



**UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS**

Pragmatic Humanism

Author(s): J. Wesley Robbins

Source: *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, May 2002, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May 2002), pp. 173-191

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27944257>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/27944257?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*

JSTOR

DISCUSSION

Pragmatic Humanism

J. Wesley Robbins / Indiana University South Bend

I.

Humanism has not fared well as a religious option with contributors to this journal. This is particularly evident in recent years.

In June 1995, Richard Rorty read his first major essay on religion, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance," to the Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought. It was published in this journal the following year.¹ Since then he has published at least one more essay on the subject, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism."² In these essays, Rorty spelled out in more detail than he had previously his version of pragmatic humanism that has more in common, religiously, with John Dewey than with William James.

Since Rorty's initial essay appeared in the *American Journal for Theology and Philosophy*, the journal has published several essays in which the authors address topics related to one or another component of pragmatic humanism. Only one of these authors, Matthew Bagger, is supportive.³ His support is limited to a few remarks about Rorty's opposition to what Bagger calls the "publicizing" of religion. He does not discuss the broader position of which that opposition is a part. Of the authors that I will discuss here, Gregory Reece,⁴ Wentzel van Huyssteen,⁵ William Dean,⁶ and Victor Anderson,⁷ only Reece

¹Richard Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 17 (May 1996): 121-140.

²Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" in *The Revival of Pragmatism*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 21-36.

³Matthew Bagger, "Publicizing Religion," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 21 (September 2000): 229-239.

⁴Gregory L. Reece, "Religious Faith and Intellectual Responsibility," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 22 (September 2001): 206-220.

⁵Wentzel van Huyssteen, "Pluralism and Interdisciplinarity: In Search of Theology's Public Voice," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 22 (January 2001): 65-87.

addresses Rorty's work explicitly. But they all oppose one aspect or another of pragmatic humanism.

I want to defend pragmatic humanism in response to these four authors. First I will summarize its main components. Then I will discuss ways in which each author's position is opposed to one or another of these components. Reece, I will argue, misunderstands Rorty's call for the privatization of religion. Van Huyssteen purports to locate the rightful place of religion in public life, vis a vis such things as the sciences, by means of a non-pragmatic philosophy that effectively replaces democratic consensus as the final court of appeal for such matters. Both Dean and Anderson contend that an extra-human power of some sort is a religious necessity, in order to insure the openness of religious life among other things. This has the effect of blocking religious experimentation by ruling out human self-reliance as a viable religious option in advance. My goal in each of these instances is to make pragmatic humanism look good by comparison to the religious positions of these authors.

II.

There are four components to pragmatic humanism as Rorty spells it out in the two aforementioned essays: pragmatic philosophy, democratic politics, a functional definition of religion, and reliance on human imagination. The pragmatic philosophy is a distinctively American version of anti-representationalism that stems from William James. James noted, as early as 1880, that one could treat social and mental change much like Darwin treated biological change, as the product of differences that occur "spontaneously" in individuals and the selective operation of the environment on those differences.⁶ Social change, according to James, is the result of the influence of "great men" whose idiosyncratic ideas the environment favors from time to time. Rorty's view of social change is a linguistic version of James, one in

⁶ William Dean, "The Irony of Atheism and the Invisibility of America," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 21 (January 2000): 59-72.

⁷ Victor Anderson, "The Wrestle of Christ and Culture in Pragmatic Public Theology," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 19 (May 1998): 135-50.

⁸ William James, "Great Men and Their Environment," in *Selected Papers on Philosophy* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1961): 165-197.

which metaphors are new ways of talking that occur “spontaneously” in individuals. Rorty says,

A sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new language, as the vanguard of the species.⁹

James’s “great men” are Rorty’s “strong poets.”

John Dewey later commented, speaking of James’s account of social change in terms of the accumulation of “spontaneous” mental differences in individuals over time,

It is not therefore the origin of a concept, it is its application which becomes the criterion of its value; and here we have the whole of pragmatism in embryo. A phrase of James’ very well summarizes its import: “the popular notion that ‘Science’ is forced on the mind *ab extra*, and that our interests have nothing to do with its constructions, is utterly absurd.”¹⁰

If, as James said, “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” and the only “independent truth” there is are the old beliefs that have satisfied some interest of ours for a long period of time, then for this version of pragmatism there is no will to truth that is different from the will to happiness. There is no intellectual responsibility to something other than humans beings and our happiness that we have a bounden duty to represent accurately in our thinking.

