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The Character of a Pragmatic Historicist Theology

A Response to Reviews of Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Pragmatic Historicism: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000)

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Response to My Interlocutors

[1] It is both an exhilarating and very humbling experience to read and respond to fellow academics who have engaged my work with such seriousness and respect. As Donald Crosby noted in his remarks on *Pragmatic Historicism* this work emerged out of conversation with a wide range of thinkers. It sought to embody a dialogical method of reflection that included the acknowledgement of the influence of others' positions, including those with whom I disagree, on my own and that invited the questioning of my own stance as much as I engaged in rigorous debates with the stances of others. It is in this dialogical spirit that I first wish to thank David Weddle and Donald Crosby for the care with which they read and responded to my work. And it is in this spirit that I will attempt to respond to some of the issues raised by Weddle and Crosby.

[2] All of the questions or criticisms raised by my respondents deserve a considered response. In this context, however, I will need to highlight those concerns I take to be most important and about which I actually have something to say. I will turn first to Donald Crosby's remarks and then to David Weddle's. Crosby raises a question that has haunted much of the western world from when historicism, with its recognition of contingency and fallibility, took hold in the nineteenth century. In Crosby's words, "how . . . can we retain a depth of religious commitment and belief in the face of pragmatic historicism's claim to the contingency and limitation of our cultural and historical settings? How should we *stake our*

lives on beliefs, outlooks, and practices of these settings that this claim bids us recognize as fallible, contestable, restricted, and relative?" These questions do not pertain to pragmatic historicism exclusively. They have been part and parcel of western thought since the early dreams of the Enlightenment were eroded by the limits put on reason by Hume and Kant. They took new form with Marx and Nietzsche and Freud as well as the growing historicism of the nineteenth century that disputed the universality of reason and linked knowledge to language and temporal and physical location. In the religious sphere these questions gained particular pertinence as the assaults first of the Enlightenment and then of historicism undermined claims to uncontested knowledge in revelation, reason, experience, and finally historical sources. The rise of biblical studies and its assertion, beginning with Spinoza in the seventeenth century, that the Bible should be treated like all other human literature, the Kantian limitation of reason to the empirical realm, the Troeltschian attack on all efforts to ground belief in what he termed "the supernatural apologetic" and eventually even the Barthian assertion that the appeal to experience was simply a form of idolatrous self-reference all destabilized any self-confident religiosity in the modern world. Add to this the growing recognition of the plurality and diversity of religious and cultural beliefs and practices that have marked our expanding global awareness for the last several centuries and the intensified recognition that religious beliefs and practices are part of culture, not some separate realm, it becomes clear that Crosby's question is a central one for modern and now postmodern persons.

[3] There have been many responses to these developments from Schleiermacher's attempt to claim a form of universal experience while maintaining that theologies and particular religious practices were thoroughly historical and hence contingent to Barth's appeal not to reason, experience, or history but to a radical revelation that differed from all other forms of human knowledge and that simultaneously pointed to the thoroughly fallible, indeed sinful character of all human beliefs and practices. Others, accepting the historicism of all human claims, have turned to living within particular traditions seeking vital life there without pretension of either universal or absolute truth. Some continue to make claims for their positions and communities as if the last several centuries had never taken place. And many others in western and indeed every society have concluded that religious commitments are passé, no longer possible or of interest. Indeed, given what has happened in the latter part of the year 2001, for many religion appears quite dangerous.

[4] Where does the pragmatic historicist fit in here? Is religious commitment ruled out because she/he lives out of the assumption of the contingency, fallibility, and the relative character of all beliefs and practices? In response to this question I would like to make several comments and then give an example. First, religious commitment is only ruled out if one assumes that to be religious requires belief in claims to absolute truth, the universal applicability of one's values, and the non-historical character of one's practices. Such necessity would surely rule out many persons today. Moreover, to insist that being religious entails such a stance leads to religious persons living bifurcated lives, making assumptions about their religious beliefs and practices that are often considered untenable about all other human ideas and activities. Or again, assumptions about the absoluteness, universality, and non-historical character of religious beliefs not only lead to internal divisions in individual humans but present profound difficulties in relation to the multiplicity of human religious

traditions. Either we are forced to assume, as have perennialists, that all these are really up to the same thing and that differences are epiphenomenal and ultimately unimportant, or we are forced to disregard all other claims to validity or meaning assuming that one tradition is true and good and all others false. Historicism, precisely by stressing the fallible and relative character of all religious traditions, provides a way to recognize the plural and diverse ways in which humans have developed religious modes of thought and action thus opening the way for various communities and traditions to both challenge and become resources for one another.

