This article explores the conflict between those who find value in religious commitment and others who recommend the complete abandonment of religion. It examines John Dewey’s reflections on religion in order to assess its possible resources for addressing this specific conflict. Dewey’s discussion highlights deep human impulses that a secular perspective should address. But this should be accomplished not through his proposed broadening of religious life, but by promoting these impulses and the community life that responds to them as shared human needs and ideals that go beyond religious commitment.

The future of religion is connected with the possibility of developing a faith in the possibilities of human experience and human relationships that will create a vital sense of the solidarity of human interests and inspire action to make that sense a reality.

– John Dewey (1930), LW 5: 273–4

1. Introduction

The question of the value of religious commitment remains, to put it mildly, an important one. Religious extremism provides a clear example of the negative influence organized religion exerts in various parts of the world. However, many people continue to locate a source of positive guidance within the set of modern rituals and practices found in religion. Their religious commitment may take a number of different forms, including the acceptance of a supernatural interpretation of religious doctrines, and what Kitcher (2007, 133) calls ‘spiritual religion’, where the Bible or other religious texts are viewed as providing a set of moral examples from which to pattern human life and interrelations. When viewed as intimately tied to social practices, rather than as simply the beliefs of separate, isolated individuals, these commitments can be further seen as providing a larger sense of community and shared perspective that contributes to the overall meaning of individual lives. This ongoing social import of religious practice conflicts with another prevalent attitude, recently given pointed expression in what has been called the ‘New Atheism’.1 These commentators
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emphasize the intellectual bankruptcy of religious creeds and doctrines, while further arguing that this very fact undermines all forms of organized religion. From their critical perspective, the proper inference to draw from the demonstrated falsity of religious doctrine is a full-blown secularism, or an even more militant atheistic stance that recommends the complete abandonment of all things religious.

This conflict is not simply an intellectual clash between alternative systems of belief, since, for example, in the case of spiritual religion the literal truth of religious doctrine is rejected. Rather, as I have suggested, it turns on how there remains a continuing attachment to the value of engaging in the religious life, here described in terms of its social role and function, despite an intellectual discrediting of religious orthodoxy that finds little importance in any form of religious commitment. The issue can be brought into clearer focus once we note that the critical approach of the New Atheism tends to focus on religious institutions and doctrines, while offering little discussion of the value many find in religious communities and practices. As a result, their thoroughgoing intellectual dismissal of religion fails to fully engage the question of its possible social import. In addition, their criticisms not only ignore the positive functions many find in the religious life, but emphasize, more or less explicitly, that a secular viewpoint can provide all the significance and value that is indeed fundamental to human existence and fulfillment (Dawkins 2006, 345–374). But for those who see this secular viewpoint as a general assault on those religious communities that give their lives meaning, this remains an obscure option at best. It is difficult not to view the strategy of the New Atheism as continuing to encourage the sort of cultural divisions that generate more fundamental disputes over matters of public concern in the areas of science, religion and democracy. Without a more explicit attempt to recognize the importance of the social dimensions of religious practice, this specific form of the conflict between religion and secularism, and the more pressing public disputes it generates, remains intractable. The challenge is this: is there a way to articulate a perspective that recognizes the social import of religious practice while not remaining exclusively tied to either a religious or secular commitment. Such a stance could portray community values and ideals in terms that both religious and secular groups could recognize as important precisely because they are not promoted as the sole reserve of one group. These ideals could then be seen as shared, while still being understood as providing the kind of social support and meaning that many religious individuals recognize as vital to their daily lives. Without such a perspective, secularists cannot help but see religious commitment as outdated and unnecessary, while the religious will continue to view the secularist option as a meaningless alternative to their own commitments.

This essay examines aspects of John Dewey’s reflections on religion in order to assess its possible resources for addressing this specific challenge. I enlist the help of this American pragmatist for several reasons. He shares the secular rejection of the orthodoxy surrounding religious doctrine expressed by