Review Essay:

"Pragmatic Attempts to Understand and Remake Religion."

by Michael Eldridge


Stuart Rosenbaum's Pragmatism and Religion is a remarkable achievement. For the first time in the history of pragmatism we have in one volume significant essays on pragmatic attempts to understand and remake religion. That it is not everything that one might want should neither be surprising nor disappointing. Its achievement is that it opens the way to a study of what should be of interest to every student of pragmatism—the viability of its methods and attitudes in one of the most pervasive areas of human activity. But as dynamic and central as it is, religion can surely be one of the more recalcitrant of practices, preserving oftentimes ancient ways of belief and ritual. Or so it presents itself. That a religion should be self-consciously reconstructing itself is not an idea easily embraced by most religionists or religion's detractors. Yet pragmatism is nothing if not experimental, regarding current practices as the products of human effort and subject to revision as needs change. Here there would seem to be considerable tension between sacred attachments and present needs, and we have not even approached the perhaps unbridgeable chasm between natural and supernatural. Indeed the challenge for pragmatism, with its scientific orientation, is how to address what is taken by many to be the antithesis of science. And to do so in a way that is honest to what it takes from science and finds in the spiritual orientation that religious persons and institutions profess. Many philosophical pragmatists have abandoned religion. This is not a practice that they think worthy of reconstruction. But surely this is an odd reaction for a transformative approach. Moreover, the classic pragmatists, while often eager to shed much of their religious heritage, were all concerned to preserve some of that heritage and bring it into line with their developing philosophy. William James perhaps more than the others found value in being religious but even John Dewey
who was comfortable describing himself as a secular humanist was also comfortable appropriating the word, "God," and passionately recommending "a common faith."

Pragmatism and Religion is divided into three parts: classical sources, contemporary essays on the American religious tradition, and three issues central to pragmatic religious values--theism, secularism and the status of the religious dimension of life. Initially one may be surprised to find selections by John Winthrop and Jonathan Edwards and interpretive essays on American religious thought. But given the contextual orientation of pragmatism one can easily understand why the book would not limit itself to explicitly pragmatic pieces. This inclusiveness, however, does limit the space available for the latter, and, as we shall see, some significant essays were not included and even some important classic writings are missing.

Rosenbaum's introduction capably explains why the diverse writings were selected and summarizes each contribution. I will neither rehearse his reasoning nor duplicate his summary. Rather I will identify and briefly discuss several of the selections to show the diversity of the book, note some important omissions and call attention to some unaddressed issues. In so doing, I hope to call attention to the value of the book for most of the readers of this review.

One would expect selections from James and Dewey. Indeed one would expect more from these two than what we have. James is important because he attempts to identify and understand religious experience, primarily in its non-institutional forms. I would have liked it, however, if the Conclusion from The Varieties of Religious Experience (VRE) had been included, as well as the influential "Will to Believe." Both Richard Rorty and Robert Westbrook refer to the Conclusion in their contributions (120 and 198) and Rorty and Sandra Rosenthal to "Will to Believe" (120 and 238). What Rosenbaum does include is James' valuable chapter on Philosophy in VRE, which shows the limitations of philosophy as it was then practiced for religious experience. James wrote, "In all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless" (80). James' negative point, however, is balanced both in this
chapter and in other places by an appreciation of the contribution that a pragmatic approach can make to understanding religion. To appreciate this positive point and to understand James' singular contribution to religious studies a reader needs more of James than what is provided.

Dewey is important because he builds on James' insights to propose a novel way of being religious, one that cuts the almost universal association of religion with the supernatural and finds the religious to be capable of pervading the natural or secular world. But to appreciate this proposal one needs to have the whole of A Common Faith (ACF) and not just the second chapter. Including the second chapter alone, as Rosenbaum does, reinforces the mistaken notion that Dewey took the problem of God more seriously than what he did (see the January 14, 1935, letter Dewey wrote to Max Carl Otto, LW 9.455). Also no context is provided that shows in what sense "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (the other included piece by Dewey) is to be regarded as a religious text. Dewey had a profound faith in human nature, intelligence and cooperation as articulated in this essay, but is not clear that this faith should be regarded as a religious one. Inclusion of the whole of ACF would have helped the reader think about this. Of course, the problem is too great for it to be solved by this corrective move alone. Dewey's unconventional religious proposal needs to be presented in its relative fullness and provided with considerable interpretation.