In “The Will to Believe” James distinguished two different interests that thinking may serve, fear of being unpleasantly surprised and hope of gaining new truths. He described scientific methods of verification as an organization of the former nervousness about being deceived into “a regular *technique*.” He asked, which is worse, dupery through fear or dupery through hope? He, of course, argued that people

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 20.

¹⁰ John Dewey, “The Development of American Pragmatism,” *Pragmatism: the Classic Writings*, ed. H. S. Thayer (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), 37.

should be allowed to choose between these different interests, in certain instances at which they may come into conflict, at their own risk.

Rorty's distinction between "projects of social cooperation" and "projects of individual self-development" mirrors James's in some respects.¹¹ Satisfying the two interests that James distinguished involves, as it so happens, different degrees of intersubjective agreement. Practices for which not being fooled is paramount require much intersubjective agreement. They are, as such, public. The natural sciences, as systems of prediction and control, are good examples. Practices for which the unexpected, coming up with new truths, is paramount require little intersubjective agreement. They thrive on idiosyncrasy and are, as such, private.

Democratic politics consists broadly of government by consent of the governed. Ideally, a democracy rests on no authority to which it has to answer, or which it is supposed to reflect, beyond the free consensus of its citizens. This means that consensus politics determines the location of the line between duties that are required of all (public) and the freedom of individuals to pursue happiness as they see fit (private), not some authority above and beyond any such democratic consensus. That applies specifically to the scope of religious freedom.

Pragmatic philosophy provides no premises in terms of which to ground democratic politics. But, the two do fit well. Pragmatic philosophy says that we have no intellectual responsibility other than the satisfaction of human interests, in particular no responsibility beyond that to represent anything accurately. Democracy says that we have no political responsibility other than to consensus freely arrived at, in particular no responsibility to an extra-human authority which that democratic consensus needs to represent and which might override it.

Rorty defines religion functionally as the source of our ideals. In traditional monotheism, this is God. In certain versions of philosophy and science it is Truth, understood as something independent of the satisfaction of human interests. For pragmatic humanists like Rorty it is human imagination, our ability to produce new ideas and words. He, like Dewey, thinks that we are better off relying on this poetic ability and its products for our happiness rather than on any higher powers.

Christianity, viewed in this way, is a strong poem that happens to have worked out in practice. The Christian Church is incipient democracy. (For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put

¹¹ Rorty, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism," 28.

on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus [Galatians 3:27-28]). The modern ideal of democracy is this egalitarian Christian Church without God. The United States of America is a symbol of the ideal of democratic fraternity. It is humans governing themselves, relying on themselves, imagining and re-imagining themselves and their world in ways that range from the widely agreed upon (public) to the wildly idiosyncratic (private) and all sorts of things in between.

In such a society, the only limit on religious belief and practice is interference with other citizens' pursuit of happiness. Democratic citizens set that limit by consensus freely arrived at. There is no higher court of appeal beyond that democratic consensus in terms of which to set the bounds of freedom and responsibility regarding religion: not the metaphysics, the epistemology, or the theology of any sub-group.

As with democracy, pragmatic philosophy provides no premises that ground humanistic religion. People, James himself for example, can and have put a theistic spin on pragmatism. But a religion of self-reliance fits well with a philosophy that focuses on "spontaneous" differences in individuals' thoughts and words and how those accumulated differences work out in practice regardless of their ultimate origin and whether they represent anything.

Pragmatist philosophy does not rule out that Jesus was in some way speaking for his heavenly Father. It disregards questions about the origins of what he had to say and focuses attention instead on the results of his sayings. Humanistic religion takes that philosophical disregard a step further. It says that tracing what the strong poets amongst us say and do to extra-human powers is fruitless. It is religion enough to rely on the imagination of such as Moses, Jesus, the Buddha, Newton, Darwin, Shakespeare, Picasso rather than on any extra-human powers that some might suppose them to represent. But that religious choice is one that has to make its way in practice. It is not foreordained by pragmatist philosophy. The latter is, as James said it was, religiously neutral.

