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Magnus Schlette

1. The Politics of Individualism

- 1 In 1930, invited to contribute to an anthology collecting personal statements of contemporary American philosophers, John Dewey chose to entitle his brief autobiographical essay “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” (LW 5: 147ff.). He thereby alluded to a fundamental shift in his intellectual self-understanding, which had departed from a Hegelian-style idealism and had led via William James to the formation of the corner stones of 20th-century pragmatism. What Dewey calls “absolutism” in his essay, stands for the anachronistic idea of an intellectual orientation to life that claims to found life-worldly experience on the insights of a self-sufficient rationality. “Experimentalism,” to the contrary, denotes an intellectual orientation directed toward empirical inquiry into the ever-changing conditions of situation-bound problem-solving. With reference to the title of his 1928, through 1929, Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh this shift may be grasped in terms of a changing quest for certainty. Dewey does not abstractly deny man’s quest for certainty within a to-all-appearances contingent world, but he refutes the traditional satisfaction of this quest by stating foundations of common knowledge that are prior to trial and immune to error. In the wake of Darwinism, Dewey wants to guide his contemporaries from their subjection to seemingly steady transempirical fundaments of knowledge about their theoretical and practical affairs toward a growth of empowerment derived from their own hitherto successful history of empirical probation. The traditional quest for certainty, which seeks reliance on authorities *external* to experience, is sublated into a quest for self-reliance *through* experience. The self-reliant individual or collective seeks to expand the range of new experiences as the only promising source of learning about the requirements of concrete situations for adaption and control.
- 2 Dewey’s concept of experimentalism refers to a practical attitude toward the world with clearly Emersonian roots in the ideas, firstly, of experience as *openness to the*

unforeseen, allowing, secondly, growth as human's striving for a higher degree of *perfectibility* in mastering critical encounters with the world, and thereby, thirdly, allowing *self-realization* or self-determination in terms of an increasing independence from traditional, institutional or otherwise authoritarian constraints to the range of problem-solving activities. The self-reliance, enacted in these three features of experimentalism: openness to future, perfectibility, and self-realization, is nevertheless itself dependent on the rise of the particular methodical and institutional framework, delivered by science and democracy. Both are interrelational achievements of western modernity: The term "science," on the one hand, denotes a specific *procedure of cooperativity* among the members of the scientific community, which is qualified by critical observation of its object, by controlled theoretical generalization from observed particulars corresponding to the tested and proven knowledge derived from previous experience, and by the repeated attempt of falsifying hitherto accepted hypotheses. The term "democracy," on the other hand, refers to a specific *form of cooperativeness*, based on the willingness of engaging into a common good, of taking the attitude of the other, and of searching for the realization of common goals on the way of establishing consent.

- 3 Dewey's understanding of science and democracy transcends the familiar range of meaning no less than his idea of experimentalism. They are used in terms of scientific – respectively democratic – attitudes toward life, both supplementing each other. The democratic attitude calls for equal integration of other perspectives in contradiction and consent to broaden the range of insight into the problems individuals and collectives face during their confrontation with reality and into the possible solutions for those problems; the scientific attitude, on the other hand, calls for a critical assessment of the very object that is democratically negotiated from different vantage points. The scientific community seems to be Dewey's paradigm for his idea of experimentalism that he seeks to establish in society. It anticipates Dewey's social ideal for a specifically modern society based on the attitudes of openness to future, perfectibility and self-realization of individuals and collectives in orientation toward common goods. In as much as this society is constituted by individuals or collectives whose ratio is the establishment of openness to future, the increase of perfectibility, and the consummation of self-realization in orientation toward common goods, it institutionally embodies, what Dewey has also called a "new individualism," meaning a habitually scientified and democratized individualism (cf. LW 5: 41-123).
- 4 The idea of a "new individualism" in contrast to the "old individualism" of foregone times is set forth within a concrete historical context, namely within the transformation of the American society from a loose aggregation of pioneers, pursuing happiness on their way to the moving frontier of land and possibilities, toward the increasingly dense-populated, infra-structurally mobilized and industrialized "United States, Incorporated" (*ibid.*: 58ff.). Already Henry David Thoreau was aware of the anachronism in his idea of a secluded life on the shores of Walden Pond. His essay *Walden* reflects the irrevocable end of the pioneer's age, transforming the move forward into the open land to an inward journey seeking to poetically reestablish the autarky that had been lost in the process of nation building. Modern life is characterized by the division, rationalization and capitalization of labor and the formation of mass consumption as the basis of economic growth, as Dewey points out in a series of articles under the title "Individualism, Old and New," published in *New Republic* around the outbreak of the Great Depression. According to Dewey the United

