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The Character of a Pragmatic Historicist Theology

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

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Commentary and Questions

[1] Sheila Davaney has made a significant contribution to our thinking about the approach to theology she calls "pragmatic historicism." This approach holds much promise as a way in which theology can deal constructively with the problems and opportunities of a time in which we are becoming increasingly aware of the contingencies of our cultural and historical situatedness and of our pressing need, in an ever more interdependent world, to enter into serious, sustained dialogue with those who speak from the perspectives of traditions other than our own. Davaney both extensively draws upon and critically engages advocates of positions similar to her own: theological advocates such as Delwin Brown, Linell Cady, William Dean, Gordon Kaufman, and Sallie McFague, and philosophical "fellow travelers" such as Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, and Cornel West. Her treatment of these thinkers helps to give shape, specificity, and plausibility to her own outlook by showing where, why, and in what respects she agrees with or differs from them.

[2] The reader of her book is thus given a thick and varied picture of pragmatic historicism, a picture replete with relevant alternatives of articulation, emphasis, and argument, as well as a development of Davaney's position. The book has an atmosphere of ongoing, receptive conversation among friends rather than of stubborn, single-minded defense of a thesis against all comers. Davaney does defend her view, and her arguments are thoughtful and

detailed, but the spirit of her defense is in keeping with the contextual, fallibilistic, open-minded outlook of the pragmatic historicism she endorses.

[3] A feature of Davaney's development of pragmatic historicism that I found to be especially important and compelling is her insistence on "radically inclusionary strategies and democratic practices" (162) in the search for the widest possible public "field of theological consideration and debate" and in the endeavor to be deeply sensitive to just "who gains and who loses because of our beliefs and practices" (161). As she observes, there are significant numbers of groups and people in every society, including our own, who are victims of the unequal distribution of power and influence, and she rightly argues:

It does little good to advocate a position that calls for open debate, inclusive of multiple voices, while ignoring the mechanisms by which many are rendered invisible, denied legitimacy, or so thoroughly located at the bottom of a hierarchy of values that their reality counts for little in the evaluative equation (162).

This keen awareness of disparities of power in social, political, and economic relationships - and not just of differences in intellectual outlook and belief within and among historically conditioned cultures - is a pervasive motif in the pluralistic, inclusive outlook of Davaney's book. Her persistent plea for recognizing and working to find ways to include the marginalized and dispossessed members of society in theological conversation is one of the great strengths of her position.

[4] In the spirit of continuing the dialogue so well begun by Davaney, I want to raise three critical issues about her position that I think merit further discussion. First, despite the subtitle of her book, *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, the book seems to be almost entirely methodological or meta-theological in character - in other words, a discussion of how theology ought to be done, but with little or no explicit theological content of its own. So I raise the question, what would a pragmatic historicist theology look like, as Davaney conceives it? We need specific *examples* of the sorts of theological claims and views *she herself would espouse*, with discussions of how these claims and views fit into or flow from her methodological perspective. It is relatively easy to argue that all the principles Davaney articulates should be incorporated into today's theology, but it is extremely difficult actually to incorporate them in a constructive theology that is both coherent and convincing. A chapter could have been provided in the book to give us some idea what her own theological proposals would be. Without such a chapter, we are unable to see what the pragmatic outcome of the method would look like; consequently, we are unable to test the adequacy of the method in light of this outcome.

[5] Here are some questions such a chapter could have addressed. Would such a theology include the idea of God? If so, what particular idea or ideas about God, and why? Would Jesus of Nazareth continue to have a pivotal role in this theology, and why? Would the theology be specifically or recognizably Christian? If so, how and why? Would special appeal be made to the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity? If so, why; if not, why not? How would this theology relate to other theologies and other religious outlooks? How would it relate to the findings of the contemporary natural and social sciences, or to the arts and

humanities? How would it compare and contrast with the explicit proposals of other pragmatic historicist theologians?

[6] I realize that addressing these and other similar questions would have made the book longer and that Davaney probably will tell us that she did not intend to write this kind of book at this time, but I think that addressing them has critical bearing on our appraisal of the viability of her description of pragmatic historicism as a program of theological research and teaching. We want to see how the method *works* for her in her concrete practice as a theologian and to understand the method from the angle of its applications to her particular life and thought as a theologian. We want to put the method to a pragmatic test by assessing its outcomes, as she conceives those outcomes. Perhaps Davaney will favor us with a future volume in which this task is carried out, but I would like to hear her response to this line of questioning.

