Pragmatism and Christian Theology: Friends or Foes?
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The Promise of Pragmatism for Theology

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

I chose the theme for this issue for at least two reasons. First, like many students of American pragmatism, I have grown weary of the unreflective and largely pejorative use of the terms pragmatism and practical in United Methodist discourse. As Tyron Inbody points out in his article, this sophomoric engagement with pragmatism reduces this important philosophical tradition to morally and intellectually dubious motives about "what works." As a consequence, the much more important question about the possible benefits of a serious exchange between Wesleyan/Methodist theology and pragmatism fails to receive attention.

The second reason for selecting the current theme is hinted at in the subheading of Inbody's article about Methodism and pragmatism: Does an earnest engagement with pragmatism portend "promise" or "peril" for Wesleyan/Methodist theology? As several of the authors point out, it is a common perception that pragmatism is inhospitable, if not downright hostile, to religion and religious concerns. In part, this perception is evidence of the pervasive ignorance about the enduring interest in religious matters on the part of pragmatists such as William James. Yet I suspect that more than ignorance is at work here. I can't help but surmise that the putative antagonism of pragmatism to matters religious has been exacerbated by the often puerile broadsides at religion by some neopractitionists, most notably by pragmatism's enfant terrible, Richard Rorty (at least in his earlier work).

All of the authors in this issue disabuse readers of the notions that pragmatism prima facie poses a threat to religious thought or prohibits a fruitful exchange. So Stuart Rosenbaum employs pragmatist thought to critique the Enlightenment categories and assumptions that still too often govern debates about the legitimacy of the religious life and of religious institutions in culture. Drawing on pragmatism's "orientation to practice,"
he offers resources for empowering religious life and religious institutions as indispensable repositories of traditional and evolving human values.

Robert Neville addresses head-on the popular image that pragmatism “is dismissive of truth in favor of opportunistic belief”—a view that, if true, would ipso facto cancel its usefulness to theology. In a wonderfully lucid essay, Neville uses his theory of “symbolic engagement” to recast the meaning, reference, and truth of theological statements in a pragmatic register. Far from leading to philosophic disengagement with religious life, and opposing arbitrary commitment to some “founding authority” so characteristic of all manner of fideisms, a pragmatic approach to theology’s truth “leads directly into greater attachment and commitment that may lead to correction of our understanding.”

In his article about pragmatism and scriptural authority, Clifton Guthrie notes that the customary Protestant appeal to sola Scriptura for solving conflicting biblical interpretations or theological disputes simply has not worked. Indeed, it has led to a methodological “stuckness”—a stalemate that, interestingly, has prompted many Protestant Christians to solve their interpretive troubles along pragmatic lines in order to get on with shared projects. Guthrie calls them “weak pragmatists.” His own “strong pragmatism” incorporates these weak pragmatist tendencies in an argument that articulates what everyone—“weak” and “strong” pragmatist alike—already knows: Scripture’s authority is derivative and not foundational; its authority is a function of its inherence in whatever “theological world” a person or group inhabits.

As Tyron Inbody notes in his article, surprisingly little of substance has been written on Methodism and pragmatism. Thus, whether or not a fruitful exchange between these two traditions is possible (or, for some, desirable) is an open question. Inbody has no doubt about the benefit of such a dialogue. Pragmatism’s understanding of the interdependence of belief and practice and its experimental conception of truth can enrich Methodism’s deep commitment to theology as “practical divinity”—of doctrine as contextual formulations of faith for the sake of the transformation of life.

My hope is that these essays will show that a fruitful dialogue between pragmatism and Christian theology is not only possible but also eminently desirable.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review.
Pragmatism and Christian Theology: Friends or Foes?

Pragmatism's Empowerment of Religious Life

STUART ROSENBAUM

Many intellectuals who address issues of religion tend to be apologists and defenders of what they see as the essentials of religious faith; C. S. Lewis and Alvin Plantinga come quickly to mind. Other intellectuals who focus on issues of religion tend to be skeptics, who try to undermine what they see as the essentials of religious faith; Bertrand Russell and Edward Wilson come quickly to mind. The focus of most intellectuals where religion is concerned is attack or defense; and specific ideas about religious belief and its justification support their intellectual consideration of matters religious.

This apologetic perspective toward issues of religion is pervasive. Almost anyone concerned to live a constructive and responsible life probably thinks he or she needs to be able to give account of his or her religious views and the reasons for them. Thus, professionals of every sort—physicians, attorneys, musicians, and others—along with those who practice various crafts—business, farming, building, and others—usually feel a need to be able to take a defensible stand on issues of religious faith and belief.

This observation about customary intellectual engagement with issues of religious belief is not a philosophical or a religious observation. Probably it qualifies as a sociological observation, or, more modestly, an armchair observation about American culture and standard American forms of engagement with issues of religion. Nevertheless, to be able to make such a quasi-sociological observation about customary American engagement with issues of religion and to take seriously some implications of that observation are to become empowered to take seriously pragmatic thought about religion.
This kind of quasi-sociological observation is empowering for pragmatic thought about religion precisely because pragmatism enables different ways of thinking about how to engage religion intellectually: it "objectifies" a typical sort of intellectual engagement with issues of religion. Once this typical mode itself becomes an object of reflection, alternative modes of intellectual engagement with religion may come into focus and may begin to seem viable. So it was, for example, with William James, one of the premier pragmatists in the American pantheon.

James refused to engage religion in the customary philosophical way typical of C. S. Lewis, Bertrand Russell, Alvin Plantinga, Edward Wilson, and many others. He saw that religious belief is not a simple matter of having or being able to provide evidential justification for one's beliefs. For him, philosophy of religion, along with its usual obsession with justification of belief, is largely irrelevant to responsible religious living and thinking. In James's view, and among pragmatists generally, beliefs of all kinds—and especially religious beliefs—become a part of normal life. No longer is religion isolated in an austere world of intellect and evidence.

This point about religion among pragmatists can be put by saying that pragmatists regard religion as an integral part of the lived worlds of normal human beings. They see religion as a mode of human practice in much the same way as they see science, morality, business, and etiquette as such modes. Consequently, pragmatists do not accord pride of place epistemologically or ontologically to any one of these modes of human practice. Science, for example, has no priority as an institution of human practice over the human institutions of religion and morality.

The way they think about belief is one symptom of the significant way in which pragmatists differ from other intellectuals. In its very concept, belief becomes an integral part of individual character, habit, and personality—a practical way individuals address issues of all kinds, from the most mundane to the most significant. Like one's character, habit, and personality, so one's beliefs are subject to various kinds of developmental influences. As peer groups and traditions notoriously affect one's values and behaviors, so do they affect one's beliefs. In some complex way, individual beliefs are functions of one's psychology as well as one's community and cultural settings. They are not unique psychological states that somehow, because of a determined focus on evidence, succeed or fail to succeed according to what is real. Belief is no longer a matter of epistemic responsi-
bility or irresponsibility. This pragmatic way of thinking about belief finds forceful expression in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, and it remains prominent in the most representative thinkers associated with pragmatism.

Pragmatists depart from conventional Anglo-European ways of thinking both about beliefs that are usually taken for granted in philosophical and theological thought and about knowledge, reality, and value. Understanding how and why pragmatists think differently about these things requires much reading in and thinking about some classical sources in the American tradition of pragmatism. Rather than focusing on these differences, in this article I concentrate on some empowering dimensions of the pragmatic tradition for religious life and thought and on their consequences for philosophy and theology.

In what follows, I discuss two ways in which pragmatism empowers religious living. First, religious beliefs are as much a part of ordinary life as are scientific and moral beliefs and even beliefs about etiquette. Religion is a normal human practice and is justified in the same way all human institutions are justified, namely, through its useful contributions to human life. Second, narrative modes of discourse become primary in religious thought—indeed, in all thought. Pragmatists acknowledge and accept the psychological power of stories in the formation and development of individual psyches, and they seek to turn thinking generally—not just religious thinking—toward narrative modes of discourse.

Religion as Part of Ordinary Life

This idea would not be thought unusual were it not for the historical ambitions of the Enlightenment to put the institution of science, along with its sympathetic partner, philosophy, in charge of justifying or legitimating all human practices and institutions. The culmination of these historical, scientific ambitions came during the twentieth century in the movements of Logical Atomism and Logical Positivism. For these twentieth-century movements, led by theorists enchanted by the success of science as an institution, science became a touchstone of truth—an ontological measure of what is and what is not. Values, in whatever form they took (and religion and morality are primary expressions of human values), became theoretically problematic, beginning to seem not legitimate dimensions of the world of fact so successfully exposed by science. In consequence, twentieth-century philosophy sought predominantly to find ways to make
thinking about values coherent with the success of science. Thus, interest theory, emotivism, prescriptivism and, more recently, supervenience theory have sought ways of thinking about value that might explain scientifically—reductively—the role of value in human life. This subjection of value to fact and of all modes of human practice to the authority of science became integral to post-Enlightenment Western intellectual culture.

Pragmatists rebelled against these Enlightenment-rooted, reductive ways of thinking. For pragmatists, the presumption that the single human institution of science, because of its own success, might pretend to adjudicate issues for or pronounce about the legitimacy of other institutions of human culture is inappropriate. William James makes this pragmatic point clearly, but it is John Dewey who drives it home quite forcefully, albeit in his typically low-key rhetoric. Contemporary thinkers who agree with this pragmatic and egalitarian attitude toward institutions of human culture are Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam. Traditional pragmatism, in its most prominent representatives, avoids the presumption of many twentieth-century thinkers about the superiority of science as a human institution.

Pragmatists see all human institutions to be on equal footing in that all constitute modes of common human practice and all are rooted equally in common human needs and interests. From this pragmatic, practice-oriented perspective, science is undoubtedly a legitimate human institution. However, morality and religion are equally legitimate. To be sure, their equal legitimacy is not their utter independence. These institutions interact, and may do so constructively; though none may presume superiority to others. The historical fact of incessant quarreling between science and religion over issues of epistemology and ontology may conveniently disappear once one manages to transcend, as do pragmatists, the Anglo-European issues of epistemology and ontology. When all human institutions become repositories of vaguely circumscribed but distinct practices of human culture, there need be no fundamental conflict among those institutions. However, since the conflict between science and religion is so common in Western intellectual culture, it may seem to need mollification. Why should scientists tolerate Western institutions of religion that have themselves been frequently and aggressively intolerant of science?

At this point in the history of Western culture the institution of science likely needs no apology. However, religious institutions probably do need some efforts to show that they remain legitimate. They need to find and
assert their legitimacy apart from the epistemological and ontological ways in which they have sought to subject science to their own dominion in the past. The claim of the practice-oriented pragmatism that sees religious institutions as legitimate repositories of a broad range of human interests can reveal this legitimacy. Consider the pervasive human interests that find expression in various religions, from Islam to Buddhism to Hinduism to Confucianism to Native American traditions to Catholicism to Southern Baptist Protestants. These religious institutions appear among diverse human communities because of a natural human need for a narrative way of situating oneself and one’s community within the context of an encompassing natural world. This narrative need is universal not in the sense of being part of an ontological “essence” of humanity but rather of being biologically and/or sociologically universal. That is, the need is common to the myriad diverse communities of humans who cluster in the various ecological niches of planet earth. What common human needs and interests do religious institutions address? What is the human need for the rites and rituals of religion?

Jonathan Ree puts his finger nicely on some of those needs in an essay in Harper’s Magazine. Ree agrees with pragmatists that metaphysical and theological issues—“divine and satanic inspiration, let alone the finer points of transubstantiation, angelology, resurrection, or divine rewards and punishments”—are irrelevant to religious life. What is not irrelevant to religious life is “the brevity and oddity of each individual existence, what might be called the tombstone facts of life.” As Ree puts the point:

It is religion that has supplied practically all the phrases, concepts, stories, and images that help us with such impossible tasks as remembering the unthinkable, forgetting the unforgivable, and lingering for a while over a fleeting instant of time. Religions have created prayers and liturgies and buildings and open spaces that may help us see our griefs and perplexities in their indissoluble individuality, but without forgetting their continuities with those of other people and generations. The shocks and aftershocks of love and death call for occasional suspensions of our daily, weekly, and annual rounds; and off the top of our heads we are unlikely to dream up new forms of interruption as well suited to our needs as those that we have inherited from religions. Much can be said about these human needs and interests that are
addressed more or less effectively by religious traditions. What is implausible is thinking that these needs and interests might somehow be transcended by the effective workings of any other human institution (science being the usual candidate). When, as pragmatists do, one puts aside the metaphysics and epistemologies of supernatural religion, what remains is the human being with her needs. Regardless of the advances in science in recent decades, it has not allowed humanity to finesse "the tombstone facts of life"—the very needs and interests religious institutions address. Transcending supernatural religion does not mean transcending these human needs.12

For pragmatists, epistemological worries about God and religious institutions disappear, as do similar worries about the epistemological foundation of morality or other institutions of human culture. But, in addition to addressing "the tombstone facts of life," religious institutions have another dimension that supports their legitimacy as human institutions.

Religions are the usual cultural loci of important human values. Think, for example, of Jesus’ parables. The power of those parables finds expression in American culture, and in Western culture generally, in particular people who enable us to see who we are and whom we might become. Without a Martin Luther King, Jr. or a Jimmy Carter, Western culture would be morally impoverished. These cultural heroes embody the standards we use to oppose the Gordon Geckos of the world (the protagonist of the Hollywood film *Wall Street*), who proclaim that greed is good. Without the values and the characters rooted in our religious institutions, Americans and Westerners would likely be even greater moral failures than they are. For all their metaphorical warts, excesses of fervor and practice, ideological rigidities, and all-too-human foibles, religious institutions are a continuing source of moral empowerment for humanity.

**Narrative as the Central Mode of Religious Thought**

The second way in which pragmatism empowers religious life is through the rhetorical priority it accords to narrative discourse over theoretical, dialectical discourse. To make modes of human practice central in all of human life is also to make normal ways of talking about human practice central in thinking about issues of human life. Put differently, narrative modes of thinking are natural when one addresses issues of practice. Any issue of daily life illustrates this point. Suppose I am concerned to saddle a horse for the first time in thirty years. The challenge I face is not that of gathering
the relevant equipment but rather the practical issue of figuring out what to
do. So, I may begin by trying to remember what my grandfather did. What
sequence did he use in applying the bridle, the bit, the blanket, and the
saddle? In other words, in dealing with the challenge before me, I try to
remember a narrative. Failing that, I consult somebody who can help me get
relevant parts of the narrative straight, even if the person cannot quite get
me to my grandfather’s story about the sequence. What I don’t do is engage
in theory. Focusing on what has worked previously or on what one remem­
bers that might illuminate the present issue is inevitably a narrative task
rather than a dialectical task. Theory is largely irrelevant in most aspects of
our daily lives. Practice, know-how—what John Dewey calls “gumption”—
provides the way forward when real conundrums appear.\footnote{13}

This point about the centrality of narrative thought in ordinary life may
be forcefully made, especially for Christians, by recalling the narrative
mode of Jesus’ own thought. Take the parable of the Good Samaritan. The
context for the story is set by Jesus’ claim that the total content of the Law
is twofold: to love God with all one’s might and to love one’s neighbor as
oneself. This context develops when legalists press to get clear about the
content of the Law: who, they ask, is one’s neighbor? Jesus’ answer is
simply to tell the story of the Samaritan. He ignores the transparent invita­
tion to offer an analysis of the concept of “neighbor” and engage in dialec­
tical analysis. Furthermore, in telling the parable, Jesus is not claiming that
everybody is one’s neighbor. Had that been his intent, why not respond
with a direct, discursively satisfying answer? Why make life more difficult
for his followers by avoiding a direct response? But, for Jesus, analytical
discourse in this context was inappropriate. In fact, there is no viable
discursive analysis of “the point” of the parable.

Much other thought in Western culture also brings narrative to the
fore. Bruno Bettelheim’s work on fairy tales is one example. Bettelheim
thinks of children as having common, characteristic psychological needs,
hopes, fears, and anxieties. According to Bettelheim, these needs, hopes,
and fears are addressed most effectively in the literature of fairy tales. The
developing psyches of children confront a troubling world of vast possibili­
ties, many of which are dark and disturbing or extremely unsettling. In the
midst of these unsettling possibilities, fairy tales convey the idea

that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic
The child needs most particularly to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal with these issues and grow safely into maturity. "Safe" stories mention neither death nor aging, the limits to our existence, nor the wish for eternal life. The fairy tale, by contrast, confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments. 

Bettelheim's point is that fairy tales enable, guide, and empower the tender, immature psyches that need the constructive shaping they offer. The rhetoric of narrative again appears more powerful than the rhetoric of theory and dialectic. Rules, even the complex rules of philosophical or theological morality, have neither the constructive power needed to shape immature psyches nor (as the legalists questioning Jesus discovered) the power of parables.

Jerome Berryman has brought this insight about the power of narrative to religious education. In Berryman's method for teaching Bible stories (including parables) to children, there is no method beyond the reiteration, retelling, and acting out of stories and their representation in concrete figures and settings. Berryman insists that religious educators must resist drawing for the children principled, theoretical conclusions from the stories and parables they are presenting. In his method, one must respect the integrity of the story and its significance for individual psyches without succumbing to the temptation to draw universal moral principles from the story. To insist on extracting principles to be "applied" to action is to commit rhetorical violence against the stories and pedagogical violence against one's tender charges.

The larger contemporary intellectual context for this respect for narrative discourse is the American pragmatic tradition. John Dewey's *Art as Experience* is probably the most systematic source within the pragmatist canon for the idea of the centrality of art in general and narrative in particular to all human thought and activity. Dewey makes more than clear throughout his corpus his deep respect for the power of narrative in preference to (what are interestingly his own) discursive modes of intellectual activity. For example, in *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey sees art, drama, and literature as necessary preparations for moral living. In *Democracy and Education*, he sees them as moral necessities.
They have the office, in increased degree, of all appreciation in fixing taste, in forming standards for the worth of later experiences. They arouse discontent with conditions which fall below their measure; they create a demand for surroundings coming up to their own level. They reveal a depth and range of meaning in experiences which otherwise might be mediocre and trivial. They supply, that is, organs of vision. Moreover, in their fullness they represent the concentration and consummation of elements of good which are otherwise scattered and incomplete. They select and focus the elements of enjoyable worth which make any experience directly enjoyable. They are not luxuries of education, but emphatic expressions of that which makes any education worthwhile.

In contrast to the ubiquitous Anglo-European traditions in philosophy and theology, the American pragmatic tradition puts narrative at the center of human intellectual life, because, as Dewey put it, it supplies "organs of vision." Narratives are central to understanding who one is and might become, what one's communities are and might become, and what one's roles are in one's various communities and what they might become. These issues are the center of the many concerns that make human life an affair of hopes and fears, successes and failures. Making one's way through such issues requires organs of vision rather than principles for application.

American pragmatism empowers human religious life by insisting, first, that the religious life, with the institutions that express, sustain, and carry it forward, is as normal and natural a part of human cultures as are those parts of life that find expression in institutions of science, politics, morality, etiquette, and sport. Second, by making the rhetorical strategies of narrative central to human intellectual life, pragmatists brook no invidious comparison of the various institutions of human culture. Each institution may do its work well or poorly, and part of the responsibility humans must shoulder is to engage the failures of institutions and to seek their improvement.

A Consequence of Pragmatism's Orientation to Practice

The most important consequence of pragmatism's orientation to practice in regard to religious institutions is this: intellectual efforts to justify religious beliefs are, as both William James and John Dewey saw, irrelevant to religious life. Apologetics, as conceived by most philosophers and by many theologians, should be of no interest to religious people or to religious intellectuals.
The primary historical motive for apologetics is to sustain the viability of religious (and moral) belief in the face of attacks rooted in the perspectives of Enlightenment science and of Logical Positivism and Logical Atomism. In seeking to defend religion and morality against attacks from scientific perspectives, many intellectuals willingly share the mistaken assumptions of those who, like Bertrand Russell and Edward Wilson, insist on the intellectual illegitimacy of religion and morality.

From a pragmatist perspective, chief among these mistaken assumptions is the notion that science is the metaphysical measure of what is and is not; that is, the institution of science provides humanity with metaphysical facts that must be accommodated by all humans and all human institutions. This assumption is mistaken primarily because it sees belief as a matter of justification and evidence of the sort recognized in science rather than as an ordinary part of individual and community life rooted in habit, disposition, and tradition.

The idea that scientific justification is basic to all justified belief is rooted in the success of science. As human institutions go, science has had a long and successful run and has not really stopped to catch its breath since the church persecuted Galileo. Science's ongoing success has bred a certain presumption among those who, like Russell and Wilson, have participated in and profited from its success. But the idea of scientific justification insisted upon by Anglo-European philosophers who are heir to positivism and atomism is the philosophical twin of the idea of belief as a fixed commitment that matches or fails to match "reality" itself and that is normative—supported or undermined for everybody—relative to a given body of (scientific) evidence.

To realize that the success of science, along with the Anglo-European notions of belief and justification associated with it, is a culturally local, though very significant, phenomenon is to realize also that those ideas of belief and justification are only one human way among others of thinking about them. The typical American pragmatist way of thinking about belief and justification is one of those alternative ways. For pragmatists, a belief is roughly a habit of action; and a justified belief is roughly a resolution of an uncertainty about what to do in a specific situation or how to think about a specific problem. For them, the psychological, social, cultural, and traditional contexts of belief are central to their truth and justification.

Thus, religious and moral beliefs are functions of one's entire character.
and personality and of one's communities and traditions. The question of whether or not such beliefs are justified is the question of whether or not they lead constructively into one's future in all the ways in which one's beliefs may do so. To think of moral and religious beliefs as justified or not relative to the standards of a single institution—science—is arbitrarily or invidiously to impose the standards of that particular institution on other different and equally legitimate human institutions.