States “has steadily moved from an earlier pioneer individualism to a condition of dominant corporateness. The influence business corporations exercise in determining present industrial and economic activities is both a cause and a symbol of the tendency to combination in all phases of life.” (*Ibid.*: 58).

- 5 Under the given circumstances the old individualism, based on the idea of the individuals as independent entities seeking equal opportunities and free associations in pursuing their self-interests has been perverted “to conform to the practices of a pecuniary culture” (*ibid.*: 49). In modern American life the pioneer individualism turned into an economic liberalism with a dominating orientation toward profit maximization through satisfaction of material wants. Greed for profit and mass consumption are interrelated: “Prosperity is our God” – as Dewey summarizes his argumentation in an essay entitled “A Critique of American Civilization” (LW 3: 140). But other than Thoreau, Dewey does not indulge in an Americanized *locus amoenus* where the old individualism may come to flourish again. Instead of searching for seclusion from every man’s life to rescue the true essence of old pioneer individualism, Dewey suggests to adapt individualism to the new environment of industrialized mass civilization. Since cooperativeness is inevitable in modern life, the individualistic pursuit of self-interest is called upon to explore goals of self-interest whose achievement is not just instrumentally but intrinsically bound to the cooperation with our co-individuals.

2. The Religion of Individualism

- 6 During his whole life Dewey was faithful to his idea of “an individualism in democracy,” which is, as already young Dewey points out in his early essay “The Ethics of Democracy,” “an individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative to and for the ethical ideal, not an individualism of lawlessness” (EW 1: 244). Later on, Dewey will consolidate his conviction that only joint cooperation, as it is institutionalized in a democratic culture, brings the potentialities of the individual to full blooming and allows him self-realization. The reason for the attainability of a principal harmony between individuals and community is, that individuation, according to Dewey, depends on reciprocal recognition of each other’s efforts to lead one’s life, and the chance of being recognized for what we do is the greater the more cooperatively our goals are designed (cf. Honneth 2000, II.). Knowledge, science-based, methodically achieved and tested, is the means for the individuals and collectives to explore the ethical ideals and the constraints, which the common endeavor has to face on a daily basis. In *Philosophy and Civilization* from the early Thirties Dewey demands the use of all intellectual resources to achieve organized social planning and control.
- 7 Dewey’s attentiveness to an improvement of the individual’s living conditions via science-based social planning may certainly be interpreted as an indication that “he appears to be returning to the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment in his conviction of a rational world responsive to scientific manipulation,” as John Patrick Diggins has put it (Diggins 1994: 304). Dewey’s explicit reference to Condorcet fits into this picture. The emphasis on resistances to progression deriving from “a lot of outworn traditions, moth-eaten slogans and catchwords that do substitute duty for thought” (LW 6: 61), words, which clearly imply a poignant allusion to religion and metaphysics, show a similarity in tone and content to Auguste Comte’s positivism.

Reinhold Niebuhr, contemporary of Dewey, Professor of Theology at Union Seminary in New York just across from Columbia where Dewey taught during the time of their controversy, and next to Dewey one of the significant intellectuals in the United States of that time, was the first to raise this point with critical intention. With reference to *Philosophy and Civilization* he takes Dewey to be the most eloquent among the naïve liberal intellectuals who are still “enmeshed in the illusions and sentimentalities of the Age of Reason” (Niebuhr 2015: 149). Dewey serves Niebuhr repeatedly as a primary target for his polemic against all strands of thought that claim steady progress in the process of civilization, leading to a growing congruency between self-interest and common good. The title of Niebuhr’s book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* from 1932 formulates his principal standpoint. Niebuhr does not see society as a stable framework of institutionalized moral standards serving the function of taming man’s immoral inclinations. To the contrary, it is the individual’s inclination toward the good, which is endangered by any sort of social agglomeration. Collectives tend to dampen man’s disposition to do the right thing, and to strengthen his egocentric instincts, which are pursued with greater strength by aggregation of interest. Dewey, according to Niebuhr, fails to acknowledge this.