[7] A second issue is related to this first one. What is there that is specifically *religious* or of specifically *religious value* about the perspective of pragmatic historicism? Davaney's discussion of this perspective is often so completely general as to be virtually generic, i.e., applicable to any and every kind of subject-matter or area of inquiry. In what ways, then, can this perspective speak to our deepest religious aspirations, needs, and values? How, for example, can we retain a depth of religious commitment and belief in the face of pragmatic historicism's claim to the contingency and limitation of our cultural and historical settings? Why should we *stake our lives* on beliefs, outlooks, and practices of these settings that this claim bids us recognize as fallible, contestable, restricted, and relative? How, to put the question somewhat differently, can the tension between locality and universality be resolved in Davaney's theological outlook? Theological claims are putatively local in their origins and development and yet universal in their intended scope. Can we really have it both ways? How? And how can our being conditioned and shaped by local traditions be reconciled with our increasing interactions with other, quite different traditions?

[8] I sense in Davaney's project an unresolved tension between being conditioned and being free, between being the product of a specific tradition or traditions and being able to reconstruct our formative tradition or traditions in light of interaction with other ways of viewing the world. How open to other traditions can we actually be, given the thesis of situatedness that is so crucial to pragmatic historicism? And how do openness and *conviction* relate to one another? Would not the openness tend to make theology a mere ethnography or detached, neutral description of different religious traditions, including one's own? And would not the conviction lead in the direction of a kind of grit-your-teeth persistence in upholding the particularities of one's own tradition in the face of all challenges or influences from other ones? How are we properly to understand and live the tension and relatedness of these two poles? How does Davaney reconcile them in her own outlook, research, life, and teaching? This kind of general issue or problem is clearly posed by Davaney's pragmatic historicism, but it is not addressed or resolved.

[9] A third fundamental issue is Davaney's view of the role of *experience* in her version of pragmatic historicism. I have not found any clear delineation or discussion in her book of the relations, epistemic or metaphysical, of our experiences as biological organisms to our historical conditioning. Reading Davaney's book, one sometimes gets the impression that

humans are free-floating historical or cultural beings with no significant connections to their natural environments, living and thinking in a manner abstracted from their character as natural beings. The clearest symptom of this anomaly in her account is her virtual neglect of the category of experience in her analysis.

[10] I agree with Davaney that there is no such thing as wholly pure or entirely uninterpreted experience. Our experiences are clearly informed in basic ways by our categorizations, beliefs, selections, and expectations; they are theory-laden. But it does not follow from this admission that there is no place for the role of experience in pragmatic historicism. In fact, the neglect of it is remarkable (although it seems to be fashionable among contemporary neo-pragmatists), given the fundamental role accorded to experience by such founders of pragmatism as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. No matter how different our modes of acculturation may be, there are commonalities of our biological nature that bind us all together as members of a common species. And we are in constant transaction and interaction with our biological, and not just our cultural or historical, settings.

[11] Moreover, there are significant, pervasive obdurances in our experiences in and of the natural world that play or ought to play an essential role in testing, constraining, and directing our cultural developments and interpretations. This issue of our character and experience as biological organisms, and not just cultural beings, needs to be confronted head-on in any viable pragmatic outlook on ourselves and the world, whether theological or otherwise. I want to know how Davaney would deal with this issue and to hear from her some account of why she seems to downplay it to such a marked extent in her book. She does allude to the issue from time to time, for example, in her discussions of Brown, Dean, Kaufman, and McFague, but she does not give it the prominence and attention in the development of her own position that I think it deserves. She rightly insists that we are embodied beings, but she does not take seriously enough the types of experience that evidence our embodiment in nature and the importance of these experiences for shaping and testing our cultural judgments and for finding bridges across our cultural differences.

[12] Davaney has written an insightful, provocative book. It is an important contribution to current discussions about pragmatism and historicism, and about ways these two closely related perspectives can be combined and brought to bear upon theological thinking (and other types of thinking) in a rapidly changing world. All of us who are concerned to think as deeply and effectively as we can about such matters are greatly in her debt.