Consider a simple example of apologetic effort rooted in this mistaken understanding about science and justified belief. Many religious intellectuals believe they must reject evolution as an account of human origins. Thus, William Dembski, Michael Behe, and Paul Johnson, along with Duane Gish and Henry Morris, think their religious beliefs require them to reject an evolutionary account of the origin of life and of humanity. These proponents of Creationism and Intelligent Design seek to show, scientifically as it were, how the theory of evolution is untenable and misguided. In this effort, however, these Creationists or Creationist sympathizers (Dembski, Behe, and Johnson posture as thinkers focused primarily on the inadequacy of evolution as a scientific theory) accede to the understanding of belief and justification embraced by their scientific and philosophical opponents. Thus, these apologists for religious belief seek to lock intellectual horns with real scientists and to show on scientific grounds that the real scientists are mistaken. One might easily predict that Dembski and company will be no more successful than was the church, ultimately and by its own admission, against Galileo. Numerous sources, both scientific and philosophical, argue against these Creationists and quasi-Creationists who believe, from a misguided sense of fidelity to their religious beliefs, that they have an intellectual responsibility to encroach on the prerogatives, perspectives, and methods of what is now well-established science. These Creationists and quasi-Creationists, wittingly or unwittingly, implicitly accede to the idea of the supremacy of science as a human institution. They acknowledge its authority to adjudicate legitimacy and illegitimacy for other institutions of human culture, in particular the institutions of morality and religion.

According to typically American pragmatic ways of thinking about science, its legitimacy as a tool of human inquiry is assured; but its supremacy as an institution qualified to legitimate or debunk other human institutions is not. Apologetics disappears in the intellectual culture of
American pragmatism simply because science has no stature that might enable it to undermine the human institutions of religion or morality.23

Conclusion

Once one appreciates the pragmatic perspective that takes seriously the natural locus of humanity and human institutions, then one realizes institutions of religion need no defense from intellectual attack. Religious beliefs and religious institutions, like their scientific counterparts, take legitimacy from their expression of distinct human needs and interests and their institutional articulation of important traditional and evolving human values. Moreover, the more natural way to express and gain access to those human values is the narrative way, which is prominent in the foundational religious literature of all cultures and in the literatures and stories that bring humans to maturity and sustain them throughout their lives. American pragmatism is the intellectual context most naturally synchronous with these ideas.

Stuart Rosenbaum is Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Endnotes

4. See, for example, _The Varieties of Religious Experience_, reprinted in Stuart Rosenbaum, _Pragmatism and Religion_ (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), ch. 18.
5. See, for example, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," reprinted in H. S. Thayer, _Pragmatism: The Classic Writings_ (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982).


8. For James, see the opening chapter on “medical materialism” in The Varieties of Religious Experience. For Dewey’s response to positivists and atomists on issues of value generally, see his Theory of Valuation in the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); for his thought about science as a human institution, see The Quest for Certainty, especially ch. 8 and Experience and Nature (1925), vol. 1 of LW, ch. 9.


10. The idea of an ontological essence is anathema to pragmatists; like the existentialists, they focus on humanity and human institutions and reject the idea that ontology is even possible. Again, see Dewey’s The Quest for Certainty.


19. Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty*, especially chs. 1-4, is an extended explanation of this genealogical account of apologetics.

20. A family resemblance appears between this widely accepted pragmatic understanding of belief and justification and the relatively recent tendency among epistemologists to abandon "internalist" theories of justification and to embrace instead "externalist" theories. This move among Anglo-European epistemologists is welcome; but insofar as it remains ignorant of pragmatic understandings of belief, knowledge, inquiry, and justification, externalist theorists remain sequestered from more fruitful, pragmatic, lines of philosophical thought concerning these same issues.

21. See, for example, William James, "The Will to Believe," and "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," in Thayer, *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*. Interpreting these pragmatic remarks about knowledge and truth in the derogatory way typical of those who criticize pragmatic accounts of belief and truth misses entirely the importance of tradition and context in the pragmatic understanding of these ideas. See for example, Bertrand Russell's dismissive treatment of the pragmatic understanding of these ideas in his *A History of Western Philosophy* and in *The Problems of Philosophy*.


Pragmatism and Theology's Truth

ROBERT CUMMINGS NEVILLE

Pragmatism gets bad press, especially in Europe, as a philosophy that actually abandons inquiry into the truth of beliefs for the practice of believing anything that "works." This impression comes from superficial readings of essays such as William James's "The Will to Believe." Superficially, James seems to say that we cannot really know whether there is a God. If there isn't, then there is neither heaven nor hell and it doesn't matter whether we believe in God. But if there is a God, then we can get to heaven if we believe there is. Therefore, let us bet on believing in God because we have nothing to lose and heaven to gain. On this reading, pragmatism seems not to care whether there really is a God, only whether believing there is will get you to heaven. Thus pragmatism, read superficially, seems to finesse the question of truth in favor of "successful" belief. Of course, no pragmatist of James's sophistication would ever accept the simplistic reading of "gaining heaven" by "believing" the right way. Moreover, even in this example, whether heaven is gained depends entirely on the truth of the belief in the existence of God.

Nevertheless, the popular image of pragmatism as dismissive of truth in favor of opportunistic belief is almost unredeemable, and we need to start over with a new look at pragmatism in the context of theology. Pragmatism was a movement begun in the last third of the nineteenth century by Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), who invented the name, and made famous by William James (1842–1910). It was elaborated into a full philosophy by John Dewey (1859–1952) and has continued to inspire philosophers and theologians to this day. While most philosophers contemporary with pragmatism dismissed theology as nonsensical or as too much devoted to institutional authorities, the early pragmatists all were quite interested in religion and used theological analyses to illustrate their points.

In this essay, I discuss pragmatism's contribution to theological truth under three major headings: engagement, meaning and reference, and truth.
Engagement

For most of European modernity, something like Descartes' radical distinction of mind from body has been assumed in philosophy and theology, even as it has been seen to be a problem. The objective world is "out there" in some sense, and certain parts of it might be knowable by science, namely, those "facts" that can be represented mathematically. What we really know, however, is our own minds, our own experience. How can we compare our experience with the objective world to see whether we accurately represent in our mental beliefs what is out there? This is the so-called "problem of representative knowledge": do our mental ideas and beliefs represent what is really real? Rationalist philosophers sought mental intuitions that could determine what the objective world necessarily has to be. Empirical philosophers sought sense impressions within experience that somehow or other must be caused by what is "out there." Neither was a satisfactory solution. Immanuel Kant argued that we know what is "out there" only insofar as it conforms to the sensibility and categories of the human mind. For Kant, we know nothing about things in themselves, only about how they appear to us when they conform to necessary human sensibilities and categories. According to Kant, the human sensibilities and categories do not register any worth or value in things, only sensations as organized according to philosophical and scientific categories. Of course, God (or freedom, immortality, etc.) cannot be known in himself or be fitted into human sensibilities and categories as an appearance. Kant therefore dismissed theology, along with metaphysics, as being noncognitive.

Although many variations on Kant's philosophy have been developed, as well as critical alternatives such as that of Hegel, his resolution to the problem of representative knowledge has been extraordinarily influential. The greatest influence has been the great weight given in recent theology to fideism. Fideism says that theological beliefs are not cognitive in a sense continuous with the rest of what we know in experience but rather are believed "on faith." For most of our cognitive beliefs we have to make cases for their truth, not necessarily through controlled experiments as in science but with some sort of experiential and rational test. Fideistic theological beliefs, however, are based ultimately on our will, not on experiential cases. Faith in this sense is what we will to believe, in a way remarkably
like William James's argument, not what we have reason to believe. Kant is famous for saying that he "limited reason in order to make room for faith."

In late modern theology, fideism has been oriented to the doctrine of revelation. "Revelation" is a text, event, or person in whom we believe because we will to give it authority. For Christian fundamentalists at the beginning of the twentieth century, the revelation was the Bible, understood literally; faith was the willed acceptance of the Bible as authoritative. The most powerful doctrine of revelation in twentieth-century Christian theology was Karl Barth's, according to which the Bible witnesses to a history of divine creation and redemption in Christ—as interpreted by Barth. Barth's story of this history followed more or less the Calvinist Reformed tradition. By contrast, the fideistic doctrine of revelation of Radical Orthodox thinkers such as John Milbank more or less follows the Thomistic-Anglican tradition.

The difficulty afflicting fideistic theology is that it is arbitrary in embarrassing senses. One group wills to authorize the Bible understood literally as the grounding revelation; another wills to authorize a Reformed reading of the divine story, and yet another a Thomistic-Anglican reading. Because such faith is a function of will and not of making a cognitive case, each group can will what it wants and declare those with a different will and those who attempt a cognitive faith to be non-Christian—which is what happened. Astonishingly, all those Christian-revelation fideisms leave the Buddhists, Hindus, Daoists, and Confucians out of their revelatory stories, as if God could be known only through their versions of the Christian story. Of course, the fideistic theologians in those non-Christian traditions do pretty much the same thing in excluding Christian theology. With theological fideism of any sort, all positions are equal in being arbitrary, with the major difference being only "mine versus the others." Needless to say, this arbitrariness has been a dark shadow in twentieth-century theology and arguably a clear danger in contemporary international affairs.

Pragmatism has effected a major revolution that makes theology cognitive again and rejects the entire problematic of representative knowledge, according to which things in the mind are supposed to represent things "out there." The pragmatists say that human thinking is a strategy for engaging reality in ways that discriminate what is important to know about. Thinking is a natural process that has evolved to allow us to discriminate what is good to eat from what is poisonous, what is safe from what is
dangerous. Part of the evolution is the development of a nervous system that allows for sight, smell, hearing, and the rest. Thinking is putting these things together so that we can engage the real world with the right distinctions and recognitions. The evolution of language and more complex systems of signs for cooperative social behavior resulted in a quantum leap forward in complexity of engagement. Without much language, people (and other animals) can discriminate for elementary purposes such as getting food and staying safe. Language, however, not only gives rise to vastly more subtle discriminations but also opens the way to vastly more subtle purposes. Instead of being limited to purposes that have to do with narrowly defined self-interest, we can have altruistic purposes. In fact, we can define our own self-interest to be the pursuit of the purposes most worth having in the world. Things in nature and society are seen to be good not only for us but also in themselves, so that we need to admire and defer to them. We can have the purposes of developing a just society, practicing a piety before the natural worths of things, paying attention to the issues that come up on our watch and doing something about them, pursuing a meaning and value for our lives in ultimate perspective, and being creative so as to make things better. These are the purposes behind the theological virtues of righteousness, piety, faith, hope, and love. We can have the purpose of understanding the meaning of it all and of conforming how we live to what is ultimately most meaningful and valuable. All civilized cultures teach these high purposes more or less well with their language and cultural forms. These are the purposes that lead to theology as the knowledge of God and ultimate matters in human life. Charles Peirce said that the most important questions have to do with what purposes are ultimately most worth having.

On the pragmatic conception of engagement, the "signs" we have are what make it possible to interpret reality. The signs that we have learned with our culture and our personal experience make it possible to discriminate what is important for our purposes, from the elementary to the sublime purposes. When my purpose is to drive to work, I need the signs I learned in driver's education many years ago: how to move the pedals, steer the car, break, accelerate, and parallel park. I also need the signs I have learned more recently from driving the roads between my house and work. When I drive, millions of interpretations are going on all at once as I keep the car on the road and move through traffic, most of them unconsciously. In fact, only
when some unexpected emergency arises, such as a car swerving into my lane, do I pay much conscious attention to driving, although my senses and kinesthetic feelings are constantly alert. Our social life is a vast, complicated tissue of interacting interpretations serving many purposes at once. Without the signs and habits of interpretation we could not discriminate what is real in our world. A native of the Amazon who has never seen a car or streets or traffic would simply not know what to discriminate when driving from my house to work: the shape of the streets, surface conditions, traffic signs and signals, indications of the intentions of other drivers—all that would be unperceived. Similarly, I would not know what to step on walking through the jungle. I would not have the signs that make discrimination of what is really there possible. Signs make engagement possible.

Signs evolve through the feedback that comes when they are used in engagement. Experience teaches which of the things one can eat is good food and which is poisonous. Driving a car, the feedback is extremely quick with regard to whether I read the traffic or road conditions correctly. Other kinds of signs are corrected more slowly. Reading a person’s body language to determine the person’s mood is filled with ambiguous feedback, although attentive dogs do that as well as people. Learning what patterns of farming lead to a sustainable ecology is very slow on feedback. The signs of interest to theology—those for discriminating what is ultimately real and important and how that bears upon various ultimate dimensions of human life—are very slow on feedback indeed. Yet every civilized culture has some signs for discriminating ultimate matters, notions such as “God,” “obligation,” and stories about the meaning of life and death.

The revolutionary pragmatic reinterpretation of experience as actual interactive engagement with reality guided by signs, rather than as mental representation of what is “out there” as really real, puts theology on a continuum with cognitive experience in other domains of life. Theology deals with aspects of reality that are pervasive and fundamental—not easily discriminable like cars in the wrong lane but of very great importance for the purpose of relating appropriately to what is ultimately real and valuable. For theology to be properly cognitive, to make a case for itself rather than to be a belief system adopted by will, it needs to connect itself with the whole tissue of human experience.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the pragmatic theory of engagement is that it focuses on the value, or worth, of things. Engagement needs
to pick up on what is important for human purposes, including the theo­
logical purposes. Human experience does not screen out the value of a
thing, allowing only the scientific "facts" to register. Rather, it seeks to
know the factual form of what is valuable and important. The pragmatic
theory of engagement does not reject human will. On the contrary, will is
exhibited in every purposive behavior. Yet human will is not called upon to
decide what should be believed in fideist fashion. Theology is inquiry into
how to engage ultimate matters with true discrimination of what is impor­
tant and valuable to discriminate, including the purposes that guide such
ultimate-oriented inquiry.

**Meaning and Reference**

In the writings of Peirce and James, the word pragmatism originated as a
theory of meaning, not of truth. Ideas have meanings that are used in inter­
pretations to engage reality. Indeed, the title of one of Peirce’s early papers
was "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." The rough principle in early pragmatic
thought is that the meaning of an idea consists of the difference it makes
to practice when one employs the idea in experience. If two ideas with
purportedly different meanings can be employed interchangeably, then
pragmatically they have the same meaning. Much theological argumenta­
tion, thought James and Peirce, is confused debate about apparently
different ideas that in practice mean the same thing. So what does it matter
whether the eucharistic elements are transubstantiated to be the body and
blood of Christ if the "accidents" are still chemically bread and wine and
the belief in them appreciates them as the presence of Christ?

James developed this rough idea with a tendency to say that the
meaning of an idea consists in the practical effects it makes on the behavior
of the one who believes it. This is to say the meaning is cashed out immedi­
ately in terms of differences in the believer’s behavior. This Jam­
esean line is easily conflated with the view that ideas are not true or false, only instru­
mental for shaping behavior. Peirce, however, was the more circumspect
logician. He said that meaning consists in the sum total of practical effects
you conceive the object of the idea to have. Thus, the meaning of the
eucharistic elements consists in part in what a chemical analysis of them
would reveal and also in part in what other signs people use to interpret
them. The eucharistic elements are implicated in symbolic systems that
relate them to the death and resurrection of Jesus; in systems defining the
sacrificial blood of the Atonement; in the very different system of symbols concerning the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb; in other systems that relate them to the spiritual nurture of Christians; in systems related to Jesus' practice of inclusive table fellowship; in systems related to the coherence of the Christian community; and in systems of cannibal rituals, among others. Each of these systems of symbols in which the eucharistic elements are implicated shapes the behavior of people who form their lives around them. Yet to know the meaning of the eucharistic symbols does not mean actually believing them with participation in those symbol systems. The meaning is rather how all those complex symbol systems would or might shape behavior when used in the interpretations that engage reality. To know the meaning is not necessarily to engage in the behavior.

For Peirce, as well as for Dewey, beliefs are habits of cognitive behavior that shape the interpretations through which we engage reality. If the ideas in two apparently different beliefs would not give rise to different behaviors, expectations, and evaluations of things, then the beliefs are not really different. To track down the pragmatic meaning of the sides in a theological debate is ultimately to track down different recommendations for behavior. Yet the behavior might be only the behavior of thinking, not overt behavior. Peirce knew that ideas or signs take their meaning from semiotic systems, from codes of meaning. We engage reality not with isolated ideas but with ideas already given meaning in their semiotic or cultural systems. The whole semiotic system is the instrument by which we discern (or fail to discern) what is important in the environment.

For theology, pragmatism points to the importance of tracking down the meanings of the important religious symbols in the various systems of symbols that define them. Sometimes theology attempts to redefine the meanings of the important symbols so that they all can be inter-defined within a single system of meanings, as in a conventional systematic theology. That can be an overly hasty enterprise, however. Religious symbols such as the eucharistic elements have rich layers of meaning defined often by very different symbol systems. It would be a serious mistake to lump together in confusion the sacrifice imagery of the Atonement with that of the Paschal Lamb. The former, which derives from Leviticus, is about putting the sins of the people on the scapegoat or lamb and sending it out into the wilderness to be eaten by a demon. This is what John the Baptist meant when he called Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of
the world. The paschal sacrifice imagery comes from the Exodus story of
the Israelites in Egypt, in which the Israelites sacrificed a lamb or goat and
smeared its blood over their doors so that God would not strike down their
firstborn as God was doing to the firstborn of everyone else in Egypt. This
had nothing to do with removing sins; in fact, it involved punishing the
Egyptians brutally for the sin of their Pharaoh. Rather, it had to do with
symbolizing death passing over the Israelites, or over the Christians because
of the sacrifice of Jesus, our paschal lamb. The meaning of the eucharistic
elements may not be a single theological system integrating all subsystems
of meaning but rather a collage of those subsystems whose collective prac­
tical effects might or might not be consistent.

Whereas meaning is the problem of how signs are to be defined, refer­
ence is the problem of how they are used in interpretations that engage
reality. Peirce said that there are three fundamental dimensions of refer­
ence, ways by which interpretations refer signs to their objects in reality.
The first mode of reference Peirce called "iconic," which means that the
object is affirmed to be like what the sign says. His example was the cross
in a church, which is iconic of Jesus' crucifixion because its shape is like
Jesus' cross. Maps are iconic of territory. Scientific theories are iconic of
the mathematical structures of reality. All descriptions, in one sense or
another, refer iconically because they say that what they describe is like
what they say or display.

The second mode of reference Peirce called "indexical" because the
sign points to its object. Like a finger pointing at something so that you
turn your head to see, an indexical sign establishes a real or physical rela­
tion with the object so that you can pick up on what is important there.
The indexical mode of reference reorients the interpreter so that it is
possible to engage the object. Signs with important indexical reference
sometimes have no iconic reference, or a false iconic reference. To say that
God is the rock of my salvation is not to say that God is the proper subject
matter for geology (in fact, God is a living God, not a stone). Yet the index­
ical character of the reference in the psalm's declaration that God is the
rock of my salvation turns me to trust God, especially in stressful times—
the way a rock would be a fortress for a besieged army or a firm foundation
for a house in time of flood. Most important religious symbols are not icon­
ically or literally true; rather, they are indexically true. They need to be lived
with for a long time in order for them to do their work of transforming the
interpreters so that what is important about God and ultimate matters can be discerned. For it is not enough just to have the signs or ideas that allow for the discrimination of what is important in ultimate matters. The interpreters need to have the trained interpretive habits. That often takes a lifetime of devotion; of attendance upon the liturgy of spiritual practice; and of wrestling through crises of birth, sickness, tragedy, and death. Only when the great religious symbols, such as those in the Eucharist, have worked their way with us for many years can we become so transformed that they can connect us in discerning ways with their objects. Without the indexical mode of reference, engagement with any realities would be impossible; and engagement with realities such as God, for which we are not prepared by birth or ordinary custom, would be even more remote. The pragmatic theory of reference is by far the most promising way of thinking about how our lives are shaped, for better or worse, by religious symbols and the practice based on them. Without understanding indexical reference, we cannot understand how we engage God.

The third mode of reference Peirce called "conventional," and by that he meant that signs refer to their objects in ways defined by the conventions of their semiotic systems. Anytime we can talk about signs and what they refer to, the very fact that we use language means that signs have conventional reference. They may also have iconic and indexical reference. We need to be very careful, however, not to reduce iconic and indexical reference to conventional reference. If this were to happen, it would assume that we do not refer to real things with which we engage interpretively but only to things within our own minds apart from objective reality. Because all elements within a semiotic system are conventional signs, signs would be construed to refer only to other signs, not to what is real "out there." The genius of pragmatism is to redefine experience to mean the engagement, the interaction—the transaction (to use Dewey's terms)—between interpreting beings and things interpreted. For theology, this means that, if we are alert to iconic and especially indexical, as well as to conventional, modes of reference, we can engage directly with God and ultimate matters and not only with our ideas of them.

**Truth**

Truth is a function of interpretation. Ideas by themselves are neither true nor false except insular as they are asserted or used to interpret something.
James was sometimes fuzzy about truth, letting it mean only an interpretation of something that lets you accomplish your purpose relative to that thing. But Peirce was far more precise. An interpretation takes a sign to stand for its object in a certain respect. For instance, in respect of color, the interpretation takes the color "red" to stand for the barn. The barn is either red or it is not. The criteria for telling whether the barn is truly red have to do with checking with other witnesses, comparing notes on how the color matches labeled colors on a spectrum chart, understanding how strange light or color blindness might make the barn look green, and so forth.