Rorty the pragmatist who is also a democrat and a humanist treats religions as poems, products of human imagination whose value lies in their results. The ideals that matter most to people vary widely. There is no way to rank them in terms of an extra-human authority. Consequently, we in the modern western democracies have hit upon the

arrangement of locating the practice of religion in the creative space of minimal intersubjective agreement and idiosyncrasy, agreeing to tolerate religious differences so long as they do not harm others. To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, so long as they neither pick pockets nor break bones, we agree as democratic citizens to leave people to their own devices when it comes to the pursuit of the ideals that matter most to them.

This means, for example, that regardless what Rorty may think of the democratic credentials of monotheists of any stripe, their belief in God violates no intellectual responsibilities by his lights. Monotheism should be tolerated so long as its practice *qua* private is not forced on others as one in which they are duty bound to share *qua* public.

III.

Reece claims that when Rorty equates intellectual responsibility with our responsibility not to harm each other, and claims that people have the intellectual right to believe whatever they want when it comes to religion so long as they do not hurt anyone else, he makes a kind of category mistake.

I will suggest that Rorty's proposal misapplies a concept taken from the realm of politics, the concept of the public/private distinction, to the issue of intellectual responsibility. In doing so, Rorty represents religious beliefs as beliefs that float free of communal justification. I argue that Rorty's proposal that religious beliefs should be kept intellectually, as well as politically, private reduces religious beliefs to something like personal whims or fancies and ignores the communities in which religious beliefs have their context.¹²

Reece proposes instead that the difference between scientific and religious beliefs is the size of groups within which they have to secure intersubjective agreement.

¹² Reece, "Religious Faith and Intellectual Responsibility," 206.

The distinction between science and religion is that science tries to justify itself to a very large community. It attempts to perform repeatable, verifiable experiments that the theoretical 'anyone' could duplicate. Religious beliefs, on the other hand, are usually justified within a much smaller community.¹³

There are several things wrong with this. In the first place, if, as Rorty claims in the name of pragmatism, there is no will to Truth in addition to the will to happiness, then intellectual responsibilities are social/political, a matter of what we owe to other people. There are not two distinct categories, what we have to do in order to be happy *versus* what we have to do in order suitably to reflect what is True, across which to misapply concepts.

Second, Rorty's distinction between public and private projects is not, as Reece suggests, an absolute one between being answerable to everyone and being answerable to no one.

Rorty assumes a sharp distinction between what he calls the public and the private. The public represents those beliefs that need to be justified to other people, the private represents those beliefs that need to be justified to no one.¹⁴

The problem for Rorty is to explain how and why religion is different from science, with respect to freedom to believe as one sees fit, without invoking invidious representationalist distinctions between the cognitive and the non-cognitive or between matters of objective Truth and matters of subjective taste. His pragmatist suggestion is to distinguish different ways of pursuing happiness, ones that involve more cooperation and agreement (public) and ones that involve less (private). The difference is one of degree. Rorty's strong poets are at the extreme private end of this spectrum. They are indeed answerable to no one because, strictly speaking, someone in the midst of creating a new vocabulary is talking nonsense relative to any existing community. But if their eccentricities catch on, they become part of the regular practice of a group of some size. Rorty wants ours to be a society that

¹³ Ibid., 217.

¹⁴ Ibid., 213.

makes as much room for the idiosyncrasies of poets, for human creativity, as is consistent with not harming others. This is, among other things, for the sake of benefits that might accrue as a result in the way of both public welfare and individual fulfillment.

His pragmatic take on democratic freedom of religion, then, is that it is a function of an agreement to treat everyone in a society as poets of some degree of strength when it comes to religion, limited only by the infliction of harm on others. This religious tolerance does not rule out religious associations, groupings of different sizes that form around strong poets and that are answerable to no one but themselves. Such groups could range in size from the very large, like the Roman Catholic Church, to small closely knit communities, like the Amish, to the individual, like Thomas Paine's "my church is my own mind" or the oft remarked and notorious Sheilaism. So long as someone chooses voluntarily to remain affiliated with one of those religious groups, they would be just as answerable to their fellow religionists for what they believe as any scientists would be to their peers.

