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Pragmatic Philosophy, Theology, and Practices: Pointing Directions for African-American Public Theology

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PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND PRACTICES:
POINTING DIRECTIONS FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND PRACTICES:
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Boston University School of Theology, 2013

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues for a public theology that incorporates both reason and revelation as regulative principles in shaping public policy. A segment of scholars interested in public debate, such as Richard Rorty, believe that theology has no legitimate place in the discourse. Yet, African-American theology has been prominent in American political thought, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King, Jr. to contemporary scholars such as Cornel West, Emilie Townes, and Victor Anderson. This research upholds the value of pragmatic philosophy and theology for public discourse, particularly as key African-American thinkers have developed its potential. The thesis is that the pragmatic tradition—its basic conceptuality and its commitment to social wellbeing—can effectively employ theological and secular ideas and resources to influence public policy.

The method is analytic and comparative, beginning with an analysis of pragmatism as a method of inquiry in the classic works of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, and
their particular understandings of the role of philosophy in public discourse. This sets the stage for an analysis of neopragmatists Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Cornel West and Victor Anderson’s treatments of religion and secularism in public discourse. Using West’s prophetic pragmatism concept and public theology as the framework, the dissertation explores the historical role of the Black Church tradition during the Civil Rights Era and the contributions of African-American religious women. The analysis continues with an examination of womanist thought as it challenges and enlarges upon West’s prophetic pragmatism. Experience informs womanist thought, which in turn fosters a sharp analysis of injustices and inequalities in human existence and cultivates actions for justice and equity. The dissertation concludes with a constructive argument for a public theology.

Philosophy and theology are important contributors to public discourse, and pragmatism provides a way for both to be engaged in this socially transformative work of cultural analysis and problem solving. Pragmatic tendencies, such as joining theory and praxis and reconciling cultural and political differences in a democratic society, enliven public theology and increase its potential.

Implications for further study include professional development of pragmatic theologians and philosophers engaged in public theology and expanded scholarship and study of African-American women in pragmatism and prophetic action.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Some scholars, most of them theologians, believe that theology has had, and should continue to have, a viable role in public discourse, such as in shaping public policy. Yet other scholars assert that the influence of theology in social life has waned and that its role as an academic discipline is no longer prominent or essential beyond the academy and church life narrowly construed. Some secularists, such as Richard Rorty and Jeffrey Stout, argue for subordinating theological or religious influences and espouse secularism as the voice of authority and secularization as the cultural norm.¹ In U.S. society, individuals and groups who represent these two perspectives are posturing for their particular ideology to become the regulative principle and the predominate voice in the public arena. Others see the choice as more nuanced. For example, in their introduction to The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen note that scholars are revisiting, reworking, and rethinking the categories of religion and secularism and of the religious and the secular.²

I propose that the pragmatic tradition—its basic conceptuality and its role in public discourse and policy—can integrate theological and “secularist” contributions in shaping public policy. In saying this, I comprehend the diverse understandings of theological and secular thought, but emphasize the significance of both approaches, however unclear their boundaries. In

¹ I am using the terms secularism and secularization as defined in philosophy. Regarding the term secular, it has many meanings. Thus, its meaning will be determined by the context in which it is used, e.g. religious, philosophical, political, educational, etc.

a democratic society such as the United States, a consequence of either secularism or religion functioning as the voice of authority places the country at risk of becoming the “naked public square” that Father Richard J. Neuhaus warned about over twenty years ago. Unfortunately, that is slowly becoming the case in the United States. Individuals and groups, who hold these extreme views, both religious and secular, are filling this public space. They advocate for resources exclusive to their individual or collective self-interest. Moreover, common ground and resolutions have become increasingly difficult to achieve because of the widening gap among affinity groups, particularly between religious communities and secularists. Consequently, due to their failure to work collaboratively, the results are inequitable distribution of resources and public policies that negatively affect and marginalize key constituents of society such as single mothers, the financially insecure, youth, and communities of color. The United States is a pluralistic society: its citizens’ ideologies and human experiences are diverse. Consequently, Americans hold differing views as to what should be the regulative principles in devising policies and systems that ensure equity and promote democracy.

Throughout history, many people from various disciplines—politicians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, educators, community leaders—have analyzed the democratic system

3. Richard J. Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), p. vii ff. Neuhaus asserted that excluding religion from the conduct of business would result in a naked public square. He argued that it was dangerous to embrace secularism as the doctrine for America and, if left naked, new and distorted meanings would fill the void. He claimed that it would place religion and democracy in America in jeopardy, that it would be polarizing and equally dangerous to adopt an extreme religious view as the cultural norm.