The example of interpreting the barn in respect of color assumes a cultural context in which colors and barns are known. Religious interpretations are much more complicated with regard to context. Not only is there a cultural context that helps define the terms in a semiotic system, personal and communal contexts are important for theological interpretations as well. Communities often have special needs and purposes. Individuals have different stages on life's growth with respect to symbols. The state of a person's soul also makes a difference: a person who had been abused by their father in childhood is not likely ever to be able to interpret God as "father," even though they might know intellectually that God is not a father in the same sense that their own abuser was. The result of these observations is that theological interpretations are always actual and always in some complicated context.

Therefore, to tell whether a theological interpretation is true or false it is necessary to understand three things. First, we need to know just what meaning systems are in play in the interpretation. Second, we need to know just what modes of reference are in play. And third, we need to know the context, including the persons making the interpretation and the purposes at hand. For a long time, European Christian theologians suppressed contextual differences. After all, we were all men of an educated class who were socialized to the elite of the church and the academy. Women taught us that their contexts are somewhat different. Now we know to pay attention to people from other social classes, to those who are marginalized, and so forth.

The result is that a given theological "proposition" may be true for someone in one context and false for another. This is because the meaning of truth is whether what is important in the object engaged is carried over into the interpreter so that the interpreter can discriminate what is real and respond appropriately. Interpretations that accomplish this carryover in
some contexts may fail to accomplish the carryover in others. Theology is thus always contextual. To assume that there is a neutral theological context is vain fantasy, and pragmatism explains why this is so.

A pragmatic approach to theology asks whether a theology's various interpretations so engage the theologian that what is important in the religious objects—God and other ultimate matters bearing upon human life—is carried across into the theologian's practical life in ways that lead the theologian to be properly related to the religious objects. In the long run, theology should make the theologian true to God. The theologian can be true to God only in his or her context. If the context is broad enough to speak for a community, then theology is true for the community. If the context is even broader and involves a global community, then the theology is true across all the subcommunities or contexts.

Although each theological claim is always actual and contextualized, it is also fallible. It may be right, but it may not be. Further interpretation is always in order to untangle the systems of meanings in its ideas, to sort the various modes of reference, and to understand better its contextual limitations. Subsequent interpretation may demonstrate that what was confidently taken to be true in one context was misleading even there. So the practice of theology has no end, according to pragmatism. Just as theology, for pragmatism, does not have an arbitrary, fideistic, authoritative starting point based on will, it also has no conclusive finish.

Rather, pragmatism conceives theology always to be "in the middle," with a contextual history that has arbitrary elements and a future that may hold surprises. The best theology is that which is most vulnerable to correction—the theology which, if it is mistaken, will be found out most quickly. Vulnerability is most to be prized when theology is practiced within a rich context of practice, where the diverse meaning systems of its symbols are celebrated and analyzed, where the indexical modes of reference can shape people through time and in many situations, and where the particularities and limitations of contexts of interpretation are known and studied. Instead of thinking that we commit ourselves to religious practice by an arbitrary act of faith (will), pragmatism urges us to embed our religious lives in the richest possible religious practice because that is where the practical meanings of our theology will be found out and tested. People who think of themselves as "spiritual but not religious" can be only superficial in the experimental character of their theology because they are not...
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involved deeply enough over time with the practices that discriminate what is ultimately important in order to be corrected.

In the pragmatist perspective, faith is not an arbitrary (arbitrary is the English cognate for the Latin word for will) commitment to a founding authority. Rather, faith is the courage to engage one's theological context with devoted loyalty to discriminating what is important, offering interpretations, and seeking out corrections. Faith leads to greater involvement and commitment to the theologically shaped practices thought to be appropriate to the situation. Pragmatism does not lead to philosophic detachment or skepticism about religious life. Rather, it leads directly into greater attachment and commitment that may lead to correction of our understanding. The purpose of understanding, of course, is to live more truly in face of the mystery of God and God's ultimate bearings on all the dimensions of life. This is the pragmatic prescription for truth in theology.

Robert Cummings Neville is Dean of Marsh Chapel and Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Theology at Boston School of Theology, Boston, Massachusetts.

Endnotes


4. See the discussion of the "problem of representative knowledge" in Frisina, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action.*

5. The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is expressed in Aristotelian language; while all substances have "accidents," or properties, in the case of the Eucharist, the "substance" changes from bread and wine to Jesus' body and blood, while the "accidents" remain the same, i.e., the chemistry of bread and wine.

So Human a Book: Pragmatism and Scriptural Authority

CLIFTON F. GUTHRIE

Is there God, or a Heavenly firmament?
Are there values in life that stay permanent?
There's just one sure criterion
To base any such theory on:
How's one's life to be changed by affirmin' it?

Richard E. Aquila, Rhyme or Reason: A Limerick History of Philosophy

Robert McAfee Brown has described authority as the "Achilles' heel" of Protestantism. Precisely because it so highly values the individual faith experience of the believer and his or her ability to read and apply Scripture, Protestantism has been suspicious of (if not immune to) forms of pastoral and ecclesial authority. For example, when Schleiermacher sought to describe the purpose and place of pastoral care in the ministry of the church, he wrote, "We start with the assumption that every member of the congregation has direct access to the divine Word, can seek advice from it, and may or may not trust in their own understanding of it and in their ability to apply scriptural rules to specific situations." Within this context, then, any call by a parishioner for individual pastoral care is understood as a "sign that this confidence is lacking," and hence reflects a failure of the more public efforts of preaching and teaching. The purpose of pastoral care relationships is to give parishioners confidence in their own ability to participate in the church community and interpret the Bible on their own: "Whenever such requests are made, as ministers we are to use them to increase the spiritual freedom of our church members and to lead them to such clarity that no further request will be made." Further, he asserted that when pastors do engage in pastoral care or counseling, "we must do so with complete resignation, for our offer carries no authority. Since our church affirms that Christians are their own priests, such a personal relationship is nothing more than one of friendship, and it is fully a matter of freedom."
The move to place religious authority onto the Bible rather than onto church proclamations, hierarchies, or traditions did not quell the Protestant spirit to question authority; it only displaced all of its enormous energies onto the Bible itself. Little wonder, then, that Protestants have led the way in developing the disciplines of biblical criticism and continue to squabble over the nature and authority of Scripture. It is first and foremost a family fight. As Darrell Jodock has pointed out, modern Christian arguments about the authority of Scripture have mostly been directed toward other Christians rather than being apologetic in nature. This rings true in today's battles over the Bible, which seem characterized by one group of Protestants claiming that the Scriptures do or should have a certain kind of authority over a second group of Protestants. Meanwhile, the second group, in good Protestant fashion, seems reluctant to recognize that kind of authority just because they are told they should. Whatever one makes of Schleiermacher's resignation over the pastoral relationship, American Protestants have taken to heart the belief that they can sort out the meaning of the Bible on their own and be free in relation to one another's interpretation of it.

So, another characteristic of our present troubles is that appeals to the Bible to establish the truth of one position over another don't seem to persuade, despite the fact that all sides agree that Scripture is the norm for faith. This agreement leads to a "stuckness," making it hard for us to know about how to evaluate the status of other claims to religious authority, such as prophecy. As Margaret Zulik has argued recently, the sola Scriptura tradition, with its closed canon of revelation, experiences anxiety whenever a prophetic voice emerges, because the latter assumes God's continuing authoritative revelation with the world. In a sola Scriptura solution, there is no way to resolve arguments that arise over differing interpretations of Scripture or over apparent conflicts within the profoundly heterogeneous Scripture itself. Arguments cannot be resolved because assigning ultimate authority to Scripture alone leaves no existential standing point for revelation. As much as I admire both the original (1972) and the revised (1988) versions of the "Theological Task" statement in The United Methodist Discipline, given the predominant readership of this journal, I can't help but observe that despite being the only mainline denomination to have an officially sanctioned theological methodology, United Methodists are subject to the same theological divisions that haunt the other mainline denominations. It could be argued that the 1988 revision to clarify the priority of
Scripture over tradition, reason, and experience made those disagreements even less solvable, simply because once everyone agrees that scriptural arguments for theological positions carry more authority than arguments from the other sources, it puts pressure on all to reiterate and prove that their positions are strictly biblical, and, in fact, more biblical than competing positions. But that would be the subject of another article.

This stickiness over the authority of the Bible and our inability to resolve theological disputes (because we all already agree on the authority of the Bible) has led American Protestantism toward pragmatic ways of solving its dilemmas. This development has probably already proven useful, allowing Christians who disagree sharply with one another still to find practical ways to do things together. Much of our ecumenical progress has come by our willingness simply to do things together (meet, talk, worship, aid the poor), even when we disagree over doctrine. Could it be that such a pragmatic attitude could prove useful in our ongoing disagreements? After all, pragmatism emerged precisely from the impulse that what we cannot solve through doctrines we can often solve simply by asking what difference an idea makes.

But before we think about how a pragmatic method may help us to think about the authority of Scripture, it will help to make a distinction. Pragmatism as a method of thinking means nothing more or less than asking what difference it would make to believe one thing rather than another. Or as the limerick above put it: "How's one's life to be changed by affirmin' it?" William James often suggested that we look at the practical "cash-value" of our ideas; and, frankly, this is something that has become second nature to people who live in an empirical and consumerist age, even those with decidedly non-pragmatic impulses. For example, I may decide to buy a book I want at a locally owned shop rather than at a national mega-store or an online firm, even though it may cost me more. Ask me why I made such an impractical purchase and I may give you a set of principles I hold about sprawl and the environment, fair wages, and the personal service I enjoy. You may shrug me off as an idealist, but my decision still boils down to a hope that my behavior somehow makes a practical difference, however remote, to the well-being of myself and the community. This is what I will call a weak pragmatism, a way of results-oriented thinking that is implicit rather than thoroughgoing and methodical. Commitments I have to other religious, ethical, or philosophical posi-
tions make it difficult for me to recognize that however else I may label myself, I am, in practice, also a pragmatist simply because I think about the end results of my actions.

By contrast, strong pragmatism is the explicit methodological commitment to holding beliefs solely because of the outcomes. It is, as William James described in "What Pragmatism Means," a "temperament" or an "attitude of looking away from first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."

Strong pragmatism is also characterized by a sense of humility—an awareness that our beliefs are provisional and experimental or prone to change as our inner and outer circumstances change. We retain them only as long as the fruits of those beliefs prove helpful, no matter how firmly they are held. Charles Peirce put it beautifully when he said that a belief is "the demi-cadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life." A comma rather than a period. Clearly, any strong pragmatist account of the authority of Scripture will have both of these characteristics: it will be oriented toward consequences and it will be self-aware.

The distinction between weak and strong pragmatism is helpful to us in two ways. First, it gives us room to assert that although theories about the authority of Scripture vary among contemporary theologians, many of them share weak pragmatist tendencies, even those who may be most appalled to be told so. The root of theologians' disagreements with one another over Scripture may prove less about the content of Scripture than about the practical results for the church were a certain stance of biblical authority to be taken. Second, as a strong pragmatist myself, the argument I put forward in this article about authority in general and biblical authority in particular must be considered provisional and experimental. I hope merely that it proves to be useful to our churches in their present contention over issues like the ordination and marriage celebrations of gays and lesbians. These are often cast as arguments over what the Bible says, although it is increasingly recognized that what is at stake are actually whole religious cultures and the control of church institutions. That is, when we are honest, we acknowledge that there are disagreements about what practical results for the church will come were one stance toward the Bible or another be adopted. In an age when it is hard for so-called conservative and liberal Christians to find areas of agreement, there is something to be gained, I believe, by recognizing the general pragmatist tendencies most of us share.
Strong Pragmatism and Scriptural Authority

Both pragmatism and a near-obsessive concern with biblical authority have deep roots in American Protestantism. Concerning pragmatism, it is no coincidence that America's most important contribution to the history of philosophy was born out of a basically Protestant orientation. Its imprint is seen, for example, in William James's treatment of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), in which the struggle of the divided self for conversion takes center stage. As Louis Menand has noted, James's practical sensibilities made him a sort of "super-Protestant" in that he thought of pragmatism as a philosophical equivalent to the Reformation: "He intended pragmatism as an argument, in philosophy, for discarding obsolete verbal ritual and rejecting the authority of prior use." Concerning biblical authority, it is particularly within the American context of denominational competition that the pressure to name exactly how the Bible is authoritative became most acute. Looking over the tangled history of American church life, informed by Reformation piety, Renaissance scholarship, and Revivalistic culture, Phyllis Bird comments, "Both the shape of the church, with its multiple denominations and independent churches, and its theological discourse have been deeply marked by battles over the Bible, battles that are being replayed in many denominations today."

Strikingly, pragmatism arose precisely during the era of the most intense public battles between critical biblical scholarship and fundamentalism, the period bookmarked by the Presbyterian heresy trial of Charles Briggs in 1892 and the Scopes trial of 1925. Higher biblical criticism was beginning to be established in theological seminaries. control of denominations was at stake, and the debate for biblical authority tended to be cast in an either/or framework: either one accepted the methods of modern scriptural criticism or one believed the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy.

This climate may have shaped William James's answers to a religious questionnaire sent out by James B. Pratt of Williams College. Question 9 asks bluntly, "Do you accept the Bible as authority in religious matters?" James responded, "No. No. No. It is so human a book that I don't see how belief in its divine authorship can survive the reading of it."

This emphatic triple negative would seem to put an end to James's willingness to acknowledge the authority of the Bible, at least if that authority is grounded on a doctrine of its divine authorship as inerrancy in all
matters of faith, science, and history. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James made a common distinction between questions of fact (existential judgment) and questions of value (spiritual judgment). Higher criticism of the Bible had shown it to be full of both scientific and historical errors—it is a fully human writing. So if our doctrine of its revelatory authority depended on its being free of error and human interest, James argued, "the Bible would probably fare ill at our hands." "But if," he went on, "our theory should allow that a book may well be a revelation in spite of errors and passions and deliberate human composition, if only it be a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate, then the verdict would be much more favorable." 15

As a pragmatist, James could not ignore the facts of critical research into the origins and assembly of the Bible, 16 but neither could he ignore the facts of the testimonies and beliefs of those who wrote down and passed on the biblical texts. *Varieties*, in fact, was an attempt to take the testimonies of religious persons seriously and scientifically, to allow the emerging science of psychology to include the study of religious experience as a part of the "study in human nature," as the book's subtitle states. While other psychologists of religion, like James's student Edwin Starbuck, were beginning to do empirical research into religious experience, using questionnaires and statistics, James was primarily interested in the personal testimonies of those who claimed to have such experiences. Naturally, his interest would be drawn to the lives of the "great-souled" persons whose wrestling with God produced the Bible in the first place. The Bible would then be authoritative insofar as it was understood as testimony to the faith of its composers.

But not just its composers. An earlier question in Pratt's questionnaire allowed James to put the matter more sharply. When asked "Why do you believe in God?" and given the authority of Scripture as a possible reason, James replied intriguingly, "Only the whole tradition of religious people, to which something in me makes admiring response." 17 For a strong pragmatist like James, the truth of the Bible, its claim to have authority, would need to be demonstrated, not by a theory or doctrine of Scripture but in the concrete lives of those who read it and tried to live by it.

Admittedly, this kind of authority will seem rather thin for most Christians who would insist that the authority of Scripture must rest on the God to whom Scripture testifies rather than on the persons who do the testifying. Indeed, despite the recurring interest in religion among pragma-
tists like James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty, as a results-oriented philosophy, strong pragmatism's ability to affirm traditional Christian doctrines is slippery at best. They belong to the category of "over-beliefs," as James put it, affirmations that are beyond rational pragmatic proof.

Dewey, for example, would let go of most of the content of the evangelical Christian faith in which he was raised. Early in his teaching and scholarly career he was devout and active in the Christian student movement, but eventually he came to think of faith as the ongoing human struggle for truth and cooperation and would affirm this form of faith as more intrinsically religious than "any faith in a completed revelation." As with James, Dewey would look for the truth of faith in the lives of those who professed it rather than in a closed canon or a system of doctrine. Richard Rorty summarized Dewey's position about Christianity and the Bible this way:

Suppose that a source you believe to be nonhuman tells you that all men are brothers, that the attempt to make yourself and those you cherish happier should be expanded into an attempt to make all human beings happy. For Dewey, the source of this suggestion is irrelevant. You might have heard it from a god or a guru, but you might just as well have found it carved out by the waves on a sandy beach. It has no validity unless it is treated as a hypothesis, tried out, and found successful. The good news about Christianity, Dewey is saying, is that it has been found to work.

So what a strong pragmatism can offer any discussion of biblical authority is the insistence that whatever over-belief one may hold about the Bible, it should be examined and assessed by the kinds of practices that it engenders among those who believe it. What difference does it make to concrete lives, to the function and health of a church, or to the effectiveness of Christianity's public witness if you affirm one view of Scripture over another?

Cornel West

Dewey would have found in fellow pragmatist Cornel West an encouraging example of the way that Christianity has been found to work even when many of its old formulations have been rejected. Near the end of The American Evasion of Philosophy, his rich genealogy of pragmatism within the history of American thought, West coins the term "prophetic pragmatism" to describe his own location within the conjoined streams of American philos-
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...ophy and religion, because it "harks back to the Jewish and Christian tradition of prophets who brought urgent and compassionate critique to bear on the evils of their day." That it invokes the legacy of biblical witness to power is testimony to the way that his own participation in the Christian faith has worked to shape him, help him cope with the complexities of postmodern life, and give him a political point of view: "I find existential sustenance in many of the narratives in the biblical scriptures as interpreted by streams in the Christian heritage; and I see political relevance in the biblical focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth." He adds, "Needless to say, without the addition of modern interpretations of racial and gender equality, tolerance, and democracy, much of the tradition warrants rejection."22 West identifies himself as a pragmatist within the Christian tradition for both intrinsic and extrinsic religious reasons: "First, on the existential level, the self-understanding and self-identity that flow from this tradition's insights into the crises and traumas of life are indispensable for me to remain sane." West writes evocatively of how participation in this tradition staves off the sense of despair and meaninglessness he might otherwise have without a communal tradition with which to stand. The second reason is political and entirely extrinsic and pragmatic. It is the recognition that "the culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious." Therefore, "To be in solidarity with them requires not only an acknowledgment of what they are up against but also an appreciation of how they cope with their situation."23 He goes on to commend to other leftist intellectuals the deep resources for prophetic social change inherent and already proven in the religious communities of America, particularly in the Black church.

For West, the authority of the Christian Scriptures is rooted in its ability to authorize or give growth (authority comes from the Latin auctoritas, "the giving of increase") to social movements on behalf of the poor. As we would expect with a strong pragmatist, West has a self-aware sense of the provisionality of his position. It is adopted because he hopes it will be useful for the political causes to which he is faithfully committed and because, on a personal level, he can do no other. Is the gospel true? he asks. "I reply in the affirmative, bank my all on it, yet am willing to entertain the possibility in low moments that I may be deluded."24

Rebecca Chopp

One more example will suffice to show how a strong pragmatist position...
may delineate biblical authority. One of pragmatism's core insights is that because knowledge arises out of specific historical and practical realities, we are not inclined to change our minds unless some belief we hold no longer works. Rebecca Chopp, noting that feminist Christian theologists are painfully aware that much of what passes for traditional Christianity does not work for women in the present age, therefore calls for a "feminist pragmatics of inquiry":

A feminist pragmatics of inquiry arises out of a situation in which something does not work: women are physically and emotionally abused; use of the word "man" to describe all human beings no longer makes sense; Christian tradition contradicts itself by promising freedom while at the same time reflecting the misogyny of the culture.

So, unlike some forms of theology that understand themselves to be merely descriptive and oriented toward past revelations in Scripture and tradition, feminist theology is explicitly constructive and future-oriented: "[F]eminist theology is explicitly oriented toward the concrete transformation of meanings and structures, of consciousness and of roles."

Chopp follows the distinction Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza made in *Bread Not Stone* between treating Scripture as a structuring prototype and treating it as an eternal archetype. As a prototype, the collection of writings that make up the Bible serves as an exemplar of how various people and communities, moved by faith in God, struggle, act, and write themselves into a more liberative future. It also allows us to take full stock of the historical situatedness of its various origins and the fact that these writings were responses to lived dilemmas and not meant to be bearers of timeless and abstract truths. The authority of the Bible is found in its ability to pattern for us today how faithful people live their faith practically. As Chopp notes, there is a close linking of Christian practice and biblical interpretation in this tradition, what Schüssler Fiorenza calls a "pastoral-theological hermeneutic of the Bible." Feminist theology uses the Scriptures as collections of proclamations, as models of Christian discourses of emancipatory transformation.

The refreshing honesty of how feminist theology (or any theology, for that matter) "uses" the Scriptures shows that, for Chopp at least, feminist theology is pragmatically self-aware. It is because feminist theology is well aware of how the Scripture has been used by others that it is able to use it
too: "Feminist theological scholarship has to do with the authority of the Bible, how it comes to be used against women as a tool of oppression and how it might be used as a support for emancipation." Thus, its scholarship does not pretend to be value-neutral or universal. Rather, because it intends to promote gender justice, it recovers forgotten narratives about women characters in the Bible; uncovers patriarchal readings; locates its writing within patriarchal histories and structures; and, when it needs to, is able to designate a biblical text frankly as a "text of terror."

* * *

Having looked at James, Dewey, West, and Chopp, we can see a certain pattern emerging among these strong pragmatists in their approach to the authority of Scripture. First, while being rooted in the Christian tradition, they are not afraid to use it for agendas that are political, constructivist, and pragmatic. They can do this openly because it is clear to them that the Scriptures have always already been used for other agendas. Indeed, because the Bible texts emerged from specific political and religious circumstances they are authoritative in that they warrant a corresponding faithful pattern of interpretation and liberation for our own age. Second, the strong pragmatist is finally interested in the kind of living that comes about by specific ways of engagement with the Scriptures. Wanting to know what difference it makes to believe this or that about God or Scripture, the strong pragmatist draws inspiration for belief and practice from the lives of specific faithful persons, traditions, and religious communities.