Third, it is downright odd to criticize Rorty's pragmatic humanism as individualistic. Devotion to democracy, *a la* Dewey, is an important component of that religious vision. For Rorty, modern democracy is the historical product of the Christian ideal of fraternity. It is, in effect, the Christian Church without God. The United States then, as symbolic of the democratic ideal, is Christian America in a way our Puritan forebearers could never have dreamed. Critics may not like the kind of community with which Rorty identifies religiously. But they surely cannot rightly accuse him of leaving community out as a dimension of religion.

IV.

Critics charge that pragmatic humanism "reduces religion to something like personal whim or fancies."¹⁵ Whatever merit this charge has rests on a combination of some version of a cognitive/non-cognitive, objective/subjective, serious/non-serious distinction and the belief that Rorty's treatment of religion as private is the equivalent of placing it on the "bad" side of the distinction. That distinction is a stock in trade of representationalist philosophies. It supposedly enables us to

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

distinguish areas of thought and language that are more or less accurate representations of reality, and thus objective, from areas that are not, and thus subjective. This, in turn, is the context for much of the discussion about the relationship between religion and science: on which side of that distinction does religion fall?

Van Huyssteen's discussion of rationality and interdisciplinarity in his article is motivated, at least in part, by desire to undermine invidious distinctions between the objectivity of science *versus* the subjectivity of religion. A number of pragmatists, including James and Rorty, share that motivation with him. One purpose of James's demolition of the notion of disinterested science was to make it impossible to contrast unflatteringly the disinterested objectivity of science and the wishful subjectivity of religion.

The question is how best to accomplish this. Specifically, are we better off to argue for the representational credentials of religion in comparison to science, and thus for its objectivity? Or, would it be more effective to deny that thought and language are representational in the first place, thereby wiping out the objective/subjective distinction that traditionally has been made in those terms? Van Huyssteen takes the former route. This is what puts him at odds with pragmatic humanism.

In an open, postfoundationalist conversation, Christian theology—for philosophical, theological, and scientific reasons—should be able to claim a 'democratic presence' in interdisciplinary conversation. . . . This kind of theology will share in interdisciplinary standards of rationality, even as we respect our widely divergent personal, religious, or disciplinary viewpoints. And because of the shared resources of rationality, we also share an *epistemological overlap* of beliefs and reasoning strategies that finally may provide a safe space for an interdisciplinary conversation between theology and other disciplines.¹⁶

The epistemological overlap that van Huyssteen claims between religion and science turns out upon examination to be a

¹⁶ Van Huyssteen, "Pluralism and Interdisciplinarity: in Search of Theology's Public Voice," 82-83. (emphasis mine)

representational one. It is on the basis of this purported representational similarity between theology and the sciences that he concludes:

Then it would also make perfect sense to say that constructive theology, which traffics in the most basic of human feelings and parochial visions, is nevertheless a perfectly legitimate form of disciplined scholarly consideration, even within the secular university.¹⁷

The problem with this is not just that van Huyssteen is confused about what he is up to philosophically. His way of securing the intellectual equality of religion to science is also undemocratic in an important respect. The philosophical confusion is evident. Van Huyssteen's repeatedly claims to be operating in some kind of postfoundational middle ground between the classical representationalist extremes of ideas that represent objective Truth and ones merely express subjective desires. Yet his epistemological project is representationalist to the core. This becomes abundantly clear when we piece together several of van Huyssteen's scattered remarks.

This richer notion of rationality thus embraces the hypothesis that our primary connectedness with the world is at the level of interactive, pre-reflective feeling that is always already weighted, patterned and directional.¹⁸

. . . [A] postfoundationalist notion of rationality reveals the fact that one's own experience is always going to be rationally compelling.¹⁹

This postfoundationalist model of rationality . . . very specifically implies an *accountability to human experience*. . . I see this epistemic goal of experiential accountability playing out as only a gradual difference

¹⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹⁸ Ibid., 68.

¹⁹ Ibid., 69.

between *empirical adequacy* for the sciences and *experiential adequacy* for theological understanding.²⁰

The distinguishing mark of religious experience in this sense would therefore be *the individual's judgment* that the experience, and the beliefs that constitute the experience, can only be accounted for in religious terms.²¹

Put together, these amount to saying that experience is a pre-reflective "knowing," an immediacy, that various and different rational discourses have to represent more or less adequately. This experience has a religious component because at least some people "are compelled" to say that it does. A theology that is adequate to this religious component of experience is just as objective as a natural science that is adequate to the ordinary perceptual component of experience. Or, alternatively, religious/theological ideas are just as good at representing pre-reflective experience in their way as scientific ideas are in theirs.