- 8 Dewey firmly and rightly rejected Niebuhr’s accusation (cf. LW 9: 71-5; 107-11). He was well aware of social struggles and the perseverance of inequality. With good reason he also did not want to be counted among the sentimental liberals of their time, who believed in a somewhat pre-established route to betterment as French enlightenment thinkers like Condorcet, Turgot and, in their succession, Auguste Comte were inclined to do. Dewey’s experimentalism comes with ethical meliorism, which does neither exclude the possibility of cultural progress nor state it as a matter of fact. “Just because dominant economic interests are the chief cause for non-use of the method of intelligence to control social change,” Dewey replied to Niebuhr, “opponents of the method play into the hands of those interests when they discourage the potentialities of this method” (LW 9: 110). Nevertheless the charge of progressivism has been variously repeated during the many decades of Dewey-scholarship. The general unease with Dewey’s experimentalism has been pointed out more recently by Eric MacGilvray: “Dewey’s own faith in the experimental ideal rests upon three related assumptions about the nature of reality,” says MacGilvray: “that it has a fundamentally rational character, that its rational character can be grasped by unaided human reason, and that we can ultimately (and perhaps only) grasp its rational character in common.” (MacGilvray 2004: 130).
- 9 MacGilvray is mistaken in a small, though essential detail: Dewey’s experimental ideal does not *rest* on the aforesaid assumptions, but it *consists* of them. Despite of being well founded in an accumulated history of practical probation, the content of these assumptions is far from being factual. This makes them to objects of faith, which, again, is understated as an intellectual commitment to empirically formed convictions. Faith, according to Dewey, is a counterfactual commitment to an ideal – “counterfactual” not meaning: in opposition to the factual, but in the sense of being no subject to final verification. According to Dewey’s *A Common Faith*, his brief contribution to the philosophy of religion, faith is qualified by the kind of experience, which accompanies its attitude. Dewey paraphrases this experience as “being conquered, vanquished, in our active nature by an ideal end”; according to Dewey “it signifies acknowledgement of its rightful claim over our desires and purposes” (Dewey 1960 [1934]: 20) that unifies the self and evokes a feeling of harmony with the universe (*ibid.*: 22f.). He calls faith 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 desires and choices” (*ibid.*: 33). Dewey does not *state* but *postulates* the fundamentally rational character of reality as well as the congruency between its rational structure on the one side and common human reason on the other. The postulate embodies the ideal that there *shall be* a world, based on the harmony of reality, mind and action. And as such it bears consequences for the factual. Experimentalism and meliorism are ways of “applying” the ideal to everyday life, they are ways of authenticating the binding force of the postulate, and at the same time – much in contrast to a positivist account of progress – they attest the precarity of man’s future.

- 10 After all, Dewey and Niebuhr do not seem to be as far apart from each other than both have persistently claimed. Niebuhr’s insinuation that Dewey belongs to the group of sentimental liberals who believe in a teleological process of science-based betterment misses the point of experimentalism; Dewey is no less aware of the social inequalities and struggles than Niebuhr. And most importantly both believe in a faith-bound vigor as being indispensable for the mobilization of all efforts in pursuing the common good under recalcitrant conditions. “[F]or justice,” Niebuhr concludes his thought in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, “cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness of the soul” (Niebuhr 2015: 350). The approximation of justice may stand here as an exemplification of the general striving for the common good. Niebuhr emphasizes the perlocutionary force mobilized by faith that may carry the individuals beyond their immediate goals. What Niebuhr calls a “sublime madness of the soul” is structurally similar to the consummatory dimension of faithful action that according to Dewey unifies the self in his cooperative engagement for the ideal on the paths of scientific experimentalism and ethical meliorism.
- 11 For Dewey the ideal as such has neither a mere subjective reality in the mind nor a substantive reality within some remote ontological sphere, but an *operative* reality “in character, in personality and action” (Dewey 1960 [1934]: 48). Dewey’s focus on the operative reality of whatever we are faithful about lends a kind of self-reference to our faith: Its object is being enacted in the dispositional quality of our actions while we strive to realize it. In other words, as the intentional object of faithful action the ideal is already present in the way we exercise whatever we do to realize it; yet it may never be fully embodied in any particular result of our doings. Dewey suggests a process-oriented understanding of the ideal in terms of “idealizing” our actions through faith. This seems to be very near to what Niebuhr means, when he claims, “the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible” (Niebuhr 2015: 208). The dialectic of the possible and the impossible grasps the idea of approaching the common good via determinate negation of any claim to have reached it. And again, both, Dewey and Niebuhr, call this faith into the impossible, qualified by “the sublime madness” (*ibid.*: 350; *see above*) of “being conquered, vanquished, in our active nature by an ideal end” (Dewey 1960 [1934]: 20; *see above*) most concordantly a religious attitude toward life.
- 12 In fact, calling it religious is too vague and underestimates its specific dynamic. The ideals, whose final realization is principally beyond the possibility of empirical indication, let alone evidence, but which, nevertheless, are exercising a binding force on our practical orientation, qualify a very specific religious disposition. It combines

