain, 2011, 85).

Religious education would need teachers and educators ready to bring their religion into their classes but «not in the sense of organized religion», but in a Deweyan sense, because «if one understands religion as it functions – as symbols, stories, institutions, ethics, values, and practices that make life meaningful – then any teacher [...] brings his or her religion into the classroom» (Baurain, 2011, 88). Indeed, that of the teacher would not be a work of transmitting dogmas, but a living testimony of the values inherent in the various religions which, if applied daily, can transform entire social communities (Block, 2007). In this regard, significant are the words that Dewey dedicated to a future educational student:

Your work as an educator is actually a religious vocation because it gives you a sense of transcendence. Your church is the university. And your prayer is teaching. Your community of saints is made up of your students. And your prayer is when you carry on intense, revitalizing, give-and-take conversations in the classroom (Nash, 2002, 5).

The teacher therefore becomes a prophet of God, a God who, however, is not that of a confessional religion, but an entity that testifies the values and principles of all religions toward which everyone can aspire. It then appears evident that Dewey wished for a school that prepares everyone to fulfil the law:

To exercise their intelligence in all of their activities through a new kind of faith which looked to experience rather than to institutional authorities as the assumed guardians of entry to another realm. This emancipation is to be fostered by teachers through a democratic approach to education (Nodding, 1993, 625).

The school, then, must not be extraneous to religious and spiritual issues, because it is important that schools do not become victims of confessionalism but offer to the new generations an overview of the various religions, their doctrines and their values, so that each student, in addition to internalizing religious principles from the point of view of a common faith, matures – if so desired – a faith of his/her own, free from any external imposition:

The point of raising religious or spiritual issues in schools is to promote reflection and inquiry on significant questions», the «students must get the message that spiritual ideals and values are important, and they must feel free and equipped to make informed choices concerning them (Baurian, 2011, 89).

The words of Dewey expounded in *A Common Faith*, therefore, represent an appeal addressed to all, that religious principles do not lose themselves in the reading of sacred texts or in rites, but find a practical fulfilment in ordinary actions.

However, many would argue that the American philosopher and pedagogist's ideas in matters of religion are utopian, as evidenced by the many cases in the world in which religion is one of the first causes of disunity and certainly not of harmony. The latter would certainly be a legitimate observation, but refutable if we consider how in Dewey the hope for a better world lies in the power of education, or in the work of schools and various educational institutes able

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It is through educational work that the Deweyan concept of the religious can be internalized in everyone's life, guiding their thoughts and actions and contributing to the creation of a democratic society in which religious values are not simply theorized, but embodied by each person and brought to life (Pasca, 2021). Only in this way can we hope for the

decrease of the episodes of racism and discrimination that today, more than ever, characterize multicultural societies and hope for a democratic citizenship that considers differences a resource that opens up to a pluralist, planetary and intercultural community (Mortari, 2008).

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