**Weak Pragmatism in Theologies of Scriptural Authority**

In *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, David Kelsey surveyed the dominant theological approaches to scriptural authority and argued that while theologians of the Neo-Orthodox-dominated twentieth century typically agreed that Scripture should be authoritative in theology, they differed widely on what that meant when Scripture was actually used in their theological argumentation. For inerrantists, like B. B. Warfield, Scripture's authority resided in a property of the text itself. For others, like Bartsch, it was the capacity of the text to give rise to "quasi-technical" theological propositions. For narrative theologians, Scripture was authoritative because its reading brings alive the character of God within the Christian community. For existentialists, such as Bultmann, the Bible expressed a revelatory event in the
past that was also available to persons today. After surveying typical ways that Scripture has been claimed to be authoritative for theology, Kelsey concluded:

In every instance the answer was cast in terms of something the scripture was said to do: it refers or "points" the reader to the sequence of God's mighty acts in history which constitute Heilsgeschichte (Weight); it renders a character (Barth); it expresses the occurrence of a cosmic redemptive event and occasions a transformation of my vision of the world so that I come to live in ways apt to its true character (Thorton); it occasions an event in which my personal and private life is transformed (Bultmann); it expresses the occurrence of a saving and revelatory event for an earlier community and occasions an event of encounter with the holy here and now (Tillich); it proposes or commends concepts men should use to construe their experience, their word, and themselves (Bartsch).

Biblical authority occasions things, renders things, proposes things, does things. Its doing things is the proof that (if not the basis for believing) the Bible is authoritative for Christians. Even theologians for whom pragmatism is a modern heresy may therefore be more pragmatic in orientation than they would care to admit.

For example, Terrence Reynolds has argued that although the disparate theological voices of ethicists James Gustafson and Stanley Hauerwas may well hold incommensurable theological worldviews, they do share some pragmatist tendencies. For Gustafson, Scripture is a source for helping shape Christian communities to seek the overall good of God's creation, while for Hauerwas it serves to produce people of specifically Christian virtues. One major difference is that while the former has acknowledged the kinship of his thought to the pragmatist tradition, Hauerwas is famously critical of it as a part of "theological liberalism." Even so, Reynolds asserts, because he refuses to justify it on other grounds, such as the canons of reason in the modern university, Hauerwas finally seems to base his community-of-character theology on the conviction that it works.

Hauerwas, apparently out of his own personal experience, begins with an existentially grounded belief that the interpretive framework of the Christian faith has been pragmatically effective for himself, that it has the power to be equally effective for others, and that it ought therefore to be defended in these conversations rather than adjusted or departicularized.
Readers of Hauerwas may balk at the implication that he is pragmatist in orientation. But I think Reynolds has a point. Insofar as he and other Alasdair Maclntyre-style virtue ethicists are driven to argue that faithfulness to Scripture and traditional orthodoxy should serve to transform personal and communal identities vis-à-vis pluralistic culture, they may fairly be described as weak pragmatists. What is at stake between Hauerwas and Gustafson, then, is less methodological than substantive: they have vastly different positions on what it means to live Christianly.

Terrence Reynolds's analysis of the Hauerwas/Gustafson debate and Kelsey's observation that theologians differ primarily on how they claim the Bible works help describe why the mere appeal to the Bible does so little to solve theological differences between Christians today. Most profoundly and most simply it is that they differ on the conception of what Christianity is or should be. Every different conception of the faith must delineate its own idea of Scripture because each different conception will end up using Scripture in a potentially different way. American Protestants at least are as Protestant as ever Schleiermacher could have hoped; they are "free" from one another's conceptions of authority, and our differing conceptions of authority carry no authority for us.

Where does this leave the claim that theology should be based on the Bible? Kelsey's position still seems accurate to me: a theologian's claim that the Scriptures are authoritative is not a description but an invocation; it is a claim that has a "self-involving performative force." Kelsey states, "It is a performative utterance in that by it the speaker effectively acknowledges a rule governing the practice of theology: In the making of theological proposals, Scripture is to be used in such a way that it helps somehow to authorize the proposals." The theologian who invokes the idea that Scripture should be authoritative for theology in fact says little about how Scripture will be used, but does signal that she or he wants to play by the rules of the Christian game, at least as understood within a theological age heavily conditioned by Neo-Orthodoxy. Again, Christian theologians all seem to agree that Scripture is or should be authoritative, but their widely different interpretations and the ongoing lack of agreement between Christians cast doubt on whether this claim has any practical meaning. Rather, what does seem to have practically different consequences are the quite different theological worlds to which we are variously committed.

Darrell Jodock has helpfully suggested that "scriptural authority is not
foundational... it is in fact quite derivative. Like a spider web without anchor points, a theory of scriptural authority collapses without an image of revelation, without an image of God, or without a portrait of the community of faith to which it can be tied." He goes on to say, "Nor is it necessary that all Christians agree on any one theory of scriptural authority. A group of Christians can profit from the Bible and find its writings religiously useful without a 'correct' understanding of inspiration or revelation."

Most analyses of authority distinguish authority from power in that authority is accepted and recognized willingly.38 The authority of Scripture, then, is not abstract or a reality that exists outside of a relationship between Scripture and community. Jodock argues that the texts of the New Testament were recognized as authoritative by the emerging Christian movement because they were found to be useful, both within their original contexts and within congregations that experience similar situations. As biblical scholarship has established, the multiform telling of the gospel story, the letters of Paul, the differing emphases of the Pastoral Epistles, and the Johannine literature was a concrete theological response to particular practical needs. Likewise, Phyllis Bird has argued of the Hebrew canon that

...before the individual writings were assembled into a body of "scripture," each had established its authority in respect to its own peculiar character and use: laws, to guide and govern the community; ancestral tales and historical narratives, to create and confirm a sense of identity and trace the activity of God in past experience and event; prophetic oracles, to illuminate God's action in the present and to warn; proverbs, to counsel; psalms, to direct prayer and praise; didactic tales, to instruct and encourage steadfastness.39

The establishment of a particular canon of writings was a process that acknowledged the already existing authority (that is, an already existing relationship) of specific writings to accomplish specific things within the community of faith. Different writings were given different types of authority because they accomplished different things. Canonization did not mean that no other writings could be authoritative. The canon, writes Bird, "did not contain all of the writings judged to be inspired, true, and profitable for knowledge of God and conduct of life, but only those deemed essential and having broad appeal within the community."40
As an example of Jodock's insight that every account of the authority of Scripture implies a web of other theological commitments, it is helpful to hear briefly from a decidedly nonpragmatic contemporary Reformed theologian, John Webster. Webster has put forward a bold new account of the authority of Scripture over the theology and practice of the church in his book *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*. He is concerned that the church not lose sight of the fact that its relation to Scripture is finally one of obedience: "The authority of Scripture is the authority of the church's Lord and his gospel, and so cannot be made an immanent feature of ecclesial existence. Scripture's authority within the church is a function of Scripture's authority over the church." 41

We would be hard pressed to find a contemporary position on scriptural authority further removed theologically from James, West, and Chopp than Webster's. Where James saw "so human a book," that orthodoxy would be hard-pressed by its careful examination, Webster sees danger for the church in the trend for the "element of creaturely reception to become inflated." In contrast to the strong pragmatist's self-aware use of Scripture, Webster asserts that for the church to name the Bible as Holy Scripture is to confess its adherence to the God of the Bible, and hence to put itself under its authority. As with Jodock, Webster notes that a doctrine of Scripture comes with an implied theology: "An effective account of biblical authority... will place it within a cluster of other affirmations about God, the Holy Spirit, and the Incarnate Word." Further, any doctrine of Scripture must be seen in relation to—in fact begs the question of—"divine acts of revelation, sanctification, and inspiration." 42

Webster points out that doctrines of revelation and inspiration have often been applied to accounts of the authority of Scripture, but he usefully suggests that looking through the lens of the category of sanctification helps us better to locate the Bible in "the overall economy of God's grace" and thus in relation to the living faith of the church and the end toward which God draws it. Hence, he writes, "The authority of Scripture is its Spirit-bestowed capacity to quicken the church to truthful speech and righteous action." 43

A pragmatist who reads this could not be happier with Webster's acknowledgment that any idea about the authority of the Bible is already rooted in a practical relation of the holder of the idea to the Bible. Authority of Scripture is bound up in a set of practices and, indeed, in an
entire theology. Another key insight of pragmatism is the need to make our ideas cohere with one another, and Webster as a skilled systematician does this beautifully. It is possible, however, to read Webster's argument similarly to the way Reynolds reads Hauerwas's. Because Webster seems finally concerned with the shape of ecclesial existence (imprecisely defined as "truthful speech and righteous action") that will result when the church acknowledges its adherence to the Bible, it is possible to see at least a weak pragmatism operative in his thought.

Because I am strong pragmatist, there is probably a confirmation bias operating here and the tendency to see pragmatism lurking under every corner. But even as a potential counter-example to the suspicion that everyone thinks pragmatically, whether explicitly or not, Webster’s exposition begs the question of the kind of church that the kind of scriptural obedience and reading he advocates ultimately would produce. How would it differ from unreflective fundamentalism, for example, which makes largely the same claim about the authority of Scripture over the church?

Charles Peirce said, "The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit, and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise." A pragmatic evaluation of competing theories of biblical authority would simply ask what kinds of habits and action are evoked by each theory. Unfortunately, pragmatism itself cannot judge which of these worldviews is true or false: it can only name the consequences of holding each one. James put it this way: "If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to other truths that also have to be acknowledged." For many Christians, this tentativeness about what is true with a big "T" is unsatisfying. As G. K. Chesterton remarked in his book Orthodoxy, "Pragmatism is a matter of human needs, and one of the first of human needs is to be something more than a pragmatist." One of the chief developments of pragmatism through the twentieth century—and certainly its embrace by a number of Christian thinkers—is precisely this move to articulate how strong pragmatism can avoid devolving into individual subjectivism and relativism. For example, strong pragmatists like West, Chopp, and Richard Holloway have put Christian communal identity at the heart of their theological pragmatism. Any healthy mode of scriptural authority cannot help but be lived in actual communities of people who identify
with the beliefs, commitments, and practices of faith testified to by the various communities of people who lived, passed down, wrote down, and wrestled with life with the biblical God.

Conclusion

In the Anglican/Methodist tradition of the Articles of Religion, Scripture is asserted to contain "all things necessary to salvation," and no one is required to believe "as an article of faith" anything that cannot be proven scriptural. Affirmations about the Bible do not come before all else. Rather, they appear (depending on which version of the Articles you read) after affirmations of the Trinity, the Word, the Resurrection, the Holy Ghost, and even Christ's descent to hell. Further, the emphasis is soteriological. Scripture is authoritative because it contains all things necessary for God's saving purposes. It is practical. It works. So much many Christians can agree on.

But what if our soteriologies are different? What if we have irreducible differences over what salvation means? Over what the saved life looks like, how it is practiced, and where it is going? And what if, despite our differences, we all can and do assert that it is from Scripture that we have our conceptions of salvation? Then the appeal to the authority of Scripture, no matter how loudly proclaimed, will not get us very far.

One practical tool for thinking about how Christians may differ from one another in this respect is W. Paul Jones's description of five different "theological worlds" that he discerned are operative in American culture. Like any typology, this one has its strengths and weaknesses, but what makes it particularly useful in our present discussion is that it helps us to think how different experiences or conceptions of salvation can lead to different uses of the Bible. Each proposed theological world is based on the different felt dilemma (or "obsession") that salvation (or faith "epiphany") resolves. Jones names them as Separation and Reunion, Conflict and Vindication, Emptiness and Fulfillment, Condemnation and Forgiveness, and Suffering and Endurance. Each one of these worlds, Jones asserts, has strengths and weaknesses, each has its perfectly scriptural theology, each has its distinctive form of life and wholeness toward which it moves, and each always needs the practical corrective of the other four worlds to keep its perspective balanced and sane.

Whether as Jones does or not, what if we were strongly pragmatic and self-aware enough to acknowledge that the authority of Scripture is not
foundational but derivative? That our attraction to one form or another of scriptural authority is only a matter of the theological world we inhabit? This is not an inconsequential or painless recognition. It may lead some differing Christians to be completely practical and part company, despite a common heritage, scriptural canon, set of terms, polity, and even a common [but increasingly strained] life. They will conclude quite pragmatically that they don't just disagree about interpreting Scripture but are pulling at cross-purposes in wholly different religious directions. Even if we suspect that this is true, there are powerful theological images (one body, many members), practices (common forms of worship), and institutional bonds (jointly owned properties) to keep us hesitant to acknowledge what we may already know in our hearts. But it could also be that some of our hesitancy is also just weak pragmatics. That is, we are afraid of what the consequences would be or what we would practically do with ourselves if we were to affirm that idea. Until we come clean about our mutual pragmatics, it is likely that most Protestants will continue to agree vehemently that the Bible is authoritative and then wonder why they still disagree with one another. Perhaps James was right about the Bible: it is "so human a book," not only in light of its origins but also in its capacity to continue to be for Protestants the bearer of our own conflicted humanity.

Clifton F. Guthrie is Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Bangor Theological Seminary in Bangor, Maine.

Endnotes

4. Ibid., 55, 58-59 (emphasis added).
7. There is a good reason why the task force that was commissioned by the 1968 General Conference to come up with a new creed that everyone in the newly formed United Methodist Church could affirm instead followed Albert Outler's suggestion to produce a theological methodology. He knew that, while such doctrinal agreement was impossible, it just might be possible for a pluralistic church to agree on some basic principles by which theological disagreements might conceivably be solved in the future. It was a pragmatic decision from which the 1988 version stepped back somewhat.


13. James's responses are included in the letter collection published by his son, Henry, in 1920. Henry notes that his father filled out his reply "at an uncertain date in the autumn" of 1904. However, in 1904 Pratt was still doing doctoral work under James's guidance at Harvard (see www.williams.edu/library/archives/manuscriptguides/pratt/bio1.html). He wasn't appointed to Williams College until 1905. Pratt would go on to become a philosophical realist himself and write strong critiques of pragmatism, including What Is Pragmatism? (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), which James would then disparage as being based on severe misconceptions. See "Professor Pratt on Truth," in The Meaning of Truth (New York: Longman Green and Co. 1911), 162-79.


16. In a letter to Henry W. Rankin, dated June 10, 1903, James wrote, "I do not (and I fear cannot) follow the gospel scheme as you do, and that the Bible itself,
in both its testaments (omitting parts of John and the Apocalypse) seems to me, by its intense naturalness and humanness, the most fatal document that one can read against the orthodox theology, in so far as the latter claims the words of the Bible to be its basis.” Letters, 2:196.

17. Ibid., 213.

18. As Giles Gunn has pointed out, “Yet even now, when the wall of separation has been breached again and again, it still remains the case that many intellectuals continue to persist in the opinion that pragmatism is at the very least indifferent to religion and more likely inhospitable to it, if not downright incompatible with it.” See “Religion and the Recent Revival of Pragmatism,” in The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture, ed. by Morris Dickstein (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 406.

19. James, Varieties, 397-400.


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.


27. Ibid., 251 (emphasis in original).


30. Chopp, Power to Speak, 41 (emphasis added).


38. See Clifton F. Guthrie, “Sacral Power: A De-Centered Theology of Clergy Authority” (Diss. Emory University, Graduate Division of Religion, 1996).
40. Ibid., 44.
42. Ibid., 8, 55, 8.
43. Ibid., 54, 52.
46. Another contemporary strong pragmatist, Richard Holloway, has recognized such uncertainty as a liberative truth that allows Christians the freedom to move from anxieties over whether the doctrines of Christianity are true toward practices that seek to follow the example of Jesus. See *Doubts and Loves: What Is Left of Christianity* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate Books, 2001).
49. See W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); and *Worlds within a Congregation: Dealing with Theological Diversity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000). This second book includes a copy of the “Theological Worlds Inventory” that can be copied and used as a tool in a congregational setting.
The Question

In his essay, "Types of Wesleyan Philosophy: The General Landscape and My Own Research Agenda," Thomas Oord suggests that Wesley's appeal to experience and his inclination toward "practical divinity" may provide fruitful grounds for explorations into the relation of Wesleyan thought to pragmatism. In this article, I try to get beyond any sophomoric rhetoric about how "pragmatic" Methodists are and ask, as Oord does, whether Wesleyan theology might benefit from a serious engagement with this American intellectual tradition. Is a fruitful exchange possible?

The first thing that struck me when I began to work on the essay was the absence of books and articles on Wesley or Methodism and pragmatism. A search of the "Methodist studies" section of my library and my seminary's library turned up no books. A search of the ATLA database of published articles on religion and theology produced almost no articles, and an Internet search located almost no "hits" on Methodism and pragmatism, except for pejorative or pedestrian uses of the term pragmatism. In short, there is almost nothing published on my subject. Apparently few editors have considered an exchange between Methodism and this distinctly American tradition in philosophy to be an interesting and fruitful topic to explore, except the editor of Quarterly Review.

There are good reasons for this dearth of essays. First, and most obvious, more than a century exists between the end of Wesley's writings and the emergence of pragmatism as an American philosophical movement. Second, the search seems inappropriate because, it is claimed, Wesley was neither a theologian nor a philosopher in the proper sense. Third, although Methodists frequently are credited or blamed for being "pragmatic," the term has such negative connotations among Wesleyan scholars and theologians that pragmatism is dismissed as a movement that
advocates a method and a view of the world contrary to Wesleyan theology. Pragmatism is an "atheistic philosophy." Finally, neopragmatism's aggressive antifoundationalism runs so counter to certain assumptions in Wesleyan thought that even a date, let alone a marriage, is difficult to imagine. Although classical pragmatists were certainly not reductionistic naturalists, their "open" naturalism does not seem to support some of the dualistic views of the world held by followers of Wesley.  

However, if philosophy is not identified with a speculative metaphysics (as it is not in any form of pragmatism) and with reductive naturalism (as it is not in pragmatism from James to Rorty), then there are reasons to explore ways in which a Wesleyan understanding of "practical divinity" can be informed by pragmatism and neopragmatism. My basic thesis is that Methodism can benefit from a dialogue. By getting clear a pragmatic understanding of the interdependence of belief and practice and an experimental understanding of truth, we can enhance and strengthen the Wesleyan view that theology is "practical divinity" in the sense that doctrine is contextual and directed toward life and its transformation.

**Pejorative and Pedestrian Views of Pragmatism**

To be sure, the term *pragmatism* is occasionally used by non-pragmatists in a positive way to refer to thinking that is no nonsense, realistic, and hard-headed—that is, not abstract and speculative. However, in common parlance, *pragmatism* is a pejorative term. Pragmatism is the reduction of beliefs and actions to "whatever will work." It is the philosophy of the American entrepreneurial business culture, often modified with the adjective *ruthless*. Pragmatists believe whatever ideas serve their wants and desires. They abandon or compromise their ideals in order to succeed at making more money or in achieving political power. To be pragmatic is to be less than noble, principled, or honest. Belief in an idea depends on whatever "feels good" to us. Speaking of James's pragmatism, Bertrand Russell, in his *A History of Western Philosophy*, says, "Roughly speaking, [James] is prepared to advocate any doctrine which tends to make people virtuous and happy; if it does so, it is 'true' in the sense in which he uses the word.... If the belief [in God] makes them happy it is 'true.'"  

Some Methodists approve of the conjunction of Methodism and the popular meaning of pragmatism. They use the phrase *Methodist pragmatism* as honorific. "The genius of Methodism is its pragmatism." They accept the
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image of Wesley as a pragmatist who was indifferent to doctrine or serious theological inquiry and dominated by concern for organizational strategies. Wesley's pragmatism refers to his effectiveness in developing a polity but not to his understanding of his teachings. The New England "Annual Conference 2001 Final Report to Review the Appointive Process" celebrates Methodism's "pragmatic polity," by which is meant Wesley's organization of Methodist societies, itinerant system, circuit riders, annual conferences, and superintendents—all representing "responses to specific needs." Others credit Methodist pragmatists as successful "strategists for church growth." So our church growth strategies depend on our "sanctified pragmatism." Finally, for those with a more theological agenda, to say that Methodists are "practical theologians" is to say that we merely dabble in theology, that we are not among the "serious" theologians, that we provide spiritual or devotional theology instead of systematic theology, that we offer a simplified version of academic theology for the nonprofessional, or that we focus on actions instead of beliefs.

My concern here is neither to affirm nor to condemn this aspect of Methodism. Rather, it is to argue that lines of thought drawn from Wesleyan theology can be intertwined with lines of thought drawn from pragmatism to create a nonfoundationalist and nonessentialist practical theology in which theological knowledge has less to do with metaphysical foundations and certainty than with the life of love and holiness. By drawing on pragmatic philosophy, Methodists can give a serious account of why we repudiate the antithesis of theory and practice and of our understanding of the meaning and truth of theology as "practical divinity" by showing how doctrine is a strategy for solving the problems of what beliefs we can affirm because they serve the conduct of everyday life. To use Dewey's language, "[T]ruth as utility means service in making just that contribution to reorganization in experience that the idea or theory claims to be able to make."

What Pragmatism Is

There are three characteristics of American pragmatism that are significant in exploring the affinities between "our doctrine" and pragmatism. When I refer to "American pragmatism" or to "pragmatists," I mean, specifically, the classical pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead and the contemporary neopragmatists Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, and Hilary Putnam.