John J. McDermott's essay, "The Aesthetic Drama of the Ordinary," would have more naturally followed an expanded selection of ACF because McDermott understands the importance of the third chapter, "The Human Abode of the Religious," as Bernstein and Westbrook do not. McDermott, in his collection of Dewey's work (The Philosophy of John Dewey [G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973]) includes only this chapter from ACF (vol. 2: The Lived Experience). Both Bernstein and Westbrook fail to appreciate fully this situating of the religious within society thus making possible the dispensing with specifically religious institutions (138f and 199-201). Westbrook also gives ACF an undeservedly individualistic reading. He writes: "Despite its title, ACF treats religious experience chiefly as an individual religious experience, an affair of the self, and has little to say—and even less good to say—about the common life of religious communities" (200).
reason ACF is not individualistic and religious communities are largely irrelevant to, if not destructive of, a common faith is that Dewey locates the religious within secular society--the human abode. So one should not read the third chapter as a stand-alone treatment of how to live religiously but should read it in conjunction with Dewey's extensive social and political writings. When one does this, s/he can realize how "Creative Democracy" is a religious text in Dewey's sense of "religious"—a pervasive commitment that informs the person or group.

I was surprised that McDermott's essay was included as a "classical source" but could see the sense of it. He articulates a thoroughly secular--in the sense of having to do with the here and now--and sacred sensibility that deserves careful consideration in a culture that often separates or even segregates the two. But I was even more surprised and could not ultimately justify the inclusion of Rorty's "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" in this section. That a contribution by Rorty should be included is not questioned; that it is a classic source is. That noted, Rorty's essay, as one would expect, is richly provocative. I particularly like the description of ACF as "rather unambitious and half hearted" (120), for it is only 84 pages in its original form and 56 pages in the critical edition.

Bernstein's essay opens the second part of the book and admirably introduces the reader to the classic pragmatists' approach. What I find most interesting is his consideration of a challenge that he thinks bring us to the "heart of the matter" of Dewey's religious proposal: Is Dewey's recommended way of life a religious one? Within the few pages he has available Bernstein provides an answer that distinguishes Dewey's approach from a narrow or reductive secular humanism. But a full answer would require a much greater effort. This is a problem not just for Bernstein but for many of the contributors. By the time they have canvassed their chosen topics they have little time for the major issues they raise. Moreover, many contributors write without much reference to what other interpreters and critics have done and thus many of the essays cover much the same ground. And consequently the perplexingly issues raised by ACF are not adequately investigated. There is much introducing and exploring and little thorough investigation.
One of the finer pieces is Douglas Anderson's, "Awakening in the Everyday: Experiencing the Religious in the American Philosophical Tradition." Anderson effectively shows why Jonathan Edwards should be taken seriously as an American thinker, for Edwards provides, "in seminal form . . . an American version of religious experience: the maintenance of a religious attitude in the conduct of a finite life" (145). This Anderson finds in Edwards' diary and "Personal Narrative," but these intriguing and illuminating writings are often obscured by "a focus on his philosophical argumentation or the 'fire-and-brimstone' side of his work" (143). (It is the latter that we find in the Edwards selection included in the volume under review: "Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God.") Anderson also provides a very good rationale for including Thoreau's "Walking," one more specific than the editor's reference to Thoreau's "natural piety" (6). What Rosenbaum says is correct, but Anderson helpfully points out: "The creature act of the walking life is one of risk and possible loss; we must advance with an attitude that is awake and attentive to this--for Thoreau, this is a religious attitude." Anderson's discussion of Edwards and Thoreau enables him to explicate Dewey's notion of the religious in experience (148-50) that implicitly answers the question raised by Bernstein and Westbrook by showing that Dewey's recommended way of life is meliorative and pervasive and has continuity with traditional views of religious conversion but of course reconstructs them.

Where Bernstein recounts the pragmatic religious tradition and Anderson places Dewey in the context of an American religious tradition, William Dean attempts, less successfully in my view, to show the pragmatic character of much of Western theology. There is value, to be sure, in including a contribution from a distinguished American empirical theologian, but his selective reading of Western theology is misleading. He rightly calls attention, for instance, to the historicity of Israel and its god, but in neglecting the pervasive apocalyptic elements, which are anti-historical, of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, he presents only one dimension of a complex collection of writings. Dean also accepts Bruce Kuklick's thesis that pragmatists, and particularly Dewey, are heirs of Calvinism (154 and 159). There are, of course, some important links, as is shown by Dewey's biography, but this is a reductionistic thesis that ignores the important breaks with the earlier orientation. This reference also calls
attention to additional omissions on the editor’s part. A selection from Kuklick (and replies to him) would have been valuable.