ultimate concern with a futuristic orientation, anticipating a turn of eras that despite of its expectation is not subject to prognosis on the basis of empirical knowledge. May betterment be advanced only by small changes, progress repeatedly be conveyed by steps backwards, never secured and always at risk – according to the disposition in question the very possibility that there is betterment *at all*, the conviction that progress is not wholly illusory, is not enlivened by the deduction of probabilities from historical evidence like, for example, in Kant's moderate hope for progress, but by a common faith into an order wholly different from our empirically known dimensions. This disposition may be appropriately characterized as *eschatological*. For eschatology denotes the expectation of a consummatory state of being, which will once come into existence. It is the eschatological force of faith that according to Dewey as well as Niebuhr moves history toward the common good. But then, again, is the controversy between Dewey and Niebuhr just a case of mutual misunderstanding?

3. The Politics of Religion

- 13 In 1928, Dewey joins a group of western intellectuals who follow an official invitation of the Soviet Union, to inform themselves about the transformation of Russian society. He visits schools and industrial sites, talks with workers and representatives of the Russian government – and returns to the U.S. in a state of excitement. Russia was about to undertake a great psychological experiment, he reports in a series of articles published in *New Republic* (LW 3: 243). Its goal was to find out, Dewey writes, whether the democratic ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity could be most completely realized in a political community based on the abolition of private property and on the common control and administration of the industry by the workers. Despite its oppressive government he praises contemporary communist Russia for the efforts to use coordinated knowledge and technological expertise to steer economy in the interest of social order and stability. Dewey-critics such as Diggins may refer to Dewey's excitement about Russia's "great psychological experiment" as just another evidence for his enlightenment-based technocratic positivism. After all, also the Leninist transformation of Russian society is indebted to this particular tradition of enlightenment thought.
- 14 But wouldn't we rather think of this as an economic or political than a psychological experiment? According to Dewey the whole point of the Russian event would be missed, if it were reduced to a mere socio-structural transformation. Most of all Dewey is fascinated by the passion, which enlivens the mostly younger population in taking the economical challenge. And he interprets it as a genuinely religious phenomenon (*ibid.*: 245). He claims to have witnessed a joint faith among the Russians, which he compares to the spirit of Early Christianity. The comparison clearly stresses the eschatological dimension of the supposed common faith among the Russian people. According to Dewey this faith integrated the individual into an organic movement to the betterment of society. He does also notice the discrepancy between the vitality and creativity of the common faith on the one side, and the dogmatism of Marxist doctrine on the other. But at that point he is still optimistic that the "soviet official theology" (*ibid.*: 246) will slowly adapt to the innovative potential that rises bottom up from the religious movement of the Russian people.

