



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 4 (2002)

The Character of a Pragmatic Historicist Theology

A Review 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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Commentary and Questions

[1] There is much to admire in this original and provocative attempt to formulate a way of doing theology at "the intersection of traditions." While Davaney can describe her project as "an argument for the appropriateness of pragmatic historicism as a mode of Christian theology" (x), her sights are set on the wider horizon of a "theology not confined to one given tradition" (xi). What she offers is a "trajectory" of thought cast forward with hope for the flourishing of human life in the twenty-first century. For that noble aim alone this book is to be highly commended.

[2] Davaney's central achievement is to gather the various strands of current academic theology under a single comprehensive method, with a distinguishing label. It is a synthesis finely discriminated from its chief alternatives - the postliberalism of George Lindbeck and the revisionist theology of David Tracy - by being more generously inclusive of other traditions than the former and more rigorously critical of classical authority than the latter. As for deconstructive atheologists, such as Mark C. Taylor, she devotes only a footnote, dismissing the approach as asocial in its emphasis on subjectivity, as well as ahistorical in its scant attention to the past. (She does not apparently find the ironic surface of Las Vegas as glittering a model of postmodern existence as Taylor does.)

[3] Although fully appreciative of the need for self-conscious theoretical construction, Davaney insists that a "full-bodied historicism" must also include the natural and social

sciences as "conversation partners" (59). By contrast, theological methods that lay claim to truths "outside" the material world are laboring under a delusion. The new historicist broom sweeps away the dust of metaphysical privilege. There remains no divine revelation, no mystic intuition, no authoritative past, no universal moral duties and, presumably, no natural rights. These denials are not novel - although it is a rather recent fashion that they are voiced by theologians - but even thinkers Davaney most admires for holding similar views fail to carry them through with the same relentless energy she displays. Not even William Dean, who has carried the flag for historicism with sustained enthusiasm, can match the scope of inclusion Davaney's method requires. She accuses him of locating the theologian in a "narrowly circumscribed tradition" because he admits that the "size" of any interpretation must finally set a limit on how much ambiguity and difference it can embrace if for no other reason than to preserve the sanity of the interpreter! Davaney finds him lacking the nerve to go all the way into "multitraditioned" existence. But I believe him brave enough, and honest enough, to confess that it is impossible to live in a historicist world without some shred of historic identity.

[4] Now it may be that "multitraditioned" means simply "shaped by more than one strand of history, weaving together inheritances from varied historical lineages" (37). But if that is all the term signifies, I imagine both Lindbeck and Dean would be surprised to find such a commonplace raised as a criticism of their positions. Who would deny that each of us in this age of global connections is not shaped by more than one strand of history or that each of us is not daily called to prefer one inheritance over another in shaping our future? But do those quotidian negotiations constitute living in multiple streams of dynamic beliefs, values, and institutions simultaneously? Ironically, it is precisely the persuasiveness of Davaney's own arguments for the strongly "traditioned character of human existence," that leads me to question whether it is possible to participate, in ways determinative of personal identity, in the fluid flow of several traditions concurrently. The very metaphors count against the prospect: as one cannot step into the same stream twice, so one cannot step into two streams at once. The more seriously one takes the integrity of traditions, even with their permeable boundaries, the more difficult it is to take seriously the notion of being "multitraditioned."

[5] That one might "cross over" into another tradition and "cross back" with enhanced understanding of one's own faith - the sort of exercise Diana Eck reports in *Encountering God* - cannot be denied. But even as inclusive a theologian as Eck does not claim to be both Christian and Hindu at the same time. I suspect that the term "multitraditioned" transfers the value of social inclusiveness that is central to Davaney's procedural pragmatism into the domain of individual virtue. But if "multitraditionedness" cannot be attained within the limits of a finite existence, is it not an ahistorical ideal of the sort historicism ought to eschew?

[6] This question of consistency is not unlike those Davaney raises about other historicists. It is bracing to read her unyielding critical analysis, especially her respectful but unmistakable disappointment with such mentors as Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague, who fail to carry the implications of historicist method to their ultimate conclusions. Davaney notes that Kaufman regards "the categories of God, Christ, humanity and the world" as the "peculiar structure of Christianity" (89) and, despite his insistence that these categories are strictly

formal and thus empty apart from concrete historical content, the very fact that he identifies the Christian tradition by means of this "categorical scheme" scents his work with the whiff of "lingering essentialism."