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Pragmatists reject the Cartesian and Kantian models of epistemological foundationalism that are based on a transcendental a priori as the starting point for knowledge. Unlike rationalists, who seek absolute certainty through a systematic doubt carried on within the self-conscious, thinking individual, pragmatists seek through the shared inquiry of a community to confirm or revise our common beliefs when confusion or skepticism arises. All knowledge comes to us originally from outside us—from a community and from experience—as there are no innate, unconditioned grounds for knowledge within the mind. Thus, pragmatism is less a philosophy that proposes solutions to the recurring problems in the Western philosophical tradition initiated by Plato and more a set of interpretations that attempt to explain how ideas function in the communal circumstances under which we communicate and cooperate in the process of acquiring knowledge about how to live. It is a method of testing the meaning and truth of beliefs by probing the consequences of beliefs; that is, by exploring what concrete difference their meaning and truth would make to someone who believes them. Knowledge, then, is the ability to solve problems. If a belief makes no practical difference, regardless of whether it is true or false, then the belief has no meaning; and meaningful beliefs are true insofar as they help us get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience and reliable beliefs.

All pragmatists are nonfoundationalists in that they assume "ideas, words, and language are not mirrors which copy the world but rather tools by which we cope with the world." But they do not believe whatever makes them feel good or whatever succeeds in establishing their financial or political power. Pragmatists begin with a set of beliefs or traditions already in place. When a discomfort, tension, or dilemma arises within or between ideas and beliefs, they offer an experimental way of adjudicating the ideas within a community by judging the practical consequences of the idea for social practice. Pragmatism asks what consequences for social well-being result from believing one idea over another. Knowledge is thereby testable, revisable, and adjudicated by an experimental method.

Pragmatism is a historical movement in American philosophy, inaugurated by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. It is "a critical disposition toward ideas" instead of a metaphysics of ultimate or absolute truth. Peirce introduced the concept in an 1878 essay entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." Unlike rationalists, who begin with the isolated, subjective
self seeking absolute certainty through methodological doubt, Peirce begins with our inherited beliefs and habits of mind that guide our desires and shape our actions and that we have no reason to question. However, when the facts of our experience contradict our expectations—that is, when doubts arise because of an anomaly—we need to know how to pass from this state to a resolution. An irritation causes a struggle to attain some relief; so the settlement of opinion is the sole end of inquiry. The method he proposes he calls "pragmatism," a method of inquiry in which clarity proceeds on the basis of the practical effects that ideas hold within a whole social context of meaning. Peirce's principle was to "consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception." 

James, too, understood pragmatism as a way to determine the meaning and truth of ideas and beliefs and to resolve philosophical disputes on the basis of their help in resolving life's practical struggles. The method is in part an attitude toward the world, a hardheaded temperament oriented toward experience and facts. Beliefs are instruments for resolving the problems of life, when our inherited beliefs are irritated by the facts of experience. They are not for the development of speculative systems that define abstractly the inner nature or structure of the world.

The meaning and truth of a belief lie in the concrete difference the belief makes to someone. What is the criterion? To what effect? That we may the better foresee the course of our experience, communicate with one another, and steer our lives. Truth is a relation of the conceptual parts of our experience to the sensational parts of it, not the relation of our concepts to nonexperiential realities. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its veracity is in fact an event, a process: the process, namely, of its verifying itself, its veri-fication. Its validity is the process of its valid-ation. Pragmatism is "the attitude of looking away from first things, prin-ciples, categories, and supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."

Dewey described his pragmatism as "instrumentalism." Also, for him, philosophy has to do not with speculative questions about the ultimate nature of reality or the foundations of absolute knowledge but with the use of ideas in dealing with the strains and stresses of community life. specifi-
cally, for the improvement of human societies. The experimental method in philosophy is the application of the new movements in science, industry, and politics to their completion in society. The method of philosophy should be experimental instead of speculative. Reason is not something separate from experience that introduces us to a region of universal truth imposed on experience from above. Reason is experimental intelligence, conceived after the pattern of science, and used in the creation of social arts; it has something to do.21 Dewey’s pragmatism led to an instrumental theory of truth. The truth of an idea is its utility—not for a purely personal end or profit but rather for its service in the reorganization of experience that the ideal or theory claims to be able to make. An ideal is realized through its own use as a tool of experimentation for the reorganization of life for improvement.

**Pragmatism and Empiricism**

Strictly speaking, pragmatism is a method for determining the meaning and truth of our beliefs; it is not necessarily committed to some version of naturalism. However, the fact is that most pragmatists are also empiricists. This is important to note for two reasons. First, there is no necessary connection between pragmatism and empiricism; one can be a pragmatist without being an empiricist. This will be noted below in my reference to Wesley’s own distinctive mixture of dualism and pragmatism in his understanding of doctrine. Second, the typical connection between pragmatism and empiricism exists also in Wesley’s own “sixth sense” empiricism, to be discussed below. In the case of James, his version of “radical empiricism” is oriented toward a non-reductive naturalism. It is based upon the postulate that the only things to be debated among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience and the relationships that are part of experience.22 To be sure, James associated belief in God with radical empiricism (which includes a sense of “mystery” or “superhuman forces”24 or “a superhuman consciousness,” which is limited in power and knowledge [a “finite deity,” or what he calls a “piecemeal supernaturalism”]) instead of absolute idealism (in which no relationships or change exists but only an absolute oneness and unity and therefore chargelessness and absolute determinism [a “pantheistic monster”]).25 Yet, James was friendly to a belief in God.

Thus, as a method of inquiry instead of as a metaphysic, classical pragmatism offers an open-minded approach to religious questions. To be sure,
pragmatism can be put to purely secular usage to justify skeptical, non-theistic or atheistic beliefs. It can also be used to justify religious or some sort of theistic beliefs, as in Peirce's and James's "right to believe" on the basis of the consequences of belief where there is a genuine and forced decision that cannot be justified on some other grounds. But the skepticism of some pragmatists about God is not based on their assurance of the metaphysical impossibility of such beliefs (based on a materialistic metaphysics) but rather on their doubt about whether such ideas could achieve the status of experimental knowledge to fulfill the common good.

However, James's own combination of radical empiricism and pragmatism led him to a favorable view of belief in God. His radical empiricism included experience of "the more," the "reality of the unseen," and his pragmatism led him to "the right to believe." "On pragmatic principles we cannot reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it." To be sure, not every idea that has meliorative consequences is true. Its truth depends also on its relation to other beliefs judged to be true on experimental grounds and that help us get in satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience and beliefs. For James, if belief in God leads people in the future toward the condition of equilibrium, then pragmatism is disposed to regard such a belief as cognitively meaningful and true. "[I]f the notion of God, in particular, should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was pragmatically so successful. What other kind of truth could there be, for her, than all this agreement with concrete reality?" It is this conclusion that gave James "the right to believe."

Contemporary neopragmatism is much less friendly toward religious beliefs than were Peirce, James, and even Dewey. For Rorty, for example, the usefulness of religion, morality, and legality does not depend on some kind of metaphysical bedrock or empirical proof. There is no bedrock or foundation for any beliefs. Truth is a matter of trying out different forms of life, finding out what works, and recommending that way of life. He sees religious language as the language of poetic imagination instead of the language of truth and a description of ultimate reality. Religion is perhaps a useful proposal of how to operate in life by creating an individual aesthetic response to the world, but he does not see any other positive meaning to religious beliefs. Words are tools rather than mirrors of reality. Neopragmatists talk more about language than about experience or mind or consciousness.
and they are more suspicious of the scientific method than were James and Dewey and Mead. Indeed, for neopragmatists, pragmatism is incommensurable with theology because pragmatism is not simply a methodology but also a secular philosophy that is not translatable into any kind of objective conceptions of metaphysics, teleology, or theology. All neopragmatists, therefore, are antifoundationalists, for whom the validation of any knowledge claims rests on practical judgments constructed in dynamic social practices. The truth is a human creation about how we individually and socially choose to describe our world and to live in it. The neopragmatists' historicist conclusions (the truth about the world is constructed by social conventions within a particular historical context) leave theology without its classic foundations—either objective truth given to history (by revelation, as in orthodoxy) or our discovery of absolute truth (through reason, as in rationalism) or empiricism (through experience, as in liberalism).

Pragmatism and Meliorism
Pragmatism has an evaluative meaning as well as a methodological and empirical meaning. Meaning and truth are oriented toward and judged by human fulfillment or social betterment, i.e., toward what pragmatists such as James, Dewey, and West call "meliorism." As Rorty puts it, "My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law." Ideas and beliefs are true insofar as they prove to be "good," that is, to resolve doubts, inconsistencies, and dilemmas (Peirce), to be "helpful in life's practical struggles" (James), to serve the "social well being" or remove some specific trouble or perplexity and result in growth or improvement or progress (Dewey), or to enable "courageous resistance against and relentless critique of despair, dogmatism and injustice and social misery and oppression" and enable "ordinary people to flourish and flower" (West). For both pragmatists and neopragmatists (the most influential example today is Richard Rorty's neopragmatism), the significance of our beliefs is their consequences or practical effects on the well-being of the citizens in a democratic society.

Affinities between Methodism and Pragmatism
John Wesley and Methodist doctrine share much in common with American pragmatism; and Methodists could more adequately articulate their under-
standing of the nature of doctrine by formulating it in pragmatic terms. There are, of course, other candidates for such a recommendation for Methodist theology, such as existentialism and process philosophy. But the antifoundationalist, empiricist, and instrumental or practical themes of Methodist doctrine can be supported and interpreted by American pragmatism. Wesley’s appeals to experience and the practical test of the relationship between the truth of a doctrine and its usefulness are consonant with pragmatism.

Caveats
Of course, it is misleading if not irresponsible to argue that Wesleyan theology is fully pragmatic in the way pragmatists from James to Rorty understand the term. Though Wesley is not a modern foundationalist in the sense of establishing knowledge and certainty on grounds independent of and prior to theological beliefs, he does not intend to deny that doctrines make claims about “how things are.” If secular tests are the only or final test for a pragmatic philosophy or theology, then Wesleyan theology is not pragmatic. First, Wesley, unlike the thoroughgoing pragmatists, began with a nonpragmatic defense of mystery. God is a mystery to every thought experiment and is not reducible to what secular thinking will allow or can explain within a secular context. For Wesley, God as mystery can be known through direct awareness apart from a pragmatic test of distinct and measurable consequences. The sufficient God is not the pragmatic God alone but rather the God of “the universe’s deepest reaches” (James’s phrase). A God who does not transcend, who is not a mysterious presence, who is not a divinity makes little religious sense.

Second, Wesley assumed the truth of Scripture and the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion apart from any test of their usefulness. He could not have been a thoroughgoing pragmatist because the authority of Scripture as eternal truth lay securely behind his appeals to experience and practice. His itches were never as irritating as they were for later modernity. Thus, for all his pragmatic arguments, pragmatism as such would not have been religiously adequate for him. And Methodists today will want to maintain a distinction between faith and philosophy, that is, between faith as an initial awareness and attachment to something unknown (a mystery, a “more”) and how we explain and defend our beliefs about the ultimate mystery. Faith in God as mystery exists prior to any pragmatic defense of “the right to believe.” While theology is faith seeking understanding, it cannot deal only with
beliefs that are permitted by a philosophy. Nevertheless, insofar as epistemology is helpful in understanding the meaning and truth of this attachment, today empiricism and instrumentalism are the most likely candidates to help us understand certain dimensions and functions of our beliefs.

Wesley and Theology

Wesley is close to pragmatism in his understanding of theological matters. Like Peirce and all subsequent pragmatists, he began with an anti-rationalist epistemology. He started with the beliefs of the church as he inherited them instead of with Cartesian doubt. The task of theology is not to prove our beliefs in the face of modern doubt through foundational certainty but to accept them until some anomaly arose. While modern skepticism has challenged Christian beliefs primarily because they conflict with other beliefs of the modern world, Wesley's problematic was more the deadness of inherited beliefs for vital religion. His attempt to revivify beliefs was supported by an appeal to experience and to testing those beliefs according to an essentially pragmatic criterion. For Wesley, experience as a mode of perception appropriate to the religious life and a pragmatic method of establishing the meaning and truth of beliefs are ways to understand and justify our beliefs (by experience and consequences) rather than by fideism, the authority of church, or speculative metaphysics. Wesley's empiricism and practical divinity were essentially pragmatic tests of doctrine that arose in the early modern period before pragmatism was defined. His theology has affinities with the empiricism of pragmatism and with a pragmatic understanding of how and why theology arises and continues in the church, namely, to make beliefs alive, to test them by way of experience, and to make them productive of a living faith.

Wesley and Empiricism

Theologians who are close to the radical empirical side of pragmatism retain a sense of mystery. Wesley's "religion of the heart," Edwards's "sense of the heart," Peirce's "instinct," James's "a more" or his "invisible spiritual environment." George Cell refers to Wesley's empiricism as "a higher form of transcendental empiricism" and as "the entrance of the leaven of experimentalism into his work." He means that for Wesley the plain teaching of Scripture could not alone carry a conclusion about the truth but must be vouched for by the appeal to experience. Before Wesley, Cell claims, the word experience does not occupy such a conspicuous place in preaching,
teaching, and writing of any master of doctrinal and practical Christianity. Wesley was a pragmatist, then, in the broad sense that he shared the pragmatists' commitment to empiricism. Wesley rejected eighteenth-century rationalism as the basis for any kind of knowledge, including religious. Of course, many Wesleyan scholars have recognized the way in which Wesley was an eighteenth-century empiricist. So the claim that Wesley was a pragmatist in the sense that he was an empiricist identifies him with the stream of philosophy that undergirds pragmatism, namely, empiricism; but it alone does not establish him as a pragmatist. Because not all empiricists are pragmatists in the proper sense of the term. (All pragmatists are empiricists. But not all empiricists are pragmatists.) Pragmatism is above all a philosophical method, not a metaphysic or a worldview.

Although Wesley had a greater optimism than the major empiricist philosopher, John Locke, about what can be known about the world through the senses and what can be known directly about God, Wesley was an empiricist in the mode of Locke. He also denied innate ideas. Before a true judgment could be made, it is necessary to get a clear idea about what is being judged. And the ideas we judge must come from our senses, either natural or spiritual. Yet, as with pragmatists, the source of our ideas is not our own experience but the social constructions of the past that were useful in negotiating the world and that we inherited. Wesley believed the teachings of Scripture and church were true before his experience verified them to be true. Yet Wesley believed experiential verification was a necessary criterion for determining the truth of the ideas we continue to believe.

Wesley's religious empiricism functions in the transcendental realm rather than in the natural world. In this matter Wesley is a metaphysical dualist not unlike Descartes in distinguishing body and soul, the world and God, in contrast to pragmatic theologians who are non-reductive naturalists. Thus, Wesley as an empiricist appeals not to the five senses of the body but to a sensibility in the soul—a spiritual organ or sense that perceives spiritual realities analogous to the physical senses that perceive physical realities. James considered it to be not one specific sense but rather a "religious sentiment, a sense of reality other than that given by the specific senses." For Wesley, the spiritual sense is "a hypostatized faculty or organ whose existence can only be inferred from the actual presence of religious affections." Such experience for Wesley was awareness of God's gracious presence, "as real and unmistakable a perception as any sensory awareness.
When I met Peter Bonier again, he consented to put the dispute upon the issue which I desired, namely, Scripture and experience. I first consulted Scripture. But when I set aside the glosses of men, and simply considered the words of God, comparing them together, endeavoring to illustrate the obscure plainer passages; I found they all made against me, and was forced to retreat to my last hold, 'that experience would never agree with the literal interpretation of those scriptures. Nor could I therefore allow it to be true, till I found some living witness of it.' He replied, he could show me such at any time; if I desire it, the next day. And accordingly, the next day he came again with three others, all of whom testified, of their own personal experience, that a true living faith in Christ is inseparable from a sense of pardon from all past, and freedom from all present, sins. They added with one mouth that this faith was the gift, the free gift of God: and that he would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it. I was now thoroughly convinced; and, by the grace of God, I resolved to seek in unto the end.

Wesley and Practical Divinity
The notion of "practical divinity" is so central to a Wesleyan understanding of doctrine that Thomas Langford uses it to characterize 250 years of Methodist theology. Actually, this precise combination of words occurs only 14 times in the entire Wesley corpus, although "practical" appears 114 times, "experimental," 42 times; "experimental and practical divinity" 3 times; and "experimental divinity," 3 times. How does the phrase practical divinity mean? Most
characteristically in Wesley’s usage, the phrase is used in contrast to speculative or controversial theology. But I contend that the phrase indicates that Wesleyan theology is “practical” not only in the sense that it is experiential but also in that it refers to the experimental, instrumental, or pragmatic nature of doctrine. That is, it ties Christian doctrine to the character and concrete practice of Christian life (discipline) and establishes a pragmatic test for determining the meaning and truth of doctrine by examining the consequences of doctrine for Christian living.

The truth of the gospel is established within a community of believers by means of experience and by means of its consequences for the Christian life. Wesley was not interested in theology “straight up” as a set of divinely revealed truths or logically grounded beliefs. He never attempted to “prove” or establish the truth of doctrines by some kind of foundationalism (as revealed absolute truth or by rational necessity or logical consistency). Rather, his thought was devoted to a pragmatic understanding of doctrine. By “experimental religion,” Wesley meant “that religion in which the stated truths of scripture concerning inward religion become verified in the life of a believer, a religion in which people may test the truths of scripture for themselves.”

Theology is ultimately related to Christian living, actualized in authentic living for the purpose of transforming personal life and social relations. “Practical theology” was simply a name for bringing the gospel and life together, for making the message clear in expressing God’s grace and for structuring gracious Christian living. The phrase refers to beliefs that are “reproducible” and are “for activation in human life” as a “way of life” and are “without consequence until it is owned unequivocally by the ‘almost Christian’” and so is “verified in experience” as the truth that leads to “justification and newness of life.” Wesley did not use experience as a foundation for doctrines. Instead, he used doctrines to shape a believer’s experience. And if a doctrine did not lead to a certain consequence—namely, the formation of a Christian life and the love of God and neighbor—the truth of the doctrine was not confirmed.
Their truth is measured by their consequences. Although Wesley assumed the truth of Scripture and inherited doctrines apart from the pragmatic test, in the end these truths were not true apart from their pragmatic consequences; that is, their results in a life lived in the love of God and neighbor. Beliefs are true only if they result in the holiness of the believer. To be sure, there is a difference between James's and Wesley's pragmatic criterion. For James, the pragmatic test is whether or not beliefs serve human well-being (James called it "humanism"), while for Wesley it is whether or not doctrines serve Christian living (Wesley called it "holiness"). But both are pragmatists in the sense that beliefs serve the practical ends of human well-being. (The "unequivocal, ameliorative impulse" of all pragmatists, especially James, Dewey, and Rorty, is another affinity between pragmatism and Wesleyanism I do not have space to develop here.)

Two examples will underscore the pragmatic test in Wesley's understanding of true doctrine, namely, the doctrines of predestination and perfection. First, Wesley rejected predestination not because it contradicted a specific metaphysical view of reality but because it led to bad consequences, namely, it undercut Christian discipleship. In his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Wesley attempts to undercut a Calvinist (or any antinomian) exegesis of Scripture, which would have negative consequences for Christian living. In his exegesis of 1 Cor. 14:6, he refers to doctrine as a way "to regulate your tempers and life," making the test for a belief its inherent transformative power. His argument against predestination is based on "its positive or negative results on Christian life in the world."

A second example of how Wesley applied the pragmatic test for what he chose to teach is his key doctrines of Christian perfection and assurance. To be sure, he believed the Scripture required them and taught them; but his exchange in his 1759 tract on Christian perfection is instructive here. In his question and answer format, he asks, "What is Christian perfection?" and "What if none have attained it yet? What if all who think so are deceived?" Instead of responding, "Scripture teaches perfection, therefore believe it," Wesley replies, "Convince me of this and I will preach it no more." Cautious about overplaying his empiricism and pragmatism, he rejects the possibility that his belief and preaching are based solely on the evidence of this or that person. Nevertheless, he says, "But if there are none made perfect yet, God has not sent me to preach perfection." He then turns to his preaching of assurance as analogous. "Convince me that this
word has fallen on the ground, that in all these years none has attained peace, that there is no one living witness of it at this day, and I will preach it no more." Indeed, in question 38, he applies the pragmatic test even to Scripture, or at least to his interpretation of Scripture. "But what does it signify, whether any have attained it or no, seeing so many scriptures witness to it? ... If I were convinced none in England had attained, what has been so clearly and strongly preached by such a number of preachers in so many places and for so long a time, I should be hereby convinced that we had all mistaken the meaning of those scriptures—and, therefore, for the time to come, too, must teach that sin will remain until death."55

Conclusion
My intention here has not been to promote a movement among Wesleyan theologians for "Wesley as a pragmatist." Rather, I have argued for lines of affinity between Wesleyan theology and American pragmatism. Insofar as it is interested in epistemological questions, Methodist theology at the beginning of the postmodern world could benefit greatly by developing a pragmatic understanding of the character of our "practical divinity." To be sure, our doctrine is in great peril were its truth dependent on its being founded or permitted by any "secular" method. But it has great promise if we can get beyond the pejorative and pedestrian references to "Methodist pragmatism" and elaborate more thoughtfully and explicitly, through the use of American pragmatism, how Wesleyan theology accepts the relativity of our thinking so that our concepts and modes of reasoning are available to us only in our limited context; how what makes a good theology depends on the purposes we want it to serve; and how the purpose of "practical divinity" is directed toward, interpreted as meaningful, and confirmed as true by the consequences of our doctrine for the love of God and the neighbor. Pragmatists and Methodists have little patience with beliefs that undercut, neglect, or fail to be confirmed by well-being and holy living.

Tyron Inbody is Professor of Theology at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, and an elder in the North Indiana Annual Conference.