- 15 For Dewey the Soviet experiment is interesting, of course, as a paradigm case for the conditions of a great social transformation, which he also hoped for in the U.S. By no means he wants to turn America into a Soviet state. To the contrary, he is doubtlessly true to the foundations of American democracy. But he also sees them endangered by the irrational and uncontrolled forces of social modernization. What he witnessed in Russia, is a concrete historical case of Niebuhr's "sublime madness of the soul," in Dewey's terms: of an experience of "being conquered, vanquished, in our active nature by an ideal end." But Niebuhr, where he appealed to the "sublime madness of the soul," did not hesitate to add that it "is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason" (Niebuhr 2015: 350). The essential point of difference between Dewey and Niebuhr concerns the question of how to tame the eschatological furor, once it has been unleashed by religious stimulation of man's imagination. His further intellectual development brings Niebuhr to seek the answer to this question in positive religion, more precisely: in an orthodox Lutheran version of biblical faith, whereas Dewey confined himself to the reliance on intellectual integrity.
- 16 Let us first focus on Niebuhr: In his two-volume *opus magnum* from 1939, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, finished vis-a-vis of the Second World War, he had come to adopt the biblical anthropology, which understands man at the same time as an image of God and as subject to original sin. Being God's creation, according to Niebuhr's interpretation of the biblical narrative, entails man's faculty of imagining possible worlds, and his formative power to create and shape his own environment. Original sin, on the other hand, denotes man's disposition to suppress his own limitations and to rationalize his shortcomings as a created being. For Niebuhr, biblical religion serves a twofold and seemingly paradoxical function: It shall unleash the eschatological furor of treating the realization of our utmost common goods as objects of ultimate concern, and at the same time keep this furor under control to prevent it from fanaticism. The history of Christianity, according to Niebuhr, has always been endangered by a severe disturbance of the balance between unleashing and controlling the religious furor. On the one hand, particularly in the protestant denominations derived from an inward-directed sectarianism that either stressed *justificatio* and *regeneratio* as positive experiences of an individualistic transformation to limitless perfectibility or set their hopes on the collectivistic goal of realizing a perfect society, the eschatological force had fully displaced the self-denial of the faithful sinner. On the other hand, traditions inspired by the fall of man to set all his hopes on eternity often enough had slowed down any dynamic of change, whether on the individual or the collective level. It is important to see that the specific theology, which Niebuhr adopted during the Thirties, is designed to articulate his insight into the importance of faith's eschatological force on the one hand and his deep skepticism about the range of man's moral integrity in joint social action on the other: "It is a good thing to seek for the Kingdom of God on earth; but it is very dubious to claim to have found it." (Niebuhr 1996: 178).
- 17 Dewey, to the contrary, did not allow for positive religion to do the job. From the standpoint of his Darwinian naturalism all religions appeared to him as anachronistic institutions worshiping supernatural entities that did not exist. *A Common Faith* charges the traditional believer with a counterproductive dualism of the eternal and the worldly affairs which betrays him into inaction, with fanaticisms responsible for bloody aggressions in the course of history, and, above all, with intellectual dishonesty for his

stubborn adherence to scientifically outdated convictions. Therefore Dewey was forced to conceptualize the religious as a, so to speak, freestanding quality that did not have to be retraced to positive religion as its source. “All religions, marked by elevated ideal quality,” he writes, “have dwelt upon the power of religion to introduce perspective into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence. Here [...] we need to reverse the ordinary statement and say that whatever introduces genuine perspective is religious, not that religion is something that introduces it.” (Dewey 1960 [1934]: 24). Whatever may evoke faith’s vigor: neither its sources nor its evaluation shall be based on religious scripture.

- 18 Niebuhr could certainly accommodate Dewey’s attack on religion’s supposed bias toward inaction and aggression. After all, those accusations did not principally debunk positive religion, but only some of its interpretations in church history; even so there were enough counter-examples to be referred to, if evidence was demanded. As to the charge of supernaturalism, Niebuhr replied modestly to Dewey’s *A Common Faith*. “It is questionable,” he wrote in *The Nation* on September 1934, quite shortly after the publication of Dewey’s book, “whether the supernature against which Dr. Dewey protests, a realm of being separate from the natural world and interfering in its process, is really the kind of supernature about which really profound prophetic religion speaks” (quoted from Rice 1993: 158). Niebuhr did not think, that religion raises ontological truth claims that intended to compete with science. “Dr. Dewey may insist that he does not believe in the ideals as ‘antecedently existing actualities’,” he remarked with reference to Dewey’s paraphrase for the belief of supernaturalism into godly powers, “but he does believe in a world in which the possibility of realizing ideals exists. He believes in appreciating the world of nature as a realm of meaning even where it does not obviously support man’s moral enterprise but is in conflict with it. This is the kind of faith which prophetic religion has tried to express mythically and symbolically by belief in a God who is both the creator and the judge of the world, that is, both the ground of its existence and its *telos*.” (*Ibid.*: 152). According to Niebuhr the Christian dualism of man’s god-likeness and his sinfulness, the understanding of human endeavors as bespeaking the spirit of God as well as being subject to judgement beyond human measures is an adequate symbolic expression of the political ideals he principally shares with Dewey.