Also valuable would have been a classic interpretation of Dewey’s religious thinking, John Herman Randall, Jr.’s "The Religion of Shared Experience" (1939), which may have been the first attempt to provide a comprehensive account of Dewey’s religious proposal, as well as criticism of it. But there are only references to Randall in the essays by Westbrook and Raymond Boisvert; his superb but flawed essay is not included in this volume. (For discussion of Randall’s piece see my *Transforming Experience: John Dewey’s Cultural Instrumentalism* [Vanderbilt; 1968], pp. 172-84.)

Boisvert’s fine essay, “What Is Religion?”, opens the final part of the book and attempts to reconceptualize the usual ways of understanding religion. Thus it also addresses the “heart of the matter” issue posed by Bernstein. Boisvert also gets the interpretation of Steven Rockefeller and me on secularity more or less right (223), unlike the editor in his introduction, who mistakenly puts Rockefeller and me in the same boat (4). (I have a letter from Rockefeller in which he objected to my characterization of Dewey [in a draft of what was to become the fifth chapter of *Transforming Experience*] as being too secular.)

Like Boisvert, but not as original in her approach, Sandra Rosenthal attempts to get beyond the theism-atheism split as the title of her contribution indicates, “Spirituality as the Spirit of American Pragmatism: Beyond the Theism-Atheism Split.” She also rehearses the classic pragmatist history in reference to religion, but, to her credit, she includes George Herbert Mead in her account. Once again, her attention to this history does not permit her to explore adequately the question of why we should regard the pragmatists’ recommended way of life as religious. She only has space to celebrate their efforts.

Nancy Frankenberry’s “Pragmatism, Truth, and Disenchantment of Subjectivity,” has the distinction of being written from a religious studies perspective that attempts to take seriously the work of Rorty and Donald Davidson. Many readers of this review may not share her appreciation of their work, but her essay not only adds to
the diversity of the collection but provides links to work that may be neglected by those whom Westbrook has termed "paleo-pragmatists." Whatever one thinks of her efforts, one should not miss the last line of her contribution—"we might say we have lost our souls but have gained the whole world" (262). Surely this is an apt and wittingly expressed pragmatic naturalist sentiment.

Carl Vaught, in "John Dewey’s Conception of the Religious Dimension of Experience," subjects Dewey to an external critique. Given the correctness of a phenomenological approach, Dewey is wrong, argues Vaught, to have denied a distinctive religious experience and the reality of transcendence. Perhaps more than any other essay in the book this is the one to which I would have liked for there to have been a thorough-going reply.

The final essay, "Faith and Ethics in an Interdependent World," is Rockefeller’s effort to construct "a common moral faith for the twenty-first century" (304). Bernstein defends Dewey’s common faith proposal, Westbrook thinks Dewey’s proposal is uncommon, and Rockefeller believes it to be possible of actualization. Moreover, in ways that Bernstein and Westbrook would appreciate Rockefeller shows that the various religions have a role to play in the construction of a pluralistic global ethic.

Readers who are inclined to be both pragmatic and religious will find Rosenbaum’s book most appealing. It certainly provides an opportunity to reflect on the usefulness of pragmatic efforts to re-fashion religion. Even those who think religion is not worth reconstruction may find the book of interest, for it may provide evidence of the futility of the project. But these latter readers will have to work harder than the former. Thus a better book, in my opinion, would have explicitly addressed the concern of the pragmatic unbelievers: Should religion be abandoned rather than reconstructed? But this is to make the reviewer’s mistake of wishing for a book that s/he might have edited rather than appraising the book that was actually published. So let me be more positive: Perhaps there needs to be another book, a follow-up volume, one that considers more thoroughly and critically the hard questions posed by pragmatism and religion: Can one sever the tie between the supernatural and the religious, as Dewey thought, and still have a meaningful religiosity? Is a divinity, in any sense, a vital element in this
unconventional religiosity? Are churches and other religious institutions the best vehicles for this religiosity? The present book raises these questions and places them in the context of the whole sweep of American philosophy. This is no small accomplishment. As I noted at the outset: I know of no similar prior effort. But given the profundity of the questions and the many classic and contemporary efforts to address them, a single volume cannot suffice. Rosenbaum is to be congratulated for opening the way to a more concerted and critical field of pragmatic inquiry—the relation of pragmatism to religion.

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Book reviews.


Lott has amassed in this anthology sixty-one of the most significant, social and intellectual essays on the African American experience. He has arranged the essays thematically, roughly representative of the chronological ages of thought throughout American history, with an overview for each theme. The overview provides the historical context of the theme, delineates the social, economic, and intellectual tensions of the age, and discusses the role and value of each essay within that development of black intellectual thought. The ten themes provide the organization for the ten chapters, wherein at least four essays define the substance of the age and the flow of analyses of the black experience in America.