[7] But how on earth is one to distinguish one's own tradition from others - if not by some device as innocuous as Kaufman's categories? Davaney answers that religious traditions are "not reducible to either material or abstract essences but are conglomerations of all that has developed throughout their history." But given the messy and overlapping edges of religious traditions, how could one ever determine which "conglomeration" of events belonged to which history? That is, how could one ever establish the integrity of a tradition with enough clarity to determine whether one even belonged to it? Given Davaney's emphasis on the necessity of the individual's being "traditioned," this indeterminacy about how to identify a tradition would seem to be not only a theoretical problem for her method, but also a serious existential dilemma. While Kaufman may not know how to fill the category "Christ," he does know that the attempt to do so is what constitutes his membership in the Christian tradition.

[8] Further, it is not only for himself that Kaufman's "abstract" formulation of Christian theology has been efficacious. Many of us have found that it is precisely by means of such abstraction that we have been liberated from the concrete content of creeds, confessions, and crusades that would otherwise constitute our "traditioned" identity. If, on the other hand, my identity as a Christian theologian is defined by my imaginative and prayerful answers to questions about God, Christ, world, and humanity, then I am both free from the authority of past doctrines and also secure in my "traditionedness." In Davaney's version of historicism, however, we must remain forever free-floating - intentionally crossing "the boundaries of our inheritances" to create syncretistic, even idiosyncratic, traditions (111) - in a way that seems again theoretically ideal, but practically impossible.

[9] Perhaps this is only another way of asking whether Davaney finally succeeds in exorcising what she calls "the specter of relativism that has haunted historicism" ever since Troeltsch (11). Does she make good on the claim that in a fully-developed historicism "judgment and adjudication are not impossible" among competing forms of human existence (25f)? She offers us the procedural guideline that disputes must be aired in public, generating "a commitment to radically inclusionary strategies and democratic practices" (162), leading to "local consensus." The pragmatic historicist occupies "a tentative, temporary, and continually revisable place to stand that responds to the needs at hand and contributes to the wider possibilities of life" (166). For such infinite adaptability one does not perhaps so much stand anywhere as dance everywhere. But is it adequate to trust the task of human liberation to procedures that "flow from our lack of certitude about any universal norms" and thus only conserve a "place of negotiation and debate" (186)? Or is historicism another name for unending conflict?

[10] What seems to deliver Davaney from relativism here is her insistence that we are able to make tentative and partial judgments about the relative adequacy of theological proposals on the basis of their pragmatic value in caring for those excluded and disadvantaged and in promoting responsibility for the natural world. But surely these tests imply a hierarchy of values that is both universal and deeply moral. Seeking to avoid any such "essentialist" views, Davaney quotes Linell Cady to the effect that the ought of public responsibility is derived

from nothing else but the is of our common world, our shared participation in nature and history. But it is a familiar observation in the history of ethics that moral duty never arises from the mere description of the given. It is precisely in the difference between any state of affairs and it is better that moral vision and passion are born. To envision that difference requires some capacity to transcend, at least in imagination, the limits of our historical location.

[11] Let me be blunt: is historicism as the cure worse than essentialism as the disease? If men and women of noble intention are inspired by a sense of essential solidarity with other humans and are moved to acts of beneficence, even sacrifice, in the cause of peace and justice, can it be fairly said that their ideas fail the pragmatic test of living "fruitfully and responsibly within our complex and interdependent universe"? They struggle against the provincial morality and instrumentalist politics of their own traditions, not to enter into the free association of a normless conversation, but to claim a universal vision compelling all humans toward mutual respect. They have inspired campaigns against slavery, torture, poverty, and tyranny - all on the ground that those who are free and safe and wealthy are essentially one with those who are not. It is the acknowledgement of a common nature, endowed with inalienable, i.e., ahistorical rights, that has driven the greatest advances in the human condition. But if essentialist claims so contribute to "the wider possibilities of life" (162), then must not pragmatism validate their efficacy and, in so doing, render unstable its synthesis with historicism?

[12] Let me conclude near the end of the book, where Davaney describes "philosophical fellow travelers." The analysis is clear as always, the criticism consistent, and the conclusion foregone. None - except perhaps Cornel West - manage to include all the marks of a "theology for the twenty-first century." The entire collection includes non-foundationalist epistemology, non-absolutist ethics, non-essentialist anthropology, non-restrictive personal membership in multiple religious traditions and subtraditions, non-acceptance of traditional grounds of religious authority, and untiring criticism of the deployment of power by social and political institutions. The end of this relentless *via negativa* is to gain a hearing for pragmatic historicism as a method of theological reflection in both the university and the public square. In that respect, the book may be read as one sustained speech, defending theology to its cultured despisers, a strenuous *apologia pro vocatione nostra*. Thus, each of us engaged in the profession, even if not the confession, of theology has a stake in the outcome of Davaney's argument. So that is why you should read and - as a pragmatic, if not essential, act of solidarity - buy her book.