4. Political Religion

- 19 In a nutshell the conflict between Dewey and Niebuhr is about the eschatological dimension of a religious faith that shall serve the advancement of individual self-realization through joint striving for the common good. To evaluate the grounds of their fundamental differences it has to be taken into account how both understand the relation between the eschatological dimension of a politically activating faith and the concept of transcendence. Niebuhr was right in denying that Dewey’s naturalism allowed space for “transcendence with a capital T” (cf. Dalferth 2012). But if faithful reference to a transcendent source of meaning was missing, Niebuhr worried, faith’s eschatological vigor would lose its humility and sanctify human endeavors. Historical religions, according to Niebuhr, “are by their very nature prophetic-messianic. They look forward at first to a point in history and finally towards the *eschaton* (end) which is also the end of history, where the full meaning of life and history will be disclosed and

fulfilled.” (Niebuhr 1996: 4). Following Niebuhr, the eschatological disposition is endangered to become destructive, though, when it does not conceptualize the *eschaton* as coming from without, which, again, is the case, “wherever the meaning of life is explained from the standpoint of either nature or supernature in such a way that a transcendent revelation of history’s meaning is not regarded as either possible or necessary” (*ibid.*: 5). Whereas in Christian eschatology the end of history was both fulfillment and judgement, the “modern conception sees the end as only fulfillment” (*ibid.*: 166).

- 20 Under these conditions “transcendence with a capital T” may become substituted by “man’s capacity for freedom and self-transcendence” (*ibid.*) as the formative power to create meaning in history. “The ‘idea of progress,’ the most characteristic and firmly held article in the *credo* of modern man, is the inevitable philosophy of history emerging from the Renaissance. This result was achieved by combining the classical confidence in man with the Biblical confidence in the meaningfulness of history.” (*Ibid.*: 154f.). Niebuhr does not hesitate to subsume such multifarious expressions like the early Italian Renaissance, Cartesian rationalism and the French enlightenment, sectarian perfectionism and secular utopianism under his unifying principle. Contemporary Russia, object of Dewey’s admiration, served Niebuhr as an outstanding example for this kind of religious hubris. His worries are congruent with those of the Austrian immigrant to the U.S. Eric Voegelin, who shortly after Dewey’s *A Common Faith* had published his famous essay *Die politischen Religionen*, thereby introducing the term “political religion” into the debate on the origins of totalitarianism.
- 21 Voegelin subdivides political religions into supramundane and intramundane branches (Voegelin 2007: 17). Whereas the supramundane political religions accept “transcendence with a capital T” as the source of the social body’s existence and selfunderstanding, intramundane religions are characterized by sanctifying the contents of the world (*ibid.*: 50). In 1952, Voegelin expanded the rather sketchy approach of his essay on political religions in his book *The New Science of Politics*. Here, he elaborates the intramundane (political) religions under the name of Gnosticism: “Gnostic speculation overcame the uncertainty of faith by receding from transcendence and endowing man and his intra-mundane range of action with the meaning of eschatological fulfilment. In the measure in which this immanentization progressed experientially, civilizational activity became a mystical work of self-salvation. The spiritual strength of the soul which in Christianity was devoted to the sanctification of life could now be diverted into the more appealing, more tangible, and, above all, so much easier creation of the terrestrial paradise.” (Voegelin 1952: 129). Gnosticism, in short, refers to the “immanentization of the eschaton” (*ibid.*: 163).
- 22 Voegelin understands the key change in the eschatological paradigm structurally quite similar to Niebuhr: The disposition of the religious mind that is based on the immanentization of the *eschaton*, is realized in acts of self-transcendence intending to overcome the narrow borders of previous accomplishments on the path to inner-worldly perfection. After all, there is much in their respective characterization of the modern age that Niebuhr and Voegelin share. Both claim a transformation of eschatology in the modern age, substituting transcendence “with a capital T” for a concept of self-transcendence respectively – borrowing Georg Simmel’s term – of “immanent transcendence” (Simmel 1968: 197). Both interpret the millenarian idea of a Third Age, the Age to the *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit, produced by 12th century’s mystic