4. Some would argue that this is exactly what has been the impact of the “Bush Doctrine” and the wars and current economic situation, the effort to dismantle unions, attempts to prevent the passing of the health care bill and the subsequent attempts to repeal it.

and have put forward a variety of ideas and methodologies as to how this democratic system ought to function, particularly as it relates to shaping public policy. Pragmatism is one approach that scholars, such as the late John Dewey, use to critique and influence public policy decisions. Pragmatism is an American philosophy, conceived and developed by American scholars—most notably Charles Peirce and William James. The pragmatic maxim is as follows:

Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have: then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.⁶

In recent history, American scholars such as the late Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Victor Anderson, and Jeffrey Stout have applied their understanding of pragmatism to public discourses on politics and the academy. This research examines more closely the concept of pragmatism and its usefulness as it relates to public policy. I define public policy as the laws and policies that citizens and elected or appointed officials approve through a democratic process, that function to regulate society in such a way to ensure safety, fairness, and equity, and that preserve order.⁷

My thesis is that the pragmatic tradition—its basic conceptuality and its role in public discourse and policy—can integrate theological and “secularist” contributions in shaping public policy. My basic supposition is that religious and secularist ideologies are useful in identifying and assessing inconsistencies in public policies and provide viable methods for analyzing

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⁷ I consider the quest for social justice to be a quest for equality and freedom that is informed by a set of values and norms held by groups or society and perpetuated through systems such as public policy. At times, these values and norms conflict with one another due to any number of reasons. Social change occurs when a community or group’s norms and values change in such a way as to benefit the common good, which is not always immediately apparent. In a democratic society, the public sphere or square is the open space where individuals interface with others for a variety of different reasons such as to discuss or develop a common understanding of democracy. In the United States, this common quest for equity and rights has as its guide the U.S. Constitution. Inherent in this document is the respect for the individual freedom and responsibility to others, private and public.
culture, understanding moral frameworks, and inspiring others to act. The pragmatic tradition as a methodology is useful in facilitating discussion and problem solving and provides a means for addressing the tensions inherent in public discourse, such as what exists between secularist and theological approaches to shaping public policy. Thus, the task of this dissertation is to argue for a public theology that incorporates both reason and revelation as regulative principles in guiding the public policies of a democratic society to benefit individuals and society. To that end, this research encompasses several aspects.

**Methodology**

First, to provide a framework for this inquiry, I examine the key aspects of the constructive works of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. I pay particular attention to their construction of pragmatism as a method of inquiry, and their respective understandings of the role of philosophy in public discourse. I have selected these three because, through their work, we have the initial construction of pragmatism as a method of inquiry and its subsequent development as a system. It is especially important to begin with a foundational understanding of their concepts of pragmatism, because in later chapters we will examine several neopragmatists and contemporary pragmatists, each of whom claim to be informed by these three. In this brief survey, I highlight three basic uses of pragmatism: Peirce’s treatment of pragmatism as a method of inquiry, James’s use as a means to understand truth claims, and Dewey’s development of pragmatism into a system and as a mechanism for social change.

Next, I review the basic conceptuality and role of American pragmatism in discourse about public policy and social change. To do so, I examine the important works of four neopragmatists and contemporary pragmatists: Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Cornel West, and
Victor Anderson. I have selected these scholars because they have influenced neopragmatism and other contemporary conceptions of pragmatism in the United States. I compare West, Stout, and Anderson’s respective responses to Rorty’s position that religion is incommensurate with pragmatism. Stout, who is a secularist, differs from Rorty in that he makes more room for use of religion in public discourse. West argues that his concept of *prophetic pragmatism* is a way of incorporating religion as a pragmatic method in public discourse. Anderson, in response to Rorty, Stout, and West, combines analytic philosophy and academic theology to construct a public theology, which he calls *pragmatic theology*, and argues that philosophy and academic theology have a shared role.

Third, I challenge Rorty’s position that religion is incommensurate with pragmatism. In doing so, I address the question as to whether there is a religiously ascribed ethic that can hold its own in public discourse. I argue that there is and that it is evident in the pragmatic tradition. To support this claim, I will examine more closely Cornel West’s concept of prophetic pragmatism. Prophetic pragmatism, briefly defined, understands pragmatism as a political form of cultural criticism. West asserts that this methodology is useful regardless of whether or not a person ascribes to a religious belief. The backdrop of this stage of my analysis is Anderson’s understanding of public theology. To determine whether West’s concept satisfies this definition and to determine the legitimacy of West’s claim, I apply his concept to Jeffrey Stout’s treatment of democratic engagement between secularists and religious groups and Emilie Townes’s cultural critique of public policy’s impact on women and public health.