Endnotes
1. Thomas Oord, "Types of Wesleyan Philosophy: The General Landscape and My
I thank my colleagues William Dean, Wendy Deichmann-Edwards, and Kendall McCabe for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this essay.

One welcome exception to this generalization is Mark Mann, "A Pragmatic Wesleyanism: Price, Wesley, and a Nonfoundational Religious Epistemology," http://david.snu.edu/~brint.fs/wpsjnl/Mann01.htm.


20. James, Pragmatism, 133, 47.
22. See James, Pragmatism, 14, 45-47.
24. Ibid., 192.
27. James, Pragmatism, 57.
28. Ibid., 61-62; See also 57, 192.
29. Ibid., 168.
32. Anderson, Pragmatic Theology, 105.
34. West, "The Limits of Pragmatism," in Cornel West Reader, 186-87.
38. Ibid., 93, 73.
39. Mann, 'A Pragmatic Wesleyanism,' 8. Wesley uses the word experimental in several of his writings, including "this experimental proof" in reference to health treatment via shock therapy (1:346); "experimental knowledge" of


41. James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 61.


49. Cushman, John Wesley's Experimental Divinity, 36-38.


52. See West, Cornel West Reader, 144.


Coaching, Pastoral Counseling, and Ministry

THOMAS R. HAWKINS

Once church leaders stopped calling ministry groups "committees" and began describing them as "teams," it was only a matter of time before "coaches" replaced "chairpersons." After all, teams do not have chairpersons. The New England Patriots and the Indianapolis Colts do not have chairpersons, convenors, facilitators, or even leaders—they have coaches. So if churches have teams, they must also have coaches. When church leaders embraced the language of teams, they opened the door for another, more subtle, shift in their language of leadership—from leader to coach.

Therefore, ministry "teams" no longer need chairpersons or leaders. They instead have "coaches." If the newly formed ministry team is still acting like the old church committee, then perhaps its members lack good coaching on their roles and responsibilities. They need a coach, not a chairperson with better facilitation skills. If creative new pastors encounter stiff resistance to their change efforts, they do not need to attend another seminar or workshop. They will instead benefit from having a personal coach. A coach can walk alongside them through the minefields of congregational change, helping them calibrate their own behaviors to new circumstances and purposes.

Tipping Point for Coaching as an Emerging Discipline?

The new language of coaching seems to have reached a tipping point. References to coaching are suddenly everywhere. One of Tom Bandy's recent books proposes that effective leaders are involved in "coaching change." Robert E. Logan has long been closely associated with the church planting and church multiplication movements. He now serves as
Executive Director of CoachNet, whose website proposes that coaching is essential for effective ministry. CoachNet even asserts that leaders who have a coach will experience higher success rates in ministry than other church leaders. One of the Alban Institute's best-selling books in 2003 was *Redeveloping the Congregation: A How-to for Lasting Change* Each chapter supplements the text with material written from a coaching perspective.

Judicatory leaders responsible for church development and redevelopment are also embracing coaches and coaching. For example, the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference's Office of Congregational Development has the goal of creating a coaching culture throughout the conference. Conference leaders hope to train and deploy coaches for new-church developers, transformational pastors, and pastors involved in missional ministries. Coaching, they conclude, holds one key to an effective congregational development strategy. This conclusion is not an isolated phenomenon. Several denominations either request or require that church planters have a coach to walk beside them during their start-up years.

Coaching's popularity is even more pronounced in corporate and business settings. As early as 1950, Myles Mace used the term coaching in his book *The Growth and Development of Executives*. Mace emphasized on-the-job coaching as one way to develop an executive's leadership and managerial skills. Over the past half-century, coaching has expanded into a strategy for boosting the career advancement possibilities of promising employees as well as for improving executive performance.

It was not until the early 1990s that coaching gained momentum as a separate profession. In 1992, Thomas Leonard founded Coach University. Almost simultaneously, Laura Whitworth and some of her associates founded the Coaches Training Institute. Both organizations quickly began graduating trained coaches who entered private practice as well as corporate settings.

In 1996, only 200 people attended the first International Coach Federation (ICF) conference. By 1997, attendance had increased to 300. From these modest numbers, who could have anticipated that ICF would now include 14,000 members worldwide? In addition, nearly fifty training programs currently prepare professional coaches.

Coaching, as Myles Mace observed fifty years ago, had always been a special perk of corporate executives. As the twenty-first century begins, coaching has now become generally available to everyone. Coaches have
carved out specialty niches unknown even a few years ago. These niches range from life coaching to relationship coaching, from diet management to retirement planning. Coaches will help you organize your office or your household closets. Not surprisingly, a coaching niche also exists for church leadership and congregational transformation.

Why Now?

While coaching seems to have burst unexpectedly onto the organizational landscape, its current popularity has deep roots that have been growing unnoticed for several decades.

Disillusionment with counseling and managed care

As counseling has moved into the realm of managed care, some counselors have become increasingly dissatisfied with the constraints created by insurance regulations and government policies. So they opted to shift from counseling to coaching. Books such as Williams and Davis's *Therapist as Life Coach* and Lynn Grodzki's *The New Private Practice: Therapist-Coaches Share Stories, Strategies, and Advice* are explicitly written for people wishing to make a transition from counseling to coaching. However, this alone cannot account for coaching's popularity. Its popularity stems also from a changing understanding of how organizational transformation occurs.

From organizational redesign to personal transformation

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, North American institutions undertook numerous large-scale change initiatives. Few of these efforts produced the results for which their proponents had hoped and most ended in frustration, if not outright failure. By the early 1990s, many change agents had become disillusioned with large-scale structural redesign and the politics of strategic planning.

Their hopes subsequently shifted to a new, emerging strategy for organizational change—the personal and professional transformation of individual leaders. Previous initiatives had failed, they reasoned, because key leaders often refused to alter their own behavior while simultaneously demanding changes in how other groups and individuals functioned. Unless one could transform how key organizational leaders thought and acted, few other systemic changes would take root.

Parallel to this development, the 1990s saw a surge of interest in systems thinking. Systems thinking asserts that all parts of a system are
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interconnected. Changing one part automatically changes all the others. Such thinking reinforced the emerging approach to organizational change that focused on changing key leaders. Because leaders occupy a unique social location within organizations, altering their behavior triggers significant changes throughout the whole system.

Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* represents the shift from the structural redesign of organizations to the personal transformation of individual leaders. Edwin Friedman's *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* and *A Failure of Nerve* reflect the same shift. Friedman, for instance, argued that the leader's own level of self-differentiation and maturity determine the whole organization's level of maturity. An organization cannot grow beyond its leader's own maturity level. Consequently, the best way to help an organization change is to work on the leader's growth and transformation.

However, transforming how leaders think and behave is not an easy task. Attending a few workshops will seldom alter a lifetime of deeply engrained habits. What, then, could help leaders sustain the transformative changes they were personally committed to making?

Having an executive coach quickly emerged as one answer to this question. Coaches could contribute to a level of reflective practice, accountability, and support that otherwise remained unattainable. Coaching became the leverage point for organizational renewal and change. Once organizational change was reconceptualized as an inside-out rather than an outside-in process, coaching for leadership became an indispensable resource.

Coaching's evolution among church leaders follows roughly this same trajectory. In the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference, for example, the merger of two previous annual conferences in the mid-1990s was not followed by detailed strategic planning and organizational redesign but rather by an intense, sustained emphasis on leader development.

**Downsizing and the elimination of informal coaches**

Another significant factor in the evolution of coaching has been corporate downsizing. Middle managers traditionally served as informal coaches and mentors. They fostered learning, guided people toward new skills, and assisted with career planning and development. Corporate downsizing, triggered by globalization and technological change, eliminated many of these positions, creating a coaching and mentoring void. Since nature
A host of self-employed coaches have rushed in to fill it.

One can trace a similar pattern in church organizations. Annual conference staffs have shrunk considerably over the past decade. Successive financial crises as well as changing philosophies about the function of denominational bodies have downsized most judicatory staffs. Many downsized staff members had informally served as coaches and mentors. They fostered personal and professional growth, anchored new skills, and guided people toward new learning. In their absence, should we be surprised by a fast-growing market for coaches who will help pastors improve their preaching, work through conflict and change, or balance their personal, spiritual, and professional lives?

Defining the New Profession of Coaching

Some church leaders have enthusiastically embraced coaching, but others remain skeptical. Critics complain that the terms coach and coaching conjure up negative rather than positive images. The term coaching suggests a red-faced basketball coach (usually male) shouting orders from the sideline to players on the court. It seems masculine, authoritarian, and hierarchical. These same athletic connotations give coaching a competitive, hard edge. Others find the terms too vague or general. Is coaching truly a new type of helping relationship; or is it just putting a new label on the same old thing that consultants and counselors have been doing for a long time? Still others equate coaching with giving advice and wonder what all the fuss is about. What is so unique or special about giving advice?

If the term coaching is part of the problem, then it may be helpful to revisit its origin and evolution. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the English word coach first appeared in the sixteenth century. It referred to a closed, horse-drawn carriage with seats on the interior for the passengers and exterior seats for the coachmen or drivers. It was derived from the French word coche, which was a corrupted version of the Hungarian term koczi szeker—a wagon from the Hungarian town of Kocs.

So how did we get from a horse-drawn carriage invented in sixteenth-century Hungary to a twenty-first-century helping relationship? Actually, it is not an enormous leap of imagination to see how both a helping relationship and a horse-drawn carriage involve moving people from one place to another. A carriage was a useful metaphor for helping people go from one place to another in their life journeys. By the nineteenth century, English
universities were describing a private tutor who prepared candidates for examinations as a "coach." Within these same universities, a coach could also be someone who trained others for athletic contests. Coaching helps people go from where they are to where they want to be. It is an action-oriented partnership that helps people stay focused on the results they want to achieve. Too often leaders become distracted by daily circumstances and lose sight of their larger purposes and visions. Coaches support leaders who want to identify and stay focused on important tasks or purposes.

Coaches guide church leaders toward increased competence and self-awareness. A coach can facilitate reflective practices that enhance a leader's effectiveness. Having a coach means having a partner who can help one reflect on one's own thinking and uncover blind spots or hidden assumptions that get in the way of effective action. Coaches work from the inside out. They help leaders discern their own core values, sense of vocational call, and vision. They foster the critical thinking and strategic planning that translate these values, visions, and vocational meanings into specific goals and concrete actions. Coaching holds people accountable and supports follow-through on freely chosen actions.

Benefits and Possibilities

One can easily understand why pastors would be attracted to such a relationship. Many pastors work in relative isolation. Significant contact with other professional colleagues is often sporadic and episodic. The coaching relationship offers the possibility of ongoing support and guided dialogue around important pastoral issues.

Coaching is particularly helpful when leaders have multiple projects competing for their attention, when resources are scarce, or when they face tough choices. (When are these conditions not the norm for pastoral ministry?) Pastors often need help staying focused on the results they want to achieve. Daily circumstances can easily distract them from their major goals, causing them to lose sight of their larger purposes and visions. Coaching can play an invaluable role in helping pastoral leaders maintain focus amid daily pressures and distractions.

These two reasons alone account for coaching's popularity with church planters and redevelopment specialists. These particular pastors typically face severe isolation and loneliness. They often must make difficult choices.
Coaching can play a pivotal role in helping these church leaders stay focused, healthy, and grounded.

Coaching also has implications for lead pastors in multiple-staff settings. Some church staffs operate on the rancher model: Each member has his or her own turf and everyone else stays out. Others are rigidly hierarchical; and lead pastors exercise considerable control. Heads-of-staff who want to empower other staff members while maintaining reasonable oversight would find coaching tools, techniques, and strategies extremely helpful in their work.

Alan Roxburgh has argued that the North American church's current context requires it to move beyond traditional 'lone wolf' understandings of ministry. When multiple cultural, demographic, and technological factors are simultaneously in transition, no single individual has the gifts and graces to lead churches successfully through uncertain times. Our historical context requires plural leadership—different people with different personalities, skills, and perspectives working together in shared leadership arrangements.

Since few individual congregations can afford a multiple staff with all the necessary competencies, the best answer is some form of collaboration, partnership, and mutual sharing among pastors within defined geographic areas. Mutual conversation and coordination between these leaders would supplement strengths, illumine previously hidden blind spots, and nurture new skills. Collaboration, dialogue, and mutual support in such an arrangement would inevitably take the form of coaching. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Roxburgh's model could thrive unless all participants shared basic coaching skills and competencies.

Finally, many traditional sources for coaching and mentoring have disappeared. As noted earlier, downsized judicatory staffs have lost most of their capacity for coaching church leaders. Downsizing has also resulted in district superintendents and similar judicatory officials overseeing more churches and pastors. Consequently, they have less time to coach or mentor other leaders. The superintendent's supervisory responsibilities and appointive power also potentially undermine the coaching dialogue itself. Many pastors need another relationship outside these supervisory lines. Coaching provides one obvious solution.
Coaching and Pastoral Counseling

To produce these outcomes, coaches use a tool kit of practices and skills. Coaches listen closely, empathize, ask good questions, and challenge assumptions. They are skilled in such practices as reframing, establishing trust, and building rapport. Coaches assist clients in goal setting and action planning. They develop the client’s ability to make decisions and take responsibility for their lives. They design structures for accountability and support.

These competencies seem similar to skills traditionally associated with therapy and pastoral counseling. How does one distinguish where coaching leaves off and pastoral counseling begins?

Unfortunately, the line between coaching and counseling is not always clear. This blurred boundary derives from common philosophical roots that both disciplines share. For instance, coaching’s emphasis on vision and values draws heavily on Adler’s belief that people develop a unique life approach that shapes their goals, habits, and values. It also echoes Jung’s emphasis on living one’s life purposefully, his teleological belief that we invent our futures through our visions. Humanistic psychology also figures prominently in the coaching literature, especially Maslow’s language of self-actualization. Other aspects depend on Milton Erikson’s insights into how language and powerful questions can trigger transformational change.

With such eclectic and diverse roots, what really distinguishes coaching as a separate discipline? Indeed, critics worry that some coaches may actually be doing harm to people who are receiving coaching but actually need counseling. These same critics complain that coaching may provide a convenient excuse for people who need but are resistant to therapeutic help.

While there is considerable overlap between counseling and coaching skills, both ICF and individual coaches make a vigorous distinction between coaching and counseling. Coaching and counseling work with different populations, have differing goals, possess divergent orientations toward time, and have distinctive ways of structuring the client relationship. Coaching, they argue, is for people who are basically healthy but want to accomplish more in their lives. Therapists and counselors, on the other hand, have traditionally worked with people who bear a burden of emotional pain rooted in past experiences. Thus, counseling emphasizes healing and the processing of emotion. The counselor’s general goal is to heal emotional pain so clients are more able to cope with life and relation-
ships. Coaching, on the other hand, is more oriented toward learning and performance, not emotional or cognitive disorders.

According to coaching's proponents, counseling looks back into the client's past, focusing on the client's previous emotional and psychological history. Coaching explores what kind of future clients are seeking to create. Coaches help people focus on future behaviors and take concrete next steps toward their goals. Whereas a coach would ask "how" the client can move forward, a counselor seeks to find answers in the client's personal history for "why" they act as they do now.

Therapists are more apt to focus on process, feelings, and the client's inner world. As a result, therapists are free to move at a slower pace and to examine reflectively the client's inner world. Coaches, conversely, are more oriented to outcomes, actions, and the client's outer life. The client's inner world has importance only insofar as the client needs to link an inner sense of values and purpose to outward action. Consequently, coaches move at a faster pace, seeking to produce concrete results in areas where the client wants to see progress.

The two disciplines also have different settings. Counseling usually occurs in controlled, consistent, private settings. The counseling conversation has a fixed time and happens at regularly scheduled intervals. These conversations almost always occur face-to-face. Coaching, on the other hand, is much more flexible. While some coaches meet with their clients in face-to-face settings, many coaches use the telephone for their sessions with clients. The coaching schedule itself may be more fluid and dynamic with opportunities for email and fax contact between regular telephone calls.

Coaches also distinguish themselves from counselors by pointing to how power is handled in the client relationship. Most therapists, they argue, operate from a medical model—the therapist is the expert, the client the patient. Clients come with problems they expect the "expert" to "fix." The therapist remains the professional who has special expertise that the client lacks. In coaching, however, the client always retains the power. Clients remain the experts on their own work and experience. Coaches speak of their client relationships as partnerships between equals. Coach and client are co-active in designing their alliance. While therapy is usually hierarchical, coaching is typically collaborative and mutual.

These distinctions are somewhat overdrawn, as all attempts to model or categorize whole professions always are. However, they do suggest that
coaching and counseling are two ends of a continuum. At many points between these two poles, they overlap and their boundaries blur—particularly where both professions draw on some of the same tools and strategies.

Some Theological Concerns
The real critique of coaching does not lie with how it distinguishes itself from other, more traditional, helping relationships. Far more serious are some of its philosophical and theological assumptions.

For example, coaches often speak of their clients as creative and whole, brilliant and resourceful. Clients have nothing broken, missing, or needing repair. The intent of such language is to make clear that the coach is not a therapist trying to fix something that is wrong with a client. It also highlights where coaching's assumptions are not easily integrated into a Christian tradition where no one is whole and where everyone has something broken, missing, and in need of repair.

Coaches often assert that clients already have the answers they need within themselves. The coach's task is to believe in the client's natural brilliance and resourcefulness. The coach's role is to help people discover their natural brilliance and find the answers they are seeking within themselves. At times these assertions seem as if they could have been drawn from some first-century Gnostic treatise. Robert Hargrove, for instance, writes that everyone has the power to choose whom they will be. Humankind's greatest invention is not the wheel or even fire. It is the power to invent and reinvent ourselves.¹³

The essential Christian assertion is that we do not have all the answers within ourselves, let alone the ability to invent and reinvent ourselves. Certainly, within most expressions of Western Christianity since Augustine, there is no place within ourselves that is so free from sin that we can bootstrap ourselves back into wholeness or obtain an undistorted picture of ourselves and our world. Again, an assertion that works well in distinguishing coaching from counseling may make coaching somewhat suspect among thoughtful Christian leaders.

Coaching also has elements that are deeply grounded in the Christian vision of life. Its emphasis on creating a safe and trusting place where people can dream, vision, and take action in their lives immediately resonates with biblical images of hospitality. Coaching seeks to create a hospitable space where people can discover deeper truths about themselves. Its emphasis on
dialogue and partnership also echoes many gospel themes.

Coaching consistently refuses to compartmentalize life. Coaches—even executive coaches—insist that their clients’ personal and professional lives are deeply interconnected. Coaching’s focus is the whole of one’s life. Coaches argue that they do a disservice to people when they help them excel in one part of their lives at the expense of other parts. Within a religious tradition that asserts that we can lose our souls even while winning the world, coaching’s holistic emphasis finds a natural home.

Conclusion

Church leaders learn best by reflecting on their leadership practices in ways that forward the action of their lives and deepen their own understanding of themselves and their purposes in the world. Coaches can play an indispensable role in this process. They can support people as they uncover blind spots and explore new ways of thinking or acting. Coaches can encourage church leaders to step out of the reactive flow of events in order to reflect and act more purposefully. Coaches nurture the conditions where leaders can learn to trust their own intuitive knowledge. Coaching offers a practical way to structure accountability and support into pastoral leadership.

Coaching has only recently emerged as an important resource for church leaders. Its staying power and long-term benefits remain undetermined. Yet its potential is great, particularly if its relationship to more traditional helping professions is clarified and its philosophical underpinnings subjected to a more rigorous theological examination.

*Thomas R. Hawkins teaches in the Career and Organizational Studies Program at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois.*

Endnotes


10. Ibid.


Will This Holy Mystery Serve United Methodists Well?

WILLIAM MCDONALD

This Holy Mystery (THM) is a milestone in the United Methodist sacramental renaissance afoot since at least 1972, when the prototype for our current Word and Table liturgy first appeared. The document represents an important and much-needed articulation of Methodism's eucharistic theology, the first such official statement. It joins its sister document on baptism, By Water and the Spirit, approved in 1996. With both statements, Methodism is poised to recover its theological and liturgical heritage and to be better prepared for ecumenical dialogues.

We need these documents because our sacramental theology and practice have lagged far behind Wesley's. In assuming the conventionalities of American Protestantism, Methodists have forgotten how our eucharistic theology makes us unique. Instead we have settled for a rather anemic memorialism in theology and a

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This Holy Mystery (THM) is the title of a document about the theology and practice of the sacrament of Holy Communion that was approved by the General Conference in 2004. One of the great benefits of this document is that it clearly explains the multiple biblical and theological understandings of the Lord's Supper and then shows how these principles are expressed in practice. While there is openness to flexibility, there is also clarity found here that is in line with the most current scholarship on early Christian eucharistic practices, research on the teachings of John Wesley, and the latest ecumenical dialogues on the subject.

So often what we do in worship is separate from what we believe. We don't always think about why we do what we do. The practice of worship often comes from the old adage "we've always done it this way".

Note: All page references to This Holy Mystery are taken from The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church-2004 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004).
contented unfamiliarity with Wesleyan eucharistic hymns and the liturgy they complement. To say we have needed this for a long time is an understate­ment. It is a step in the right direction.

*THM* effectively locates Wesleyan sacramental theology among Catholic and Reformational stances. The authors clearly articulate Methodist eucharistic theology while drawing upon ecumenical consensus about its corporate, memorial, sacrificial, and eschatological meanings. Wesley’s notion of “real presence” is identified with the Greek term *mysterion*, a sure and real presence and means of grace, but one that is to be experienced more than explained. This presence is connected to the elements while it pervades the assembly. *THM* quotes Wesleyan eucharistic hymns, such as “O the Depth of Love Divine”—a hymn, we might guess, that is seldom sung in our churches.