[5] Lurking in much of the discussion about whether a recognition of historicity undermines religious potential or not is, I think, a deeper assumption that religious beliefs are totally or substantially different from other kinds of beliefs and practices, that religion is some kind of *sui generis* dimension of reality that plays by different rules than other areas of human life. Such assumptions have indeed characterized certain strands of thought in the last several centuries but viewing religion in such a manner has not necessarily vitalized it or protected it from the encroachment of, from different directions, science and historical consciousness, nor provided a way for religious persons to deal with our emerging global context. Indeed, as the above comments indicate these assumptions have resulted in both the bifurcation between the individual's religiosity and the other aspects of his/her life and in the inability to account for and deal with a radically pluralistic world. But this separation has also, especially in the western world, had other social and cultural implications. It has been manifested most clearly in the privatizing and subjectivizing of religion in a way that has rendered it either ineffective or problematic in the wider cultural realm. The purported separation of church and state, public and private and religious and secular are all embodiments of these developments. This has meant that, on the one hand, the public role of religious convictions, values and practices are technically delegitimized while, simultaneously, our ability to trace and understand the actual role they continue to play is obscured. But if religion is part of culture as many thinkers, including a wide range of theologians from pragmatic historicists to post-liberals, have contended, then it, like all other elements of culture, is historical, particular and bears all the marks of human thought and action. Our religious beliefs and practices are thus relative and contingent like other human claims and activities but they are also interpreted as significant forms of culture that shape and are shaped by their histories and contemporary contexts. Religion becomes not only what one does in the depths of one's subjectivity but more importantly what one does as a member of historical communities that are also political, economic, and social realities. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, tracing the changes in our perceptions of religion from those articulated in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, contrasts contemporary views with those of William James. For James, according to Geertz, "'religion' or 'religiousness' . . . is a radically personal matter, a private, subjective, deep-experience 'faith-state'" (169). For Geertz, religion, while deeply personal, must now be interpreted in relation to collective life, politics and power. In his words "'experience,' pushed out the door as a radically subjective, individualized 'faith state,' returns through the window as the communal sensibility of a religiously assertive social actor" (178). Pragmatic historicism provides us with tools for understanding and taking account of religious beliefs and practices as what Geertz calls "outdoor occurrences, *plein air*

proceedings in the public square" (169) that notions of religion as universal, absolute, and ahistorical simply do give us.

[6] But if pragmatic historicism gives us tools of analysis does it at the same time rule out a vital life lived in the midst of the recognition of our historicity? The final answer to this lies not so much in arguments but in whether pragmatic historicists in fact think that their deepest "religious aspirations" can be lived out of this vision of reality and whether they can find communities that will nurture and embrace such a way of life. Henry Levinson offers, I think, a testimony to precisely this kind of religious life in his article "Rorty, Diggins, and the Promise of Pragmatism." I ended *Pragmatic Historicism* with a meditation on the tragic character of historicism, its recognition of limitation and contingency and the call to live, humbly but hopefully, within those boundaries. Levinson, interestingly identifies a different way of being religious, what he calls, indicating his own religious location, a festive Jewish American naturalism and pragmatism. Building on George Santayana and Richard Rorty, Levinson calls for a loving embrace of our fragile contingent world. "My effort," he states, "is to celebrate joy without transcendence, responsibility without theology or existentialism, science without scientism, coherence and clarity without essentialism, inquiry without foundationalism, reason without representationalism, chance without chaos, sufficiency without certainty and, all the way up through wit's end, the love of life in the consciousness of impotence." (39). For him this embodies not a tragic view of life but a festive one in the face of the vicissitudes of finite existence. It, moreover, does not suggest the rejection of historical communities or practices but rather sees their vitality in their very indefiniteness and in their ability to be modified or changed (40). Finally for Levinson, this is a comic, celebratory vision of the religious life. Near the end of his essay, Levinson states:

By "comic" I mean . . . a view that takes joy as seriously as it does meanness. Comedy . . . doesn't blink when it encounters suffering, absurdity, and evil. To the contrary, it insists on highlighting them. But it doesn't lend these things any romantic grandeur. Instead, it finds ways to celebrate "passing joys and victories in the world." Rather than revealing, or pretending to reveal, ways to triumph over finitude in some fantasy world of transcendence and eternal bliss, comic vision makes suffering, absurdity, and evil mean and tries to find festive ways to cope with them, ways geared to foster "more joyful life in a lasting world" (40).