Joachim of Fiore, as an anticipation of inner-worldly sanctification, which according to Niebuhr and Voegelin alike characterizes a historic dynamic inherent in supposedly secular societies. Both refer to sectarian movements in early Protestantism as mediators of the great transformation, which lead to the immanentization of the Christian *eschaton*. And both interpret the totalitarian systems of the 20th century as radical outcomes of this transformation.

- 23 It is particularly interesting that Voegelin allows for a further subdivision of the intramundane branch of political religions. He differentiates between idealist and activist versions of immanentizing the *eschaton*, which call for a correlating distinction between two different conceptual accounts of immanent transcendence. "In every wave of the gnostic movement the progressivist and utopian varieties will tend to form a political right wing, leaving a good deal of the ultimate perfection to gradual evolution and compromising on a tension between achievement and ideal, while the activist variety will tend to form a political left wing, taking violent action toward the complete realization of the perfect realm." (Voegelin 1952: 175). Whereas Voegelin expected indications for the idealist, progressivist version of Gnosticism in the political symbolism of the modern western democracies, he spotted the activist version in the totalitarian societies of his time. The fundamental difference Voegelin points out, here, concerns the structure of transcending the factual. Both versions of the Gnostic movement immanentize the *eschaton*, but whereas the revolutionary interpretation of the *eschaton* pushes for the activist completion of human striving for the ideal, the evolutionary interpretation defends the acceptability of a tension between the factual and the ideal that may not be overcome by planned action. Accordingly, the revolutionary eschatology conceptualizes immanent transcendence in terms of a remote state or order of being that will be realized through the full actualization of man's faculties, thereby relativizing transcendence to the status of transient and actively vanquishable remoteness from the factual. To the contrary, the evolutionary eschatology accepts the remoteness of the transcendent. Whereas in the case of the revolutionists the inner-worldly goals are sanctified, in the case of the evolutionists the ideals indeed evoke the utmost commitment to particular goals, but allow the awareness that the final realization of the ideal may transcend man's faculties.
- 24 This distinction in mind, there is good reason to assume that Dewey does uphold a concept of immanent transcendence very similar to the evolutionary version introduced by Voegelin. In fact, Dewey might represent a rather sophisticated variant of the evolutionary stance. Because Voegelin points out that in contrast to the revolutionary proponents of political religion the evolutionists were *content* with a remaining tension between the accomplished and the ideal. This does not exactly correspond to Dewey's standpoint. Dewey is far more skeptical about the immanentization of the *eschaton* than that. According to Dewey there is a principal incongruity between the factual and the ideal; furthermore, it is precisely this incongruity, which unleashes the eschatological furor that is so productive for the accomplishment of particular ends in view. Young Dewey wrote about true religion with clear reference to Hebrew 11, 1: "She would rise to her divine prerogative of life in things unseen, and faith in things yet unrevealed to sense." (Quoted from Kestenbaum 2002: 177). And fifty years later, in *A Common Faith*, we read: "Faith is a kind of anticipatory vision of things that are now invisible because of the limitations of our finite and erring nature." (*Ibid.*: 183). The deictical expressions "yet" and "now" indicate the principal incongruity between the factual and the ideal – you cannot reply:

“May be not yet unrevealed, now still invisible, but wait fifty years.” There is a strong sense of humility in Dewey’s concept of faith that impedes the sacralization of cooperative strivings for the common good.