Thankfully, the statement corrects a longstanding tendency among Methodists, namely, that, while *anamnesis* (recollection) is an important dimension of the sacrament, we are not Zwinglian memorialists. “Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. . . . [It] is not primarily a remembrance or memorial” (898). Nonetheless, many clergy and probably most laity would describe the Eucharist solely in such terms. This is an instance of understanding shaped more by popular evangelicalism than by Wesleyan theology. Perhaps the statement could have also noted the inappropriateness of “Zwingli” tables, with “Do this in remembrance of me” carved across them. Why not tables with “I am the bread of life” inscribed across the front? Bare memorialism does not begin to plumb the depths of the Wesleys’ eucharistic poetry.

Surprisingly, the statement’s commentary on the use of wine is purely descriptive, noting that wine is commonly used among Christians and that “United Methodists customarily serve unfermented grape juice in Holy Communion” (920). Use of wine is neither advocated nor discouraged. Such liturgical mischief as “private” communions, irreverent disposal of remaining elements, and “consecrating elements ahead of time for the convenience of the pastor” are all strongly discouraged (921). Shedding such practices will help clarify eucharistic theology. Even more devastating to Communion practices has been the issue of “unworthiness” to commune. *THM* reinforces Wesley’s own pastoral advice to troubled consciences in this matter.

From the beginning, *THM* speaks in urgent tones about a cry from the grass roots for deeper, more meaningful, participation in Holy Communion.
According to a General Board of Discipleship questionnaire, circulated churchwide and used as background for the document, United Methodists hunger and thirst for better understanding of the sacrament, and better and more frequent celebrations. I wonder just where these fellow Methodists are. Looking out from my home in the Southeast, I see a church still very much attached to patterns and attitudes imimical to a fuller eucharistic practice. We have a longer way to go than the document suggests if a regular Sunday Eucharist is to become the norm in American Methodism. This is one of the document's hopes. But is it really the church's desire?

Can the document really call the church's attention to Communion and effect some corporate soul-searching about our practices? Not as long as it is not studied by local groups, used in seminary curricula, or taught by pastors and bishops. Unfortunately, the document risked oblivion from the start. It was approved at General Conference 2004, though most news reports ignored it. That was potentially the most important thing that happened at General Conference; but the fact that it passed with little fanfare is a haunting sign. It is not that the media failed to pick up on its significance but that the church itself is just not that interested; and This Holy Mystery may wind up gathering dust with lots of other worthy initiatives. If this happens, then worship and sacramental theology will plod along as usual, failing to be fed this cup of cold water. Does United Methodism really want to be eucharistically shaped? To the extent that it does not is symptomatic of how determinative nineteenth-century revivalism and conventional American Protestantism still are for us. The church is too deeply entrenched in these habits to be freed from them by a document, no matter how articulate.

Four old Protestant ghosts linger in our sanctuaries: the preference for the spiritual over the embodied; the inward and personal over the outward and corporate; preaching as the exclusive, most "effective," means of grace; and fear of all things Roman Catholic. This last ghost haunts the minds of those who think that added emphasis on the Eucharist is "too high church," when, in fact, it is a reclaiming of Wesley's evangelical catholicity. Wesley shunned theological innovation. By "plain old Christianity" he meant the New Testament and the early church. His renewal movement always assumed this catholic, universal background— the eucharistically centered church of the early centuries that continues to the present.

THM claims we are recovering Word and Table. This may be true around the edges of church life: at district pastors' meetings or as part of
some retreat schedules. But until Word and Table has entered the regular Sunday schedule in local churches, the sacramental revival has not really changed the church's soul.

Since we are still overwhelmingly sermon-centered, listening is the primary worship activity. Contemporary worship seems to offer only more of the same, just dressed up for the times. In many ways, the inertia in worship renewal has been compounded by contemporary worship sensibilities. It has created an enormous theological vacuum. We are sidetracked into preoccupation with style, marketing, "relevance," and a feverish "meeting of needs" when we should be thinking theologically about our practices. There is nothing inherently wrong with contemporary style, except that it is largely averse to sacramentality. At least, that seems to be the case in many congregations where it is being used.

However, there are exceptions to this condition. Many annual conferences have at least a handful of congregations that are breaking out of the cerebral model of worship and recovering the historic unity of Word and Sacrament. That these churches might combine traditional and contemporary music is far less exciting than the fact that they rejoin Word with Table, speech with sign-act, spirit with body, corporate with individual. They unabashedly celebrate Eucharist every Sunday and would think it odd not to do it. Let us find out more about these parishes and how they broke out of the conventional mold to recover truly catholic, evangelical, and sacramental worship. How does a regular Sunday Eucharist transfigure parish life as a whole? Perhaps THM can be supplemented with a collection of stories from these eucharistically centered United Methodist churches around the country telling us how they live out what the statement articulates.

Our basic obstacle to making THM truly our own is the fact that this catholicity is paid only lip service. We have a theology and a liturgy, but we are not shaped by them. Eucharist is regarded as one program among many, not as the heart and soul of the church's life. It is not yet the context for everything else we do. Having a sacramental theology is one thing, but living out of it is something quite different. We are not there yet. But maybe, if taken up and considered, THM can be a step along the way to the eucharistic feast.

William McDonald is College Chaplain and Associate Professor of Religion at Tennessee Wesleyan College in Athens, Tennessee.
way; or practices emerge from the personal preferences and experimentations of individual clergy or worship teams. THM roots the beliefs in historical, biblical, and theological principles and then shows how the actual practice of the celebration of Holy Communion should derive from and be consistent with those beliefs.

THM has also tried hard to maintain a "balance of welcome that is open and gracious and teaching that is clear and faithful to the fullness of discipleship" (901). There is an openness to flexibility, but this is not an "anything goes" approach to Holy Communion and the beliefs that undergird the practice of the sacrament. The document provides a clear explanation of what The United Methodist Church believes and it expects that children and adults alike will come to understand the meanings and purposes of Holy Communion.

Holy Communion is a sacrament. As such, it "uses tangible, material things as vehicles or instruments of grace" (891). In the case of Holy Communion, the material things are bread and wine (or grape juice). These "elements" convey the "presence of Christ" and are vehicles of God's grace to us as we participate in the sacrament. John Wesley believed that by partaking of Holy Communion, one could experience God's prevenient grace (God seeking us out, calling us, guiding us), God's convicting grace (the grace that convicts us of our sin and calls us to repent), God's justifying grace (that wonderful grace that allows us to feel forgiven and in right relationship with God), and God's sanctifying grace (the grace that urges us and enables us to grow in personal and social holiness as we become disciples of peace and justice in the world) (890-91). This is not to say that God's grace is not present at all times; but the instruments of bread and wine/juice make God's grace manifest for us in a unique way. They become the "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace." THM clearly reclaims God's grace as the foundation of this sacrament.

The recognition of God's grace present in the Eucharist leads the congregation to give thanks (eucharisteo). Historically, many have approached the Communion table with an attitude of unworthiness—a sadness of heart as the Lord's Supper was equated with the Last Supper and the remembrance of Jesus' crucifixion and death. While remembrance (anamnesis) is one aspect of the Lord's Supper, THM highlights the early church's practice of celebrating the Resurrection during Holy Communion.
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and giving thanks to God for God's various acts throughout salvation history, including the life and ministry of Jesus, not just his death. The document also emphasizes the communal aspect of Holy Communion—the body of Christ gathered to receive grace so that we may go into the world to offer our own bodies as a "living sacrifice." Because of God's grace, God's salvific acts in the past and the present, and God's future eschatological promise, we are encouraged to "approach the Communion Table with desire and expectation, with awe and humility, and with celebration and gratitude" (898).

THM affirms that when we take the sacrament of Holy Communion seriously, integrate our beliefs with our practice, and preside at the Table in such a way as to make the sacrament indwell the lives of individuals and the corporate body of the faithful, then God can use more frequent participation in Holy Communion to extend redemption, reconciliation, and justice (cf. 893). People will want to invite others to the table of grace and reach out to those on the margins of society who are excluded and feel unloved. We will invite others to come and eat and be nourished, healed, and forgiven. Participation in the sacrament can contribute to both personal and social holiness as we are "empowered to work for healing, compassion, reconciliation, justice, and peace" (925). We are called into "accountability for renewal of the social order, liberation for the oppressed, and the coming of the realm of God" (927).

While THM has much to offer local congregations, there will be some pastors and congregations who will find the document too structured and prescriptive and thus too limiting. They prefer a more informal approach to the sacrament, with extemporaneous prayers; or they prefer to break down the hierarchy of clericalism by wanting laity to participate in the liturgical leadership of celebrating Holy Communion. Ethnic cultures in the denomination, congregations in our central conferences that are not accustomed to a formal Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, as well as persons presiding in "contemporary worship" contexts may find in THM an approach to the Lord's Supper that is too traditional and too Eurocentric.

While I may have preferred a stronger emphasis on ways to adapt THM's recommendations to various contexts, my major concern with the document has to do with the language that seems to contradict the theology expressed. The doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation are repudiated and grace is emphasized. THM makes it clear that United
Methodists believe that "Christ is present through the community gathered in Jesus' name (Matthew 18:20), through the Word proclaimed and enacted, and through the elements of bread and wine shared (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The divine presence is a living reality and can be experienced by participants; it is not a remembrance of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion only" (896). However, the theology that is advocated in the language of the epiclesis section of the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving ("Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ" [*United Methodist Hymnal*, 10]) and the language that is most popular in the distribution of the elements ("The body/the blood of Christ, given for you" [11]) are not consistent with the belief stated in *THM*. The language in the Prayer implies that the elements are the body and blood of Christ. It reinforces a primary theme of Christ's sacrifice and guides us to equate the sacrament of Holy Communion with the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. For the sake of consistency, I would prefer (at least optional) language in the Prayer that clearly names what we believe, i.e., "May we experience your divine grace in these gifts that we may be your presence in the world."

However, let us read *THM* carefully lest we dismiss too quickly the many ways in which to implement its recommendations. The purpose of the document is to encourage our congregations to think clearly (historically, biblically, theologically, and experientially) about what the sacrament of Holy Communion is about. It prompts us to ask important questions. What does Holy Communion mean? What is God's role in it? What role do we play? Where is Christ present? Who should partake? What effect does Communion have for individual and communal transformation? How do the various aspects of our *practice* of this sacrament embody what we believe? I strongly encourage pastors to lead discussion groups within their congregations on *THM* so that people can begin talking about what they believe and how their beliefs are expressed in practice. May we all become faithful interpreters, claiming the document's clarity and flexibility.

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*Kathy Black is the Gerald Kennedy Chair of Homiletics and Liturgies at Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California.*
Chapter 1 opens with a salutation that introduces Paul in his office of apostle of Jesus Christ. He pronounces grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. There is also thanksgiving for the grace given to the Corinthian church (v. 4). The grace (charis) they have received is crucial for the appeals Paul will make later. Grace through the Spirit is basic to his pleas for unity and for the disposition that must accompany the gifts of the Spirit that were deposited among them.

Paul was very much aware of the richness of the gifts in this church. They were lacking in nothing, with possibly the exception of love and humility. But love, which brings on humility, is the greatest of the gifts in that it confirms whether a gift truly is from the Father of the Lord Jesus. Everything done in the church was to be a testimony to the salvation given through Christ and the redemption of creation wrought by him. The church is therefore to be a testimony to the faithfulness of God as it awaits the return of the Lord and the consummation of the age.

Corinth was a seaport city whose booming economy allowed it to prosper and thrive. It had a reputation for good living. Not surprisingly, the city had many shrines to many deities devoted to indulging the appetite for pleasure. It is understandable, then, that the Apostle spends much of the letter addressing issues of idolatry and sensual indulgence. Because of the similarity in ecstatic practices between pagan cults and Christian pneumatics, it was urgent that gifts of grace exercised in the name of Jesus be confirmed by the testimony of Christ and the criteria of godliness.

The occasion for the writing seems to be a response to reports that reached Paul in a letter from “Chloe’s people” (1:11); and possibly a letter
from her, Chloe was a prominent member in the church at Corinth. It appears that the church met in her house and that she possibly was the deacon at this church. Questionable spiritual practices, division, and strife that had arisen among the brothers and sisters was troubling—and an official act was to communicate with the apostle who planted the church for his wisdom, insight, and guidance.

Paul obliged with a response directed at the specific needs of the congregation; but he also addresses matters pertaining to the faith in every generation and a multitude of circumstances. Paul sets the specific issues facing the Corinthian congregation in the context of what it means to be in Christ—to live as members of one body and to be the sign of God's love to the world. The backdrop for speaking to specific issues of spiritual practice and other conduct is the resurrection of Jesus, the gift of the Spirit, and the expectation of the Lord's return. Hence, every act committed by the believer has consequences of ultimate significance.

Already in the salutation, Paul seems to anticipate the problems in fellowship caused by misunderstanding concerning charismatic gifts. So even in the general greeting, specific issues are being brought into focus. In v. 5, Paul implicitly addresses the practice among some in this community to assign priority to those having gifts of inspired utterance and spiritual knowledge. By means of utterance and spiritual knowledge, the Spirit could speak directly to guide the Body in revealing the mind of Christ and in edifying believers in the faith. Yet without love the testimony would not be to Christ at all. Without love, believers would scarcely be different from those intoxicated at the shrines of pagan deities.

The purpose of these "grace gifts" (charismata)—never to be lost—is to enrich the entire Body (v. 5). But the purpose is also that those outside the Body would be convicted and brought into the fellowship of believers. Paul affirms the abundance of the Corinthians' gifts (v. 7), but he keeps the gifts in proper perspective. Gifts are not ends in themselves; they are for fashioning a Body that witnesses to the work of Christ in the world and to his return to rule the world in righteousness.

The Apostle places a high premium on blamelessness (v. 8). The backdrop is the coming of the Lord, when all works will be tried. Utterance, exercise of gifts, and working of miracles that are not confirmed by the Lord will be rejected; and those who boast in them will be denied in the day of the Lord. However, true believers are to behave in the present as
though that day has already dawned. Only those with such purity of heart and act are blameless. They are waiting anxiously, with singleness of heart and no distraction, for that day. Indeed, they may be compared with the soldier who has shed excess garments to be ready. The degree of purity leaves such a one unaccused, beyond reproach.

Having one’s works confirmed by God rests in the divine faithfulness. It is given in the fellowship (koinonia) of the Son, but is inextricably bound up with the communion of the Spirit that is extended in the world through the church. There is a resonance within the body of Christ, the church, when it is enriched by the grace manifested in true utterance, knowledge, or any other gift.

During Advent, this word is a fitting reminder for why we exist as the church. Just as a gift is never given for its own sake or for the sake of the one who receives it, so the church does not exist for itself. Instead, the church bears witness to God’s redemptive work in creation. It is the manifestation of a divine disruption in an order that amounts to chaos. The church lives to extend the fellowship that is in God to all who believe on the name of Jesus. The gospel calls us to turn from the ways of rebellion and death to the transfigured world that can be glimpsed among those who love the Lord and one another.

Advent is the summons to forsake all ways that tarnish the image of God, which is being restored. It is the grand appeal to remain in a state of readiness and welcome to the Lord who fills the church by the Spirit and will fill the earth with knowledge and glory as the waters cover the sea.

December 4, 2005—Second Sunday of Advent
2 Pet. 3:8-15a; Isa. 40:1-11; Ps. 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8

This is one of the general epistles, sent as a circular letter to the churches named at the beginning (1 Pet. 1:1). It is addressed to believers undergoing persecution for the confession that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. The purpose is to encourage them to hold on to the faith and to remain steadfast in their profession. The suffering they endured was in part due to alienation from their families and their culture (1 Pet. 4:4-5). For obeying the gospel they decried behavior that previously had defined them. Former friends considered them strange. Yet they received the odd form of instruction that enjoined them to “rejoice” when they fell into temptation and to regard the trial of their faith as spiritual attainment (4:13).
The specific issue before us is the frustration that resulted from waiting for the return of the Lord. In this they shared the common lot of many Christians during the later portion of the apostolic and the subapostolic age. Specific reference is made here to the fathers who died, while all things remained the same. The problem is exacerbated by the scoffers, who would tease or poke fun at believers for a faith that seemed to them like foolishness (2 Pet. 3:4).

What is being probed in this particular lection is the folly of making judgments about God based on human measures. In this regard an inversion is taking place. Those who would posture as scoffers are now having the limits of their logic exposed. This is something of a rhetorical victory for the writer of the epistle, whose work is the fortification of believers who need this sort of defense. Human measures used against heavenly wisdom are essentially foolishness. Specifically, the problem here is "counting behind God," when God is from everlasting to everlasting. God is before arithmetic and will be when counting has ceased.

The issue here is not so much the 1000/1 ratio as it is the juxtaposition of domains. The one regarded as plenary is shown for what it is—human, limited, and inadequate. However, the ratio, which occurs at other places in the Scriptures, does assist in putting the truth of this word into perspective. There is a world of difference between the Lord's day and my day. It takes 365,000 of our days to equal one of the Lord's days. That means it takes over four of our days to equal one of the Lord's seconds; and a whole year of ours is just over a minute with the Lord. If a day with the Lord is a thousand years, a century goes by in a little over two hours.

The epistle writer knew the danger of unraveling the gospel by taking out essential content. He knew the urgency of keeping the promise at the heart of the gospel. The hope of the fullness of salvation is not merely a tag that is stuck on at the end. Yes, it is about the end (the eschaton); but this is where faith begins. Eschatology, that is, the doctrine of last things, is also a profound word concerning first things. For the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we confess as our Savior, is both Alpha and Omega. He is the beginning. He is the first and the last. Believing the end to which we are being taken is not a matter of "afterlife" so much as it is the principle of vitality in this life. Knowledge of what God is doing is the key to our courage, the source of our urgency, the supply of energy for our mortal frames.

The lethal pitfall in considering the Lord as being slack (slow, delayed)
is how it makes us slack. The logic is that if God is slack, then we can be slack with impunity—there are no consequences. If God is slack, then we can eat, drink, play, take God for granted—there is no need to be cautious. We tend not to be mindful of how we treat our neighbors. How we live is a matter of option; we can set aside the challenges and demands placed upon us. Truth can be changed at will; we can write our laws and set our agenda as we go.

The inversion is further shown as essential goodness that resides within God. What is named by the scoffers as slackness is proclaimed as long-suffering. It is not God's will that any should perish but that all should come to repentance and faith. This grace is extended so that those who believe will not perish with the elements when they dissolve with fervent heat (v. 12).

The urgency of this text is precisely the sort being pressed during Advent. It is a summons to faithfulness and obedience, even in the face of what seems like slowness on God's part. God does not view matters as we do. We are bounded by time; God's view of the matter is from eternity. Judgment does indeed come suddenly, but prior to its coming there is time—yea, extension of time—for the purpose of bringing on our repentance. Otherwise it is a given that the Lord will catch us with our work undone and reveal us in our faithlessness, which is the very motif found in countless parables.

The apocalyptic view of the apostle regarded nothing less than cataclysm as the prerequisite for ending a sin-scarred creation and transfiguring it as the home of God. Great noise and fervent heat are his preferred images for describing the destruction of the earth and its works in preparation for a new heaven and a new earth. Heat and power of this sort are no longer far removed from our reality. Neither is the lethal hatred that can serve to ignite it.

Recall how the steel melted when the planes struck the Twin Towers. Even more heat can be generated by splitting atoms to release nuclear power. That is the sort of heat that was released over the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when the bombs fell. Jihad is not a game in this nuclear age. Armageddon is not a political strategy for manipulating the balance of power in the world.

The question for the believer is this: What manner of people should we be—those who are fascinated with the world that is being destroyed or...
those who look for the new heavens and the new earth? It is the question of whether to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus and return to our pollutions or whether to be in all holy conversation and godliness.

December 11, 2005—Third Sunday of Advent
1 Thess. 5:16-24; Isa. 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126; John 1:6-8, 19-28

The epistle to the Thessalonians is perhaps the earliest New Testament writing that is preserved. Like 1 Corinthians 15, a prominent emphasis is on the Parousia—the return of the Lord. Here we see the throb of early Christian communities who awaited daily their Lord's coming with clouds and great glory to take them from a world of tribulation and suffering. Apocalyptic in character, the expectation was for the Lord to return at any moment. The cry of these believers was, "Come, Lord Jesus."

We see from this epistle that one ramification of this expectation was idleness within the community. There were those who refused to work because of this expectation. Not gainful in their behavior, they caused trouble and became a burden on others. Thus, they prompted the instruction that those who did not work should not be allowed to eat (2 Thess. 3:10).

What this lection gives is instruction for proper and productive waiting in the interim. To grasp the meaning of a text of this sort, one must appreciate the dilemma of the early church as the dilemma in which the entire Christian life is to be lived. On the one hand, we do not waste our time in idle pursuit; on the other hand, we do not deny or doubt the promise of the Lord's return. This is the same challenge with which we are faced in the gospel—namely, how to be found waiting, watching, ready for the return of the Lord. Rather than wasting time, we redeem time. We make haste to do the will of God in the power that accompanies his word.

A prominent reference in this epistle is to "demonstrations" (apodexis) of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:4). The gospel came not in words alone but with power—with manifestations (phanerosis, brilliance as with bright light). This was the inbreaking of the Kingdom as was seen in the ministry of Jesus and with the Resurrection. The Kingdom was at hand by the power of the Spirit. Here there is scarcely a distinction to be made between the resurrection of Jesus, the powerful demonstrations of the Spirit, and the return of the Lord. The reality of the encounters with the Risen Christ kept the community in a state of longing for his appearance, which was to be welcomed with great joy.
It is against the background of such life and vitality that the church is instructed not to “quench the Spirit” (5:19). That is, there is not to be disdain for these manifestations. Concern for order and decorum was not to allow gifts of the Spirit to be suppressed. For this would change drastically the very nature of Christian communities; and one of the possible consequences could be to retard the growth that came from conviction in the face of such great manifestations.