There is nothing remotely pragmatic about any of this. Van Huyssteen's epistemology focuses entirely on the experiential origin of ideas and pegs their value exclusively to the adequacy of their representation of that origin. To make matters worse, in the case of religious experience it is the say-so of some individual that determines whether there is any experiential subject matter for theological ideas to represent in the first place. Someone whose overriding passion in life is golf, and who constructs a belief system around that passion that articulates it quite well, could declare that this experiential complex makes no sense to them in anything other than religious terms. They would seem to have as much right, by van Huyssteen's lights, to claim a "democratic presence" at the interdisciplinary table with the sciences as Christians or any other practitioners of more traditional forms of religion.

His reference to democratic presence notwithstanding, there is something quite undemocratic about van Huyssteen's approach to the topic of the proper public role of Christian theology. He does not come to the table to discuss whether there should be departments of Christian

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 74. (emphasis mine)

theology in public universities as another “democratic presence” representing the interests of Christians. He comes as a philosophical expert who purports to know about knowledge, about Truth independent and when people are representing that more or less adequately. As such, his is what amounts to a privileged voice that stands apart from democratic consensus. He is the philosophical expert whose authoritative knowledge about rationality and intellectual responsibility comes from beyond such consensus-making procedures and therefore is in a position to correct its conclusions.

Recall that a principal motivation for these kinds of calls for a public role for religion is the fear that treating religion as a private matter is tantamount to trivializing it. It should be obvious by now that the pragmatic humanist privatization of religion has nothing to do with reducing it to triviality or unimportance of any kind, as has been the case with dismissals of religion done in the name of representationalist distinctions between objective and subjective. Rorty’s distinction between public and private projects has nothing to do with the difference between things that are important because they represent independent Truth and things that are trivial because they do not. It rests, instead, on the observation that there are more viable ways of coming to terms with the vicissitudes of life in this world than there are ways of making accurate predictions about such things as the orbits of comets, the paths of rockets, and the behavior of gases. That observation, along with the democratic judgment that agreement on the former matter is not crucial to social order, is what makes religion private. It simply does not follow that what people agree upon widely is important while what people do in the (relatively) private pursuit of happiness is trivial.

Quite the contrary, in Rorty’s scheme of things private is better. This is not because what people do without intersubjective agreement represents some higher power or Truth more so than what they do that is widely agreed upon. It is because private projects, in Rorty’s sense of the term, give freer rein to the imagination than public ones. And that is what humanists pin our hopes on, our ability to come up with new ideas and words. After all, for Rorty, we should see “the poet as the vanguard of the species.” In this setting, the enemy of religion is not scientific objectivity, which religion has to match representationally in order to be important. The enemy of religion is institutional orthodoxy that stifles human creativity.

v.

William Dean's "The Irony of Atheism and the Invisibility of America" is an analysis and critique of what he calls American spiritual culture. It is not a discussion of Rorty's writings on religion *per se*. Whether there is such a thing as an American spiritual culture or not, Rorty no doubt speaks for much that Dean finds wrong with America these days. For instance,

There is a prevailing American spiritual culture, but it is a culture skeptical of all that might stand beyond it to transform it. The prevailing American spiritual culture, shared though it is, fixes itself on the individual and basically ignores what people share. It is "atheistic" in the sense that it disbelieves in anything that might help create a new spiritual culture. This skeptical and atheistic American spiritual culture is unable to move to a new "theism," if a theism is a belief, not necessarily in a God-being, but in anything beyond itself that might help transform itself into a new spiritual culture.²²

What is most debilitating religiously in all of this, according to Dean, is the idea that religious life can proceed apace without humans being connected to any higher power. One needs only attend to the following remarks to get a sense of Dean's own hankering after Truth independent and a higher power.

