

Advanced Theology Seminar: Pragmatism (TS529)

Meadville Lombard Theological School (Fall 2009)

Tuesdays, 9-12

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Overview

This advanced graduate theological workshop explores pragmatism as a contextual and praxis-oriented theological methodology for pluralistic contemporary religious life. Varieties of pragmatism will be examined, from select classical expressions to contemporary versions. Attention will be given to issues such as the historical roots of pragmatism; the ways in which contemporary pragmatists critically draw from classical pragmatism; the interface of pragmatism and cultural criticism; pragmatist conceptions of “religion” and “the religious”; pragmatist philosophies of knowledge and value; and various theological pragmatisms. The task of the course is to interrogate how “critical religious pragmatism” may serve as a creative theological praxis especially attuned to the moral and religious challenges of our time.

Objectives

Through engagement with one another and with a vital American philosophical and theological tradition, students taking this course will:

- *become acquainted with pragmatism as a distinctly American philosophical and theological tradition;
- *hone their theological thinking and rhetorical skills;
- *experience an advanced seminar setting in which to test and examine emerging theological and philosophical commitments;
- *expand their facility with recent trends in theology, religious ethics, and cultural theory;
- *and encounter “critical religious pragmatism” as a theological and ministerial praxis creatively attuned to the moral and cultural realities of contemporary situations.

Expectations/Structure

This course will be run dialogically with mini lectures on occasion. It is a heavy reading course. Close reading, text analysis, discussion and student presentations will be our primary modes of engagement. Your grade will be based on your participation in class, your presentations, and a modest final project.

As participants in an advanced workshop, I expect each student to come fully prepared to class. By “fully prepared” I mean that each student should have carefully read and considered each of the texts for the day. As you read and prepare for the class session, I recommend using an interpretive grid to guide your work. Ask yourself four types of questions—hermeneutical, fundamental, normative, and applied.

- 1) Hermeneutical Questions: What sources, histories, contexts, traditions and methods shape the author’s work?
- 2) Fundamental Questions: Does the author assume or explicate particular views of human experience and knowledge, the nature of nature and history, and/or the meanings of “religion,” “ethics,” “theology,” and “God”?
- 3) Normative Questions: What does the author take to be normative in knowledge work and moral life; what is “good,” what is “right,” what is “true” and “beautiful”?
- 4) Applied Questions: What particular practical and theoretical problems is the author concerned with, and what solutions, if any, does the author propose?

Besides participating in each session as described above, each student will be expected to facilitate at least two sessions in the course— (though this depends on the number of students in the class). These should be collaborative facilitations, in which two to three students partner together. I will typically briefly introduce each of the session’s topics, and then ask the student facilitators to take over. Facilitators should come prepared with hard-copy handouts for the classmates that include a narrative summary of what they take to be the major points and issues dealt with in the texts for the day (2-4 pp) and a list of 5-7 questions for discussion. My job will be to open each session by contextualizing the issues. The contribution of the student facilitators will be to read or talk through their general summaries and then to generate discussion. Please come with hard copy handouts to share when it is your day to facilitate.

You have three options for your final project. One, especially suited to ministers, activists and religious workers, is to articulate 5 questions and describe 5 disciplines/practices informed by themes/insights from this course that you anticipate will be useful to you in your community forming and culture changing work. A brief interpretation of not more than a single page for each question and practice (why / how you anticipate it will be useful, and how it is informed by learning from this course) will also need to be submitted. A second option, perhaps especially suitable for those with more purely academic interests, is to articulate five new questions that the material in this course has provoked you to consider in relation to your existing or planned research and five disciplines/practices that will aid you in actually producing your research in ways that will carry forward insights from this course (e.g., more rigorous or public forms of experimentation, more collaborative-participative research, an altered rhetorical tone that reflects new understandings about knowledge work and production). A brief interpretation of these questions/practices will also need to be submitted. A third option is to submit a standard research paper.

Bibliography

1. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*
2. Susan Haack, *Pragmatism, Old and New: Selected Writings*
3. Sheila Davaney, *Pragmatic Historicism*
4. Robert Neville, *On the Scope and Truth of Theology: Theology as Symbolic Engagement*
5. Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*
6. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*
7. Judith Greene, *Pragmatism and Social Hope*

Calendar

Sept 8: Introduction: choose presentation sessions.

Sept 15: Genealogies—Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, John Dewey, “The Development of American Pragmatism” ([on Moodle](#)) and Richard Bernstein, “Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds,” ([on Moodle](#))

Sept 22: Epistemology and Experience

*CS Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” “Pragmatism and Pragmaticism,” in *Pragmatism, Old and New*, ed. Haack.

*William James, “What Pragmatism Means,” “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” in Haack.

*John Dewey, “The Quest for Certainty,” “Truth and Consequences,” “Common Sense and Scientific Inquiry,” in Haack.

Sept 29: Instructor is out of town

October 6: Ethics

*James, “Moral Philosophy and the Moral Life,” in Haack.

*Dewey, “The Construction of Good,” in Haack.

*Locke, “Values and Imperatives,” in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, ed. Leonard Harris: ([on Moodle](#)).

*Putnam, “Fact and Value”: ([on Moodle](#)).

*West, "Theory, Pragmatism, and Politics," "Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic," in *Keeping Faith*: (on Moodle).

October 13: Religion

*CSP, "A Neglected Argument," (http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Neglected_Argument_for_the_Reality_of_God); "Evolutionary Love," in *Pragmatism and Religion*, ed. Stuart Rosenbaum (on Moodle).

*WJ, "Philosophy" (Lecture XIII from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *Pragmatism and Religion*, ed. Stuart Rosenbaum (on Moodle); "The Will to Believe," in *Pragmatism: A Reader*, in Haack; "What Makes A Life Significant" and "On A Certain Blindness Among Human Beings," (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16287/16287-h/16287-h.htm>)

*Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism," in *Pragmatism and Religion*, ed. Stuart Rosenbaum (on Moodle); "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," in Haack.

*West, "Prophetic Pragmatism," in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (on Moodle).

October 20: Reading Week Break

October 27: Sheila Davaney, *Pragmatic Historicism*

November 3: Robert Neville, *The Scope and Truth of Theology*

November 10: Neville, *The Scope and Truth of Theology*

November 17: Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange*

November 24: Thanksgiving Break

December 1: Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*

December 8: Judith Greene, *Pragmatism and Social Hope*

****Statement Regarding Adaptation or Accommodation**

Students experience learning challenges for a variety of reasons. If you need course adaptations or accommodations because you are differently abled, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. Likewise, see me if you encounter difficulty with the course or feel that you could be performing at a higher level, or have a learning style issue that provides a challenge. As an instructor, my obligation is to ensure that the work you encounter is relevant to your needs and accessible. Unless you come to see me about these or other related issues, I will assume your learning needs are being met.