A similar word is in order regarding prophecy. In addition to the prepared homilies and the teaching that were so necessary for growth in the faith, room was to be left for the speech that came by direct inspiration. This was the speech that built up the Body, encouraged the believers, and made suffering ones strong in their faith. The prophetic gift was one of the marks of the “new age” that had dawned in righteousness. After all, according to the Apostle Paul, the Kingdom is not meat and drink but “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). More, with the outpouring of the Spirit came the promise that the sons and daughters would prophesy, the old men would dream dreams, and the young men would see visions. This was consistent with the return of the quenched Spirit that ushered in the Messianic age, causing the hearts of the fathers and the children to be turned to one another.

We have here, then, a sober acknowledgement of what the disposition can be toward the Spirit: quenching and resisting or openness. But even with openness there must be testing. Indeed, the instruction not to quench the Spirit is followed swiftly with instruction to put prophecy to the test (v. 21). Proving requires the exercise of the gift of discernment (diakrisis), by which knowledge is given to say whether a demonstration is truly of God. False spirits had gone out among the people; prophets spoke falsely and had led many astray. Hence, any claim to prophetic utterance was of its very nature a summons for testing.

Thus the tension: the prophetic gift is not to be despised and yet not to be exempted from testing either. More, the instruction to hold fast to what is good (v. 21b) is by implication an instruction to discard whatever does not pass the test. We have here not a friendly suggestion to be taken or left at will but an injunction that is binding upon the church.

The spirit of prophecy was given to destabilize the present order for the sake of the inbreaking of the new age brought by the Spirit. What is signified in such a moment is a permanent manifestation of what is achieved.
through Advent. Brackets are put around the present order. Privilege is withdrawn from it. For a space of time all things are open to inspection. The all-seeing eye of God prevails and nothing is hid so that it cannot be "discovered." Those in authority come under scrutiny. The life of the world to come is the norm.

The tensional language of this text is ever the speech and reality of the church. This is indispensable for believers undergoing persecution—the certain knowledge that our Lord comes to us in power and glory in the midst of tribulation. But it is equally important for a church that possesses power—that follows the tendency toward empire or ties its structures too closely to the intuitions that dispense and exercise the authority of the Gentile prince. The comfort of the church is ever to be for the trumpet to sound and the dead in Christ to rise. Indeed, the instruction is for us to comfort one another with these words.

The "at-hand-ness" of the Kingdom is to be the ever-present reality. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be alert, awake, and watching, ready for in-breaking judgment. The rupture that is the Kingdom occurs in time; but it comes in order to end time as we know it. It is the perduring juxtaposition of "an-other-world" that remains in judgment over against the kingdoms of this world. It is testimony to the truth that the suffering of this present world is not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us.

This text has ever been a favorite of Christians concerned with the holiness the church is expected to present to her Lord. As the bride of Christ, the church is to be chaste, pure, and ready for the return. Unlike foolish virgins, with no oil to keep their lamps trimmed and burning, the state of readiness is to be for whenever the cry of the bridegroom comes. Hence instructions to abstain from evil and to be blameless for the coming of the Lord (v. 23) are metaphors for describing the posture of the church toward her Lord and guiding precepts for the personal behavior of believers. We are to live in every moment as if it is the one when the Lord shall return.

Advent is the time when we come face to face with the meaning of the church's teaching concerning the coming of the Lord. This teaching, an element in the church's overall teaching that is not to be despised, has everything to do with how we live in the present. Thus, there is a place for the disciplines of "abstaining" for the sake of living the holy life. These disciplines actively covet the power of God and keep believers in a state of readiness. The Christian faith can ill afford to dispense with its expectation.
that the trumpet shall sound and the Lord shall descend. Indeed, to excise this word would be to invent another gospel.

December 18, 2005—Fourth Sunday of Advent


Here we have one of the great doxologies of the Scriptures. It is an ascription of glory to God the Father. The doxology comes at the end of one of the most complete treatises in the Scriptures—the Epistle to the Romans. The letter begins with reference to faith in Jesus Christ—of the seed of David but declared Son of God in power by the resurrection of the dead (1:3). It returns to that exalted note at its end, following the list of names of those who worked with this servant of the Lord.

Among everything else the Apostle does in this epistle, he probes the relationship between Jew and Gentile in the church of Christ and with respect to the work of salvation. For him, this is the mystery into which the angels longed to look. Now it has been revealed with a plenitude that surpasses by far the capacity of the most well-trained mind to fathom. Following his discussion of how the disobedience of Israel opened the way for the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles, Paul nevertheless insisted that they too would be brought in; and for that he blessed God with praise. Doxology is an act of glorifying God. By it, judgment is being brought against a present that is stained by sin, marred by brokenness, sundered by rebellion, and riddled by fracture. Any glory we so much as propose to take for ourselves or give to another creature falls short of the glorious life from on high.

Note that the doxology comes after a long and boring list of names (w. 1-23). What is interesting is that the list includes women as well as men. Among them is Phoebe, the deacon of the church at Cenchreae (v. 1).

The motif that runs through this epistle like a thread is this notion of bondage. One might say it is thoroughgoing. It is present in this epistle, which was probably written while the Apostle was in chains. He expressed his desire to come to the saints at Rome, but he had been prevented. He knew in a personal way how important it was for the Jewish and Gentile Christians to allow the gospel to transform them. He places much emphasis on the fact that Gentiles have no superior standing over Jews who prefer not to believe. But neither have the Gentiles superseded the Jews: Gentiles have been grafted into a stock that is holy and productive.
This doxology is riddled with the theme of continuity in the work of salvation. Indeed, this is the "mystery" that is being revealed (vv. 25-26). It is not to be known and fathomed by means of mere historical inspection. On the surface, one might say that the Christian faith is essentially for the Gentiles. True, they responded to Paul's gospel in a measure that exceeded the Jews. In his opinion, this was due to the fact that he was the apostle to the Gentiles. This led many Jews to the conclusion that they had been abandoned by this former Pharisee, who was a notorious persecutor of the church. It led Gentiles to believe that they had replaced the Jews and that the church had superseded Israel in the choice and plan of God.

Paul bristled at such a notion, insisting that Israel is the lump into which the Gentiles have been incorporated or the holy root into which the wild olive branches have been grafted (11:16-24). The gifts and callings of God need no apology. The disobedience of the Jews was the opening by which Gentiles could be brought into the holy stock. Once the Gentiles have been brought in, Israel will believe and be saved. The mystery is how God has used the disobedience of his chosen people to bring salvation to the world. How much more shall their obedience redound to this great salvation?

The terms of this mystery are interwoven as the very substance of this doxology. When Paul makes reference to "my gospel" (v. 25), he is speaking of the salvation history that he has narrated in chapters 9-11. One need not ascend to heaven to bring Christ down or descend to raise him. The word of faith is on the lips and in the heart. All that is required is to confess the Lord Jesus and believe God raised him from the dead.

The gospel is the power of God to everyone who believes— to the Jews first and also to the Greeks (1:16). There is no uncoupling of these two moments in Paul's gospel. For him this is the preaching of Jesus Christ. It is revealed in this mystery (mysterion) kept secret from the beginning of the world. What is made manifest is nothing other than what was declared by the Scriptures of the prophets. This truth was made known to him, Paul insisted, by the revelation of Jesus Christ. Herein lies the grounds for his act of worship.

Advent forces these terms of the gospel upon us. We are forced to look full-faced at this mystery. This is good preparation. The coming of the Lord is about far more than the commercial binges upon which we are prone to exit, as if the tangent has real or lasting meaning. The angle of approach given in this doxology compels us to align ourselves with the purposes of
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God from eternity, the calling of Israel, and the preparation of the line through which he came. In this regard genealogy is not insignificant. Jesus Christ is of the seed of David. True, he is declared Son of God by the Resurrection, but he is born of a woman under the Law. This datum in history is not negligible. The faith we profess has tissue; it is tactile, not docetic. It touches life with all its ramifications of pain, suffering, misery, strife, and rebellion. The triumph is not minus the tragedy.

What prompts the doxology is this surplus that takes us beyond what the eye can see, granting us a glimpse of heaven. It is more than what has entered into the heart. The scope is grand, beyond our capacity to control. It comprehends how even creation is brought into the movements of redemption: creation groans for its deliverance, and we are the firstfruits (8:22-23).

In doxology we have more than praise inspired by human utterance. Doxology is inspired by the Spirit. It puts one in the place of being overwhelmed, overshadowed, caught up, taken outside self. This is rapture. It is a rupture with the ephemeral, time-bound constraints upon reality.

Advent forces the posture of one who is brought into a state of readiness to receive the "mystery" that is being disclosed. The veil is removed. The posture is that of expectation. But more, there is utter reverence before the mystery. For there is certain knowledge that it is not fully exhausted—nor can it be. There is plenitude, surplus, richness, gushing, and overflow.

The reality proclaimed by Advent is that of the Lord who comes in glory, his appearance glorious. The angels who sing at his coming are none other than those who sang creation's story with the morning stars and, with the sons of God, shouted for joy. At his coming the trees of the wood clap their hands with joy. Every act of God in the restoration of all things in the well-beloved Son is glorious.

Advent is the reminder that the glory (doxa) is never exhausted or domesticated. It belongs to God—forever and always. It is the ascription of the creature, but is never brought under the control of the creature. In incarnation, God glorifies dust so that the dust may sing God's praises. God takes what the world despises to bring God glory. This makes the praise evermore glorious.†
LECTIONARY STUDY

William Turner, Jr., is Associate Professor of the Practice of Homiletics at Duke University Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

Endnotes


Issues In: U.S. Latino/Latina Theology

HAROLD J. RECINOS

Latinos/as have become the nation’s largest “minority” population. To the surprise of many members of U.S. society, in little more than two decades the United States will be the second-largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world. Latino/a history in North America dates back to before the founding of what is now called “the United States of America”; yet we are typically viewed by both African-American and White Americans as the disruptive outsiders who take away their jobs or transport Latin America’s social problems to U.S. soil or who are strangers unwilling to adapt to U.S. society.\(^1\) We prefer to have others understand that Latinos/as are not homogenous but differ in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, political behavior, language, social attitudes, class, history, and culture.\(^2\)

We live and work in a multiracial America; yet the theological reading of the central social-ethical problems on matters of civil rights and national identity reflects the concerns of Black and White humanity. For instance, in “Theology’s Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy,” James Cone, who writes extensively on racism in American theology, notes that White male theologians have not engaged the ideology of White supremacy as a “moral evil and as a radical contradiction of our humanity and religious identities.”\(^3\) Cone argues that White male theologians have engaged Latin-American theologies on class issues, feminist theology on gender issues, and the Jewish intellectuals on the question of Christian anti-Semitism, but they have failed to tackle White supremacy as America’s central theological problem. Cone is correct that the anti-racist struggle is a necessary calling for religious communities; but his vision for that struggle today cannot be limited to Black and White concerns.

Both African-American and White theologians must admit in their writing and lectures that America was not shaped by Black and White humanity alone; instead, various communities of color contributed to the formation of national identity and nourished the political struggle that
made democratic and religious institutions possible. American national and religious life was conceived in the contradiction between the idea of equal and inalienable rights for all people and the extermination of the Native Americans, the enslavement of Blacks, the disinheritance of Latinos/as from their homelands, and the killing and exploitation of Asians. Cone suggests that White theologians’ feelings of guilt prevent them from talking about White supremacy. But why do most Black and White public intellectuals and theologians avoid engaging Latinos/as on the subject of White supremacy and the anti-racist struggle?

White and Black theologians who position themselves at the privileged center of theological thought are challenged today from the Latino/a margin to discuss and understand Virgilio Elizondo, Orlando Costas, Justo González, Ada Maria-Isasi Diaz, Fernando Segovia, Ana Maria Pineda, Marla Pilar Aquino, Daisy Machado, Harold Recinos, Miguel De La Torre, Ismael Garcia, Roberto Goizueta, Eduardo Fernandez, Allan Figueroa Deck, Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, Yolanda Tarango, Eldin Villafañe, Orlando Espín, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Luis Rivera Pagán, Luis Pedraja, and Edwin Aponcé, among others. In what follows, I focus attention on selected themes in the development and unfolding of Latino/a theology. I also discuss aspects of two groundbreaking thinkers who emerged at different stages in the development of U.S. Latino/a theology: Virgilio Elizondo and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. I conclude by remarking briefly on the present stage of Latino/a theology as well as future directions and concerns.

First Stage: 1972–1989
Postmodern discourse is intellectually fashionable in much contemporary theological scholarship. However, long before it came into vogue, Latinos/as in barrios and colonias questioned the depth of an American Christianity that incarnated the injustices of the market economy in its life. They also rejected the allegedly superior wisdom of mainstream Christian thought. Beginning in 1972, when the first publications in Latino/a theology appeared, Latino/a theologians developed their perspectives from marginalized social contexts in order to understand God from within the Latino/a experience of social invisibility, cultural marginality, economic inequality, discrimination, and everyday struggles for a better life. Latino/a theology’s articulation of religious experience included naming one’s culture and context in light of the concern to empower rejected people with a prophetic
agenda for addressing the racism, sexism, and classism embedded in dominant theologies and society.  

The first stage of theological scholarship was largely unacknowledged in mainstream academic circles and by mainline religious leaders. Yet the early theological production of U.S. Latino/a scholars gave voice to the various and creative ways in which Latinos/as were producing novel approaches to "God-talk" in the church. It also offered to the public the situated stories of various Latino/a groups, which expanded the ways in which to talk of life together in society. From its inception, Latino/a theology was "a voice in search of freedom, independence, autonomy ... a voice that wishes to lay claim to its own reality and experience, give expression to its own view of God and the world, and chart its own future." At this stage of theological development, Virgilio Elizondo laid claim to Latino/a reality and pioneered a way to do theology in light of the interpretive lens provided by cultural identity.  

As the founder of the Mexican-American Cultural Center, located in San Antonio, Texas, Elizondo’s extensive theological writings suggest that culture, context, and daily life are privileged centers for theological analysis. In his book Galilean Journey, Elizondo rethinks the Christian faith tradition from the existential situation of Mexican-American marginality, focusing on God’s ultimate self-disclosure through persons living in rejected contexts. Elizondo reflects on the meaning of God’s self-disclosure in Galilee, a place looked down upon by established Jewish society, and its connection with Latino/a mestizo identity and God’s concern for universal inclusion. Elizondo argues that the Galilean context of marginality and biological/cultural diversity (mestizaje) gives rise to a message of reconciling unity ("Galilean principle"), confrontation with power ("Jerusalem principle"), and a new liberated life ("Resurrection principle"). The Word that becomes flesh in history—in a setting of racial/cultural hybridity, a place of mestizaje—results in an awareness that community in diversity is part of God’s plan for human beings.  

According to Elizondo, the socially and psychologically inferior Galileans among whom the Word became flesh show those occupying positions of power that "God chooses an oppressed people, not to bring them comfort in their oppression but to enable them to confront, transcend, and transform whatever in the oppressor society diminishes and destroys the fundamental dignity of human nature." In short, the Galilean Jesus leads rejected people to oppose their marginal status, speak of a radi-
cally welcoming God, and understand the idea of the kingdom of God in light of a program of critique of oppressive structures and a concern for human community. Elizondo's concept of mestizaje proposes that theological discourses need seriously to consider questions of self-identity, interculturality, and the meaning of the plural character of social reality.

Second Stage: The 1990s

In the late-1980s and in the 1990s, a second stage of Latino/a theological productivity unfolded, supported by the interest taken by various religious publishing houses in this emerging theological voice in the United States. We begin to see the publication of a number of significant theological anthologies that reflect the methodological, epistemological, and pastoral concerns of the various national-ethnic communities constitutive of the U.S. Latino/a population. Although in this period the essay genre was the predominate form of Latino/a theological analysis, a number of major, lengthy publications also began to appear that defined the intellectual, thematic, and practical concerns of Latino/a theology. Space does not permit me to comment on each work in the mounting body of Latino/a theological literature; so I refer the reader to the endnotes for a look at the important formative works for this period. Instead, I focus now on Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, another pioneer theologian who appears in the second stage, writing about "Mujerista theology."

Cuban born and a Roman Catholic Latina theologian, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz is one of the most active religious scholars of her generation and is best known for providing readers with a coherent articulation of Mujerista theology. In her major work Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century, Isasi-Diaz elaborates a Latina liberation theology in light of three interrelated objectives: (1) the production of a theological discourse that gives Latinas a platform from which to speak; (2) the development of a methodology that understands grass-roots religiosity as a resource for doing theology; and (3) the concern to challenge theological discourses and practices that are oppressive to women. Her groundbreaking work maintains that faith reflection begins not with the hermeneutical framework of a patriarchally patterned church but with what Latinas have to say about their daily lives, struggles, and visions for a new society. Thus, methodologically, Mujerista theology organizes the theological task around the task of listening to the voices of oppressed and suffering Latinas.
Mujerista theology locates the work of theology outside of the academy in the lived experience of Latinas, who, in the United States context, experience sexism, economic exploitation, and ethnic prejudice. Although it draws on Latin American feminist thought, Mujerista theology is concerned to critique both Hispanic and dominant culture in the United States. It seeks to enable U.S. Latinas critically to reflect on oppressive structures and internalized ideologies (sexist/racial/ethnic prejudice) on the way to developing the practical commitment to engage in a struggle that contributes to a life-dealing future. Isasi-Díaz argues that mujeristas are individuals who make a preferential option for the empowerment and rights of women, build networks of solidarity that denounce life-denying structures, and promote activity directed toward constructing a life replete with peace and justice. Combining the insights of feminism, ethics, theology, and cultural studies, Isasi-Díaz’s work offers an enriching corrective voice to male-centered theological discourse.

Future Directions and Concerns

One vital area of theological analysis that will become increasingly important for Latino/a theologians is the study of popular Catholic and Protestant religion. As Latino/a theologians become more focused on the theological analysis of popular piety, it is my hope that they will turn their attention to systematic analysis of the multiple ways in which popular religion for people in structurally and culturally disadvantaged positions use belief systems to construct everyday forms of resistance to political, economic, and theological elites. This line of research will demonstrate that U.S. Latinos/as are not passive political and religious actors but self-conscious subjects who imagine an alternative social reality, organized with more justice, dignity, freedom, and happiness.

I also expect to see Latino/a theologians more aggressively develop constructive theologies that engage in cross-cultural analysis and reflection on the historical experience and struggles of diverse ethnic communities in the United States. One recent important work in cross-cultural theology suggestive of a future research agenda is Anthony Pinn and Benjamin Valentin, eds., Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue (New York: Continuum, 2001). Focusing on the African-American and Latino/a experience, this anthology acknowledges that the theological analysis and practical concerns of the African-American and
Latino/a communities have largely unfolded independently of each other; yet the histories and experience of these struggle-laden communities demand cross-cultural conversation in order to sharpen, deepen, and relocus politico-ethical and religious concerns. The work suggests that the future growth of Latino/a theology will require ongoing dialogue and collaboration with various ethnic groups in the United States, whose cultural history is embedded in struggles for justice and against racist inequities.

Latino/a theology has been steadily building a distinctive contextual liberation theology in the United States that encompasses the varieties of religious experiences found within Latino/a communities. The early stages of Latino/a theological production were more closely tied to grass-roots communities and practical pastoral concerns. The new generation seeks more intentionally to find a voice in the academy and in public theology. I am convinced that the contributions that Latino/a theologians will make in a society that is experiencing greater pluralism and whose Latino/a populations are more diverse than ever before will be vast. Undoubtedly, as they begin to engage in cross-cultural theological production and draw on the insights of multiple and various disciplines, Latino/a theologians will join the ranks of public intellectuals who contribute to a broader social and cultural agenda. Still, whether the preferential option for the barrio will be displaced by the preferential option for the academy remains an open question for future Latino/a theologians.

Harold J. Recinos is Professor of Church and Society at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas.

Endnotes

1. See especially Samuel Huntington, Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004). In part, Huntington argues that increased Hispanic immigration and growth threaten to divide the nation between two cultural and linguistic groups, hence undermining the "Anglo-Protestant culture" at the core of American national identity—for him, the American dream happens only in English. Huntington not only is wrong about what threatens American life but also grossly misrepresents the Latino contribution to American democratic traditions and national identity. Anglo-Protestant revivalism is not the path to make America strong, but is settling for
nothing better than our diversity. See also Peter Brimelow’s *Alien Nation* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996). His writing reflects racist, nationalist sentiment that also targets “surging Hispanic immigration,” which Brimelow believes must be stopped in defense of the United States’s European common stock.


5. Latinos/as have experienced moments of solidarity with African-American political and religious leaders. However, there is a documented history of discrimination experienced by Latinos/as attributable to both Blacks and Whites in the context of U.S. society. See especially Nicolas Vaca, *The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict between Latinos and Blacks and What It Means to Be American* (New York: Rayo, 2004).


within Mainline Traditions (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999); and Espin and Diaz, From the Heart of Our People.


11. Four paradigms in Latino/a theology have been identified: (1) mestizo theology (Elizondo); (2) mañana theology (González); (3) barrio theology (Recinos); and (4) Mujerista theology (Isasi-Díaz). For a discussion, see Fernando Segovia, "Hispanic American Theology and the Bible: Effective Weapon and Faithful Ally," in Roberto Goizueta, ed., We Are a People!, ch. 2.


14. See the promising work of Benjamin Valentin, Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity and Difference (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002). Valentin argues that Latino/a theologies' sociological and cultural focus, especially on identity and difference, constrain the development of a broader liberative political project and concerns for the meaning of the common good in society.
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