Religion becomes merely an elaborate way to cope with life problems like death or to adjust to the fashions and powers of societies. Religious tradition carries no independent truth and is merely the trail left by the society's solutions to its problems, dressing those solutions up with terms like guilt and God, sin and salvation. Academic theology is no science and has no independent claims to make; it is only the church's or the university's effort to codify and institutionalize what

²² Dean, "The Irony of Atheism and the Invisibility of America," 64.

a society or some social group has already made plausible.²³

Clearly Rorty's pragmatic humanism exemplifies what Dean finds wrong. With no truth independent of human happiness to search for, nothing beyond democratic consensus to correct it, and nothing beyond human creativity to depend on for inspiration or fulfillment, Rorty's religion leaves no room for the outbreak of a new form of theism that, according to Dean, we so sorely need.

Not content to leave monotheism a matter of religious freedom as pragmatic humanists would have it be, Dean tries to bolster his hankering for God by tying it to a dialectical process in which religious movements devolve into a skeptical atheism that in turn spawns discovery of a new theism.

There is a religious law hiding beneath this. Prior to our own time a society's religious orthodoxy would be overcome by its atheism, but from the ashes of that atheism a new faith would arise. Call that law "the irony of atheism." It may be mathematical, like a scientific law: directly proportional to the power of the atheism and the intensity of its acceptance is the power of the resulting new theism and the intensity of its revolt from atheism.²⁴

He cites examples of this process working in American history, allows that it seems not to be working today, but alludes to its breaking the bounds of America's atheistic historicism so as to connect us with a power beyond our own despite ourselves.

Recognizing that they are lost to history, the American people could find that their history has been given the capacity to transcend itself. They could see that, shattered into multiple histories in a multi-cultural society, America has received from beyond itself a common spiritual culture.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

Then, history would be linked, ironically, to mystery.²⁵

This is a good example of the use of some combination of metaphysics and theology to thwart inquiry. Just as Peirce condemned modern epistemological philosophy for blocking scientific inquiry, pragmatic humanists condemn Dean for blocking religious inquiry. By his account, humanistic self-reliance is not a possible religious option. The irony of atheism law forbids it, except perhaps as an atheistic moment to be sublated by a new form of theism as the dialectic of religious history works itself out.

Why describe pragmatic humanism the way Dean does, as religious skepticism? Unless one is convinced *a priori* that religion is inherently theistic, humanism might better be described as an instance of religious invention, something worth being experimented with rather than doomed in advance to be replaced with its own incipient form of theism. The same goes for the examples Dean cites from American religious history, of seemingly atheistic moments being turned into new versions of Christian theism. Dean sees this as the working of a religious law the inexorable operations of which guarantee the eruption of a new form of theism out of pragmatic humanism. Pragmatic humanists see them as tributes to human imagination. No matter what philosophy or science may come along, convinced Christians can, if they are creative enough, put a theistic spin on it.

VI.

Victor Anderson's critique of Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism is similar in an important respect to Dean's criticism of "skeptical historicism" and, by implication, pragmatic humanism. Both Dean and Anderson claim that religion is stultified without an extra-human divine object that provides for openness in, and enlargement of, religious life.

West's religious views are similar to Rorty's in that West too places a great deal of religious weight on the combination of pragmatism and democracy. In fact, Anderson worries that West places too much religious weight on this combination.

²⁵ Ibid., 72.

One notes in West's description of prophetic criticism a religious commitment to democracy and individuality. . . . The worry here is one of equivocation . . . the religious seems to be identified with a political hope in the democratization of American culture itself. And a political theory has subverted theology, or in a Deweyan manner, the "religious" is identified with liberal democratic hope and practices.²⁶

In short, Anderson's fear is that West's religious faith is nothing more nor less than the pragmatic humanism of Dewey and Rorty in which democracy and its future replace the Christian church. Anderson rightly recognizes that what he is asking for is the reintroduction of a non-pragmatic element into West's account of religion, namely a Truth independent to which religious practices have to be loyal if not represent adequately. Anderson says of West,

He might retort that behind my equivocation charge is my admittance of a metaphysical element in prophetic pragmatism. West rejects such metaphysical thinking which he sees as being constitutive of religious realism or what he pejoratively calls, "theological objectivism."²⁷

Nonetheless, Anderson calls for exactly that realistic modification of West's prophetic pragmatism, a higher power distinct from anything human, past, present, or future.

