

Introduction

The rise of historical consciousness has been, and continues to be, one of the greatest challenges facing theologians in the modern age. And the overarching premise of this book is that any viable theology today needs to thoroughly historicize itself—its sources, its norms, its tasks, its claims, and even its contents. Put differently, religion must be conceived within the limits of history alone.

The historicizing of religion and theology is a byproduct of the widespread *historicism* that has come to dominate Western thinking over the past two centuries.¹ Historicism, which will be more fully defined in chapter 1, is the notion that, like anything else, human beings and all of their concepts, theories, communities, texts, and so on, are historical—that is, conditioned by contingent circumstances and tied to particular contexts. Historicism has a long, complex, and multifarious history.² The origins of an identifiably historicist worldview go back to the German *Aufklärung* and its effort to provide an alternative to the tradition-evading Franco-British Enlightenment. In the nineteenth century, reflection on human historicity assumed center stage in the intellectual life of Germany, largely thanks to the emergence of the modern academic discipline of history and to the historically focused philosophies of Georg W. F. Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, David Friedrich Strauss, Wilhelm Dilthey, Ernst Troeltsch, and many other towering figures. And in the twentieth century, historicism found expression in the United States by way of classical pragmatism, the early Chicago school of theology, and the ideas of important thinkers like Mordecai Kaplan, W. E. B. Du Bois, and H. Richard Niebuhr. Historicism is also the underlying presupposition of much of what now passes as “postmodern” (deconstructionism, post-structuralism, etc.), and most of the major theological programs and movements of the last several decades, from radical or

death-of-God theologies to black and Latin American liberation theologies, to feminist and womanist theologies, to postliberal and revisionist theologies, exhibit deep historicist assumptions about human situatedness, particularity, finitude, social construction, and the relation between knowledge and power.

This volume contends that contemporary theologians and religious thinkers must come to terms with historicism without reservation. And to illustrate what it means to tackle the historicist challenge head-on, this study delineates, develops, and defends a particular strand of historicist thought known as *pragmatic historicism*.³ Pragmatic historicism, as Sheila Greeve Davaney has ably shown, grows out of the historicist traditions of nineteenth-century Germany.⁴ Indeed, this project has one foot in German historicism,⁵ and at least half of that foot stands in the long and formidable shadow cast by Ernst Troeltsch and the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (see especially chapters 3 and 5).⁶ Be that as it may, the adjective “pragmatic” is meant to signal that the trajectory of historicism tracked and championed here is predominantly an American intellectual tradition.⁷ In the United States, historicism is philosophically rooted in and nurtured by pragmatism⁸ and its intellectual siblings, naturalism and radical empiricism. Thus, the philosophical genealogy of pragmatic historicism stretches back to the classical American pragmatists—Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey—and includes many of their neopragmatist descendants, most notably, Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein, Cornel West, and Jeffrey Stout. Pragmatic historicism came to full flower theologically in the early twentieth century at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, where George Burman Foster, Shirley Jackson Case, Shailer Mathews, and Gerald Birney Smith—all of whom were influenced by pragmatism as well as by Troeltsch and the history-of-religions school—developed an empirical, naturalistic, and sociohistorical approach to theology and the study of religion. The legacy of these first-generation Chicago schoolers lives on, however quietly, in the present-day pragmatic historicist theologies of Delwin Brown, Sheila Davaney, William Dean, Gordon Kaufman, and Sallie McFague. Davaney is responsible for coining the designation “pragmatic historicism,” although she enlists Brown, Dean, Kaufman, and McFague (along with a few others) as fellow pragmatic historicists.⁹ She is also historically conscious about her pragmatic historicism, mindful of the ways in which it has been shaped by earlier historicisms, “especially the positions of the early Chicago School and the first American pragmatists.”¹⁰

The thesis of this book is that the liberal theologians of the early Chicago school and the first American pragmatists provide unparalleled

resources for thinking through the conceptual problems posed by historicism as these were articulated in nineteenth-century German scholarship. They and their contemporary heirs have understood religion within the limits of history alone, all the while making bold affirmations about meaning, truth, tradition, pluralism, nature, and ultimate reality. For that reason, I want to lift up this oft-neglected but important pragmatic historicist tradition—not just as a rich and vital intellectual heritage in its own right but also as a new program for the future of theology. It is argued that pragmatic historicism is an underdeveloped resource for contemporary theology since it offers a model for normative religious thought that is theologically compelling yet wholly nonsupernaturalistic, deeply pluralistic, unflinchingly liberal, and radically historicist.