- 25 Therefore Dewey’s evolutionary understanding of the ideal’s operative reality “in character, in personality and action” (Dewey 1960 [1934]: 48) is fully compatible with his experimentalist and meliorist skepticism against simple-minded progressivism. His concept of immanent transcendence does not just allow for the tension between the factual and the ideal, it rather demands it. Given this reservation it seems by all means plausible, anyhow, to view Dewey’s *A Common Faith* as the philosophical articulation of a particularly American, democratic version of evolutionary intramundane political religion, a version that Robert Bellah (himself referring back to Rousseau) coined America’s *civil religion*. Bellah’s relation to Dewey was ambivalent, though. On the one hand he paraphrases Dewey’s humanism benevolently as seeing “the religious attitude carried in all spheres of life, an open-ended quest to realize the highest ideal values of our common humanity” (Bellah 1986: 82). But he hesitates to attest Dewey’s “religion of democracy,” as he also calls it (Bellah 2006b: 465), its suitability as a proper conceptualization of America’s civil religion. Why so? The arguments sound similar to those put forward by Niebuhr and Voegelin against the immanentization of the *eschaton*. In his meanwhile classical essays on civil religion from the 1960’s and 1970’s Bellah points out that America’s civil religion was the authentic apprehension of a universal and transcendent reality, as it has revealed itself in the common experience of the American people (Bellah 2006a: 238). Without any consciousness of the nation standing under a “higher judgement” (*ibid.*: 244) the tradition of civil religion would become dangerous, but the concept of God according to Bellah, had always been its central symbol. To the contrary, in Dewey’s version of a political religion the concept of God was dispensable, if not a hindrance to the full expression of the core of religiousness.
- 26 Worshipping the nation as well as legitimizing an imperial *raison d’être*, which would hide political purposes behind an aura of sacredness and thereby immunize them against public debate and criticism – according to Bellah these were the perils of an American civil religion without reference to transcendence “with a capital T.” Community formation through a common faith should rather be mediated by the accountability of each individual’s conscience to a higher instance than the particular mundane jurisdiction, in which the body politic has been institutionalized. Even if we consider that Dewey’s version of an evolutionary intramundane political religion differs from the aforesaid revolutionary versions of immanentizing the *eschaton*, which according to Voegelin and Niebuhr alike endanger modern civilization, it remains questionable, whether Dewey’s concept of religion may meet Bellah’s requirements. One might make Hans Joas’ point that Dewey “skips over the particularism of each individual experience and lands [...] in an empty universalism of the democratic ideal” (Joas 2000: 123). According to Joas the motivating force of this merely formal concept remains unfathomable. Therefore, the resilience of a Dewey-style political religion against the sanctification of the factual lacks a symbolic medium that would support modes of self-distancing and thereby help to balance the eschatological vigor unleashed by the common faith. The problem may very well be illustrated by reference to the Christian idea of grace. It implies, as Niebuhr reminds us, the recognition of a hiatus “between the knowledge of the good and the power to do it”; modern conceptions of the *conditio humana* since the Renaissance era, to the contrary, believed,

says Niebuhr, “that man has capacities in himself (either rational or mystical) adequate for the fulfillment of life’s most transcendent goals. Here the Renaissance is equally definitive for modern spirituality.” (Niebuhr 1996: 153f.). The dismissal of the idea of grace takes away a central symbolic means of articulating self-distancing and skepticism about man’s powers to achieve his goals. The problem of Dewey’s common faith is that it lacks a functional equivalent to the symbolic means of self-distancing which are offered by concepts of transcendence “with a capital T.” For sure, Dewey’s common faith is leashed by fallibilism as a central feature of democratic experience. But it does not offer a reservoir of symbolic means to articulate and habitualize a self-image of man that would consolidate and strengthen the fallibilistic attitude as against the vigor of self-transcendence. The commitment to a fallibilistic stance might not be a self-sustaining principle in the conduct of life, and this seems to be the by all means plausible core of Niebuhr’s occasionally unfair criticism of Dewey.

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ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the controversy between Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey about the function of religion and religious institutions in a democratic society. It shows how Dewey positions his concept of a "common faith" within his project of democratic experimentalism, before revisiting Niebuhr's criticism of this concept and particularly its anthropological inclinations. Subsequently, the article highlights the affinity of Niebuhr's interpretation of Dewey's *A Common Faith* to Eric Voegelin's concept of political religions and compares the different concepts of transcendence involved in Dewey's and Niebuhr's thinking (with special focus on Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*). Niebuhr's accusation of a shallow progressivism against Dewey is refuted with reference to Dewey's concept of immanent transcendence. Finally, the potential of Dewey's *A Common Faith* for the clarification of the concept of civil religion is discussed against the backdrop of Robert Bellah's use of this concept.

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