To embrace the contingent world with love and joy, not certitude and claims of absoluteness, may not be sufficient for all persons but Levinson suggests, and I concur, that it is enough for pragmatic historicists.

[7] David Weddle raised several issues in his comments, but central among them was his concern about the interpretation of traditions, especially religious traditions, that was developed in *Pragmatic Historicism*. There were really two parts to his concerns. The first was whether we do not need an understanding of traditions that is more essentialist in nature, that help us identify those elements within any given tradition that give it its defining character. My resistance to essentialist renderings of traditions seemed, to Weddle, to lead to too radical an indeterminacy and an inability to "ever establish the integrity of a tradition . . ." In the book I argued for an understanding of traditions as dynamic historical developments

that lacked stable essences or cores that were unchanging over time or were manifested within every formation of a particular tradition. I did not argue that religious traditions had no defining characteristics but only that these were historical and such characteristics could only be known by tracing the particular, always internally diverse and plural, ways in which a tradition took shape over time. Such a procedure would surely indicate specific, concrete elements that make a tradition what it is in its manifoldness but it would not assume that there were certain core elements that were always present or that, by definition, such elements were never present in other traditions.

[8] By way of broadening the dialogue and also strengthening my own argument I want to turn to the work of Jonathan Z. Smith. In a classic article, entitled "Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism," Smith articulates a view that I think resonates with that expressed in *Pragmatic Historicism*. Smith's essay is concerned with the character of early Judaism and the difficulty of establishing the boundaries of its identity when internal diversity and overlap with other traditions seem so significant. In this essay he turns for help to the historical debates in biological sciences concerning classification. First, he points to the system of ordering labeled taxonomy. Taxonomies seek to determine, among other things, what features must be included in order to render something a member of one grouping rather than another. In Smith's words, "in both theory and practice, taxonomies are determined by monothetic procedures and presuppositions, the quest for a single item of discrimination, the *sine qua non* - that without which a taxon would not be itself but some other" (2). Thus, for Smith, classical taxonomy "held that all members of a given taxon invariably shared common features" (3). When applied to religious traditions such a taxonomic approach propels us in the direction of seeking unchanging and historically stable essences. The quest is to discover what is always present and without which a tradition or religious configuration would not be itself.

[9] Smith also notes a second approach embodied in more evolutionary approaches. Here "time was factored into the system, and the logical definition of class by the possession of common and distinctive attributes was replaced by an historical definition of class as descended from a common ancestor. The logical *prior* gave way to the historical *primordium*" (4). In this approach identity is established less by substantive continuity and more by purported lineage. When applied to religion this suggests that what makes a tradition one thing rather than another has to do with its origins. For Smith, each of these approaches has yielded interesting things in both biological science and in the study of religion. But neither is adequate to the complexity, dynamism, and mutability of historical and indeed biological reality.

[10] Smith thus turns to another approach. Building on the work of eighteenth century thinker Michel Adanson and twentieth century theorists Morton Beckner, Robert Sokol, and Peter Sneath, he argues for what he terms a polythetic mode of classification. This approach does not decide ahead of time what characteristics are most definitive - that is uncovered through analysis. But even more importantly a polythetic approach suggests that every "class," or in our case religious tradition, is characterized by a large number of properties "with each property to be possessed by a 'large number' of individuals in the class, but no single property to be possessed by every single member of the class" (4). The ramifications of this approach are several fold. First, it suggests a variety of ways of organizing the

properties or characteristics. Depending upon the arrangement, various members of a group will appear closer or farther away from each other while remaining part of the group. This polythetic approach thus demonstrates how someone can be Jewish or Christian or Buddhist and yet share little in common with others claiming that designation. As Smith states, "if the class contained a large population, it would be possible to arrange them according to the properties they possessed in common in such a way that each individual would most closely resemble its nearest neighbor and least closely resemble its furthest" (4). At the various ends of the spectrum there would be little overlap. A polythetic mode of classification hence allows us to attend to various kinds of continuities without making any one characteristic the sole determining factor for inclusion in a group. Second, this method orients researchers to historical developments and changing characteristics of a tradition; it allows any analysis of a tradition to detail not only what are now clearly shifting commonalities but also to acknowledge differences within a tradition without assuming deviance or lack of identity. And finally this nonessentialist approach does not seek a set of characteristics that one tradition has exclusively thus setting it off from all others. Instead, by claiming that any tradition has a wide range of properties that no individual member ever embodies totally also gives us a way to understand how traditions and individuals might share characteristics without being collapsed into one another. For example, Jews of the ancient world might share some things in common with one another but, depending upon the individual or group, many other attributes with non-Jews while still remaining Jews.