That argument, I acknowledge, is not entirely original. Brown, Davaney, Dean, Kaufman, and McFague spent the better part of their careers reimagining the theological enterprise along pragmatic historicist lines,¹¹ and this volume is, to a considerable degree, an exposition and vindication of their labors (and those of the earlier historicists on whom they rely, be it explicitly or implicitly—i.e., Troeltsch, James, and Dewey, as well as Foster, Case, Mathews, and Smith). Of course, from a historicist point of view, the quest for pure originality is futile, since human beings are historical creatures and, as such, always “live out of the heritages their histories have bequeathed to them.”¹² Consequently, in good historicist fashion, I want to begin by historicizing my own project: the insights and claims I will put forward, far from emerging *ex nihilo*, are linked to, dependent on, and continuous with prior historicisms. Pragmatic historicists, though, also stipulate that we are both recipients and transformers of our inheritances (see chapter 5). And indeed, I will seek to both continue and change—that is, expand, recontextualize, reshape, build on, and occasionally amend—the extant pragmatic historicist canon, making this book a conscious exemplification of the very historicism for which it argues. This is evident in at least two ways.

First, on the analytical level, this volume, following Dean and Davaney,¹³ will set out to offer a genealogically and descriptively thick account of pragmatic historicism, chiefly for the purposes of mitigating the ironic penchant among more postmodern historicists to neglect their own history and, even more importantly, of recovering what gets lost, philosophically as well as theologically, when pragmatic historicism’s forebears (e.g., the early Chicago schoolers and the classical pragmatists) are forgotten (e.g., an openness to metaphysics and the natural world, a tool for combatting religious exclusivism and supernaturalism, a critically realist epistemology).

However, in contrast to Davaney's most recent monographs, this book is not a history or a map of historicism. On the contrary, I adopt Davaney's plotting of the historical and contemporary terrain as my point of departure and then set out to further explore and expound its constructive theological implications. Accordingly, my analysis proceeds more synthetically and thematically than chronologically, weaving together previous and current historicisms in the hopes of pinpointing common themes and emphases and constructively engaging specific theological topics and issues (e.g., religious diversity, the nature of authority, the doctrine of God) from a pragmatic historicist perspective.

Second, this book is not just descriptive, but prescriptive. That is, instead of merely summarizing the ideas of leading pragmatic historicists, I will advocate for pragmatic historicism and for the kind of theology it makes possible. In that sense, this volume can be seen as a sort of "sequel" to Davaney's *Pragmatic Historicism*, continuing to chart a course for the future development of pragmatic historicism as well as to draw out the fresh and exciting possibilities it augurs for the renewal of theological discourse in the twenty-first century. Without a doubt, Davaney and I often nudge pragmatic historicism in comparable directions. However, as will become abundantly clear in the last few chapters of the book, I end up holding out for a more critically realist, unashamedly metaphysical, and overtly theological historicism. I am also more interested in working *across* the historicist, pragmatist, empiricist, and naturalist lineages and accentuating and fortifying the intersections between them.

To be sure, most of the proposals advanced in this study rework arguments already ventured, in some manner or another, by Davaney, Dean, Brown, Kaufman, and McFague; James and Dewey; and Foster, Case, Mathews, and Smith. Still, I intend to travel even further down the trail blazed by these pioneering pragmatic historicists. At particular junctures, this volume will try to lead pragmatic historicism to some new frontiers. For instance, chapter 3 fleshes out the first pragmatic historicist theology of religions, while chapter 8 attempts to set forth a full-orbed pragmatic historicist theology of the divine. On occasion, I will necessarily part company with and push back on the different thinkers I am explicating. In some debates, I will side with certain historicists over others, and in a few cases, I will go my own way. For example, in chapter 6, I attempt to push pragmatic historicism away from the postmodern nominalism and relativism of today's neopragmatists (whom Davaney considers "philosophical fellow travelers"¹⁴) and toward the paleopragmatic realism of the classical pragmatists (especially

Peirce, whom pragmatic historicists tend to ignore or even impugn). And I look to pragmatism not only for its instrumentalist theory of truth, but also for its naturalist account of reality (see chapter 2). Indeed, throughout the book, I strive to strengthen the ties between pragmatic historicism and what might be termed its “sibling traditions” in American theological and philosophical thought: radical empiricism and religious naturalism (see chapter 8, in particular).

These sorts of critical and reconstructive efforts will frequently require looking to guides who do not necessarily identify as pragmatic historicists—for example, religious pluralists and comparative theologians, such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, and John Thatamanil; pragmatic realists, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Robert Neville, and Wesley Wildman; radical empiricists and religious naturalists, such as Donald Crosby, Nancy Frankenberry, Michael Hogue, Jerome Stone, Ursula Goodenough, and Robert Corrington; and select representatives of the *later* Chicago school of theology, such as Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Meland, and Bernard Loomer. This volume invokes these and other voices—some sympathetic fellow travelers, some formidable critics—both to reinforce, augment, extend, and supplement central historicist intuitions and principles, and to occasionally blunt, even correct, a few of historicism’s blind spots and limitations, excesses and exaggerations, thereby putting its own fallibilism into practice and, I hope, generating a richer and more robust pragmatic historicism.