Religious realism orients the theologian toward a tertiary subject who transcends public theologians' own historical faiths and theologies and their loyalties to their culture and its ideology. Religious realism orients religious devotion toward an Other whom faith recognizes as the One beyond the many theological interpretations of Christ and the many forms of cultural life, including democracy.²⁸

²⁶ Victor Anderson, "The Wrestle of Christ and Culture in Pragmatic Public Theology," 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 142-3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

Anderson claims two benefits for religious realism, enlargement of vision and openness. He tries to retain his pragmatic credentials by putting the religious realism, as a supposedly necessary corrective to West's prophetic pragmatism, to the test of practice.

Prophetic pragmatism is one contender for the public acceptance of theological critiques of culture, and religious realism is another. What is needed is a mode of analysis for testing the adequacy of the various contenders to public theology. Pragmatism offers for our scrutiny such a test. The test of adequacy for public theology is a practical one. . . . The contribution of religious realism to this practical test lies in its conceptual capacity to *enlarge our visions* of human worth and value by *keeping our visions open* to the limits of democracy and the possibilities of transcendence, fulfillment, and faithfulness.²⁹

This is not even half-hearted pragmatism. For, unlike James, Dewey, and Rorty, and despite what he says about practical tests, Anderson does not disregard the origin of religious ideas in favor of results when it comes to determining their worth. Instead, by his "realist" lights, ideas are not adequately religious unless they are focused on Richard Niebuhr's One beyond the many. Anything that turns away, or deviates, from that origin is henotheistic or polytheistic, in a word idolatrous. There is no need to wait and see whether West's prophetic pragmatism or Rorty's romantic polytheism might turn out to be at least as large in vision and as open as any form of Christian monotheism ever has been. If those religious visions do not originate in the God of radical monotheism they must be parochial and self-enclosed and, therefore, religiously inadequate in advance of any practical test. That short-circuits democratic consensus as the arbiter of religious freedom with a vengeance.

Both Dean and Anderson say, in effect, that they know in some way that no one can be open to change in, and enlargement of, religious vision apart from connection with a power higher than that is different from anything human. In so doing they dismiss out of hand what Rorty calls

²⁹ Ibid., 150. (emphasis mine)

“Whitman’s sense of glorious democratic vistas,” his “insistence on futurity” as the feature of pragmatic humanism that guarantees openness without reference to a higher power. They “know” in advance that this will not work. But how can they say this unless they believe that Christian monotheism is religiously definitive in a way that closes off any further, and different, religious experimentation?

Neither Dean nor Anderson favor governmental enforcement of religious uniformity. There is, nonetheless, an authoritarian cast to their work. Each in their own way appeals to an authority higher than democratic consensus to “force” religious uniformity on all right thinking people. Democratic freedom of religion notwithstanding, each delivers the message that pragmatic humanism is so deviant, religiously speaking, as to be unrealistic, unreasonable, idolatrous, or otherwise beyond the pale. The threat of physical punishment is missing. But the intellectual chains are there nonetheless. This is not the “intellectual republic” that James envisioned in which “we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.”

VII.

I conclude with two comments. The first is about Rorty’s distrust of monotheists. He thinks they cannot be wholehearted democrats because of their commitment to a higher power who can override democratic consensus. This distrust should not be a blanket one. There are Christian monotheists who believe as Roger Williams did that, at least since the coming of Christ and when it comes to politics, God has left his people to wander in the wilderness of this world according to their own devices. Granted, such believers will not invest democracy with the religious significance that Dewey and Rorty do. But their commitment to democratic consensus politics can be as wholehearted as that of any pragmatic humanist. For, unlike van Huyssteen, Dean, and Anderson, there is nothing about their belief in God that stands to override that consensus.

Second, pragmatic humanism is about human self-reliance, philosophically, politically, and religiously. We value our ideas because they serve our purposes, not because they represent something else in virtue of which they have truth value. We govern ourselves as equals because this works better than any other form of government humans have come up with, not because some higher authority bids us do that.

We pin our hopes on our own ability to create new ideas and words. We trust human imagination because we see what it has accomplished in the past and can project what it might accomplish in the future, not because it expresses any higher creative power. This religious position deserves better understanding and more serious consideration than it has received heretofore in these pages.