[11] None of this is to say that individuals or groups within a tradition might not claim certain characteristics as normative or as the best the tradition might offer. Such judgments are being made all the time as persons contend for the past and futures of traditions. But in terms of the historical identification and delineation of traditions such procedures are problematic. As scholars of religion it is incumbent upon us first to develop modes of classification that give us access to the wide range of historical realities in all their variety, not rule out certain developments, practices, beliefs, or values by ahistorical fiat or by the surreptitious introduction of normative claims under the guise of description.

[12] Weddle also suggests another set of questions about the nature of tradition or traditionedness. Not only do I not have, according to him, a strong enough sense of the essences of traditions I also seem to argue for the multi-traditionedness of human life, that is, I propose that persons' identities are not set definitively by singular traditions but emerge at the crossroads of multiple traditions. The above discussion of a polythetic approach to interpreting religious traditions points to the internal instability and diversity within traditions. In *Pragmatic Historicism* I stressed several further dynamics. First, I asserted that traditions in fact often emerge or gain transformed identities through encounter and exchange with other religious traditions or cultural strands. Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris refers to this process as a symbiosis of religions in which through the challenge of encounter with other traditions a tradition "discovers and renames itself in its specificity in response to the other approaches" (161). For Pieris this is more than the commonplace negotiation of identity in a pluralistic world but the profound alteration of character that emerges from encounter and dialogue. John Cobb also refers to something like this when he speaks of a Buddhized Christianity and a Christianized Buddhism (46). In both of these

approaches not only are the boundaries between traditions permeable but virtually everything is up for grabs in the dynamic moment of historical encounter.

[13] But, as Weddle rightfully notes, I want to go further than simply pointing to permeability of borders between positions or the internal diversity within traditions. I also want to suggest that for some persons, both historically and on the contemporary scene, primary identification is not wrought within a tradition but out of several strands of influence. For Weddle such a claim is problematic for according to him such plural location is impossible and at its heart denies the very notion of traditionedness for which much of *Pragmatic Historicism* argues. In response, I want to suggest that there are a number of different ways in which the plural character of identities take shape. First, there is the one suggested above in which either a tradition or an individual identity within a tradition is shaped and transformed by another tradition or set of cultural influences. Second, there is Weddle's own example of persons who move from tradition to tradition each time having an identity shaped within the confines of his/her current locale. One might call this a seriatim identity. Thirdly, there are those persons who see themselves as simultaneously immersed within more than one tradition at once. They are Buddhist and Shinto, Catholic and practitioners of the Mayan cosmo-vision, citizens, if you will, of more than one country at the same time and often a citizen of none. It is this last possibility that Weddle finds so hard to imagine. In contrast to Weddle I find such a possibility reflective of many persons today and of what Geertz calls a world in pieces. Geertz argues that we need new "ways of thinking that are responsive to particularities, to individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities, responsive to what Charles Taylor has called 'deep diversities,' a plurality of ways of belonging and being" (224). Geertz goes on to say that "there are nearly as many ways in which such identities, fleeting and enduring, sweeping and intimate, cosmopolitan or closed in, amiable or bloody minded, are put together as there are materials with which to put them together and reasons for doing so" (225). Identities do not now, if they ever did, form an "orderly" or "stable" structure. There is no doubt that this way of speaking points to the fragmentariness, the splintered worlds within which many persons live, but it also gives us tools for tracing those identities in ways that do not simply ignore their existence. It also, as Geertz notes, raises for us new questions such as "what is a culture if not a consensus" or what is a country if not a nation? We might add what is a religious tradition without a stable essence or what is an individual's identity when formed at the crossroads and borders of multiple locales? It is precisely this kind of world we live in and it is precisely these kinds of questions *Pragmatic Historicism* seeks to engage.

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