The task of this dissertation is to make a case for a public theology that is informed by the pragmatic tradition. My position is that academic theology and religious institutions have an
important role in analyzing culture and in public discourse, such as in helping to shape public policy. The application of the pragmatic tradition to public discourse is inclusive and lends itself to a multi-faceted, multidisciplinary approach to cultural analysis and problem solving. It argues for the value of the role of the practitioner (the academic and the community leader) in public discourse, regardless of their respective ideologies. My position is that theology is not subordinate to secularism nor is secularism subordinate to theology; rather, they are both a part of the human experience and thus both have value and are important to the public discourse. Therefore, I maintain that these boundaries between the two ideologies are artificial, unnecessary, and ought to be dismantled because of the polarizing results now experienced in American culture. To argue this point, I examine the historical role that religion has played in the public domain. Using West’s prophetic pragmatism as the framework, I examine the historical events of the civil rights efforts in the U.S., paying particular attention to the role of the Black Church tradition during the Civil Rights Era as a site of investigation for ways in which pragmatism as defined here significantly affected the quest for equality and justice in these communities. My position is that central to the efforts of African Americans to achieve and maintain equal and civil rights was their belief that the U.S. Constitution applied to them as citizens. African Americans used a variety of approaches to challenge the laws and provide a counter-response to discriminatory and destructive behavior that contradicted this claim. Those who fought for equal rights during this Civil Rights Era were compelled to do so because of core values and beliefs that align with the pragmatic maxim. In developing this analysis, I pay

8. The recent 2012 campaigns and subsequent election provide a stark example of this polarization.

9. Regarding the Civil Rights Era, I will cover the civil rights efforts in the United States during the period 1857–1968.
particular attention to the contributions made by African-American women, focusing on Ms. Ella Baker as a representative figure. I will demonstrate that the historic civil rights events are examples of the pragmatic method and that civil rights leader, such as Ms. Baker and Rev. Dr. King, exemplify West’s concept of prophetic pragmatism.

An important resource in this research is the scholarship of African-American thinkers, whose heritage includes the struggle for membership in the academy as well as participation in the struggle for civil rights. Their contributions in their academic disciplines and critique of American culture are beneficial to the general culture because they provide a perspective as to how we might bridge the cultural divide between the academy and the larger society and between the secular and the sacred. The African-American quest to present an alternative or broader epistemology as articulated by these scholars has brought into question the issue of knowledge and truth claims that consequently has transformed and enriched scholarship in every discipline. This research expands the substantive treatment of African-American critical thought and scholarship.

The discussion is further expanded to include the contributions of African-American women and their important and historical roles as leaders in the civil rights movement and as womanist contributors to pragmatism. To that end, I incorporate the works of Emilie Townes, Joy James, Belinda Robnett, Rosetta E. Ross, and Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham. As supplemental resources, I engage the works of Marcia Riggs, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Deloris Williams, Jackie Grant, M. Shawn Copeland, and Melissa Harris-Perry. This collection of literature provides lenses through which to evaluate African-American pragmatist approaches and truth claims, particularly in relation to the incorporation of theology and religion. The
question posed is whether the African-American worldview and historical experiences as presented here satisfy the criteria for the pragmatic tradition and in particular a public theology as described by Anderson and West.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations inherent in this project. The first limitation has to do with the scope of this work. This research focuses primarily on classical pragmatists and neo-pragmatists, with a partial development of womanist approaches as a test for the viability of a prophetic pragmatism in the public square. The research is not a study of analytic philosophy or a study of philosophy as a discipline or its historical development. Neither is it a study of secularity theories or of the Black Church in the public sphere. The analysis intersects with a number of disciplines and perspectives, but it cannot capture all of the nuances and tensions inherent in these discourses. The scope is limited to a close analysis of basic tenets in pragmatism and the tensions between secularism and theology.

Issues of gender, race, and sexuality merit attention, but this project analyzes them in an introductory way. Womanist and African-American feminist scholarship is only minimally present in the development of the pragmatic tradition; thus, this needs to be expanded in later work. The present research lays groundwork for future analysis by introducing the concerns and theological constructs of African American women that can potentially contribute to new directions in pragmatism. As an African-American female, I carry the scars of Sojourner Truth\(^\text{10}\) and, within my veins, the spirit of my grandmothers Geneva and Lena and my mother Elaine;

\(^{10}\) In reference to when she addressed the white women and men at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in December 1851. Later entitled “Ain’t I a Woman?”
thus, I am compelled to pay homage to the “Queen Mothers” and African/African-American sister scholars.\textsuperscript{11} I wish for their voices to be heard which is why they are included in this dissertation and should be included more extensively in future investigations of pragmatism.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Chapter Layout}

I equate discourse to conversation, the tone of which may vary depending upon a number of factors such as the topic, the skills and interest of the interlocutors, the amount of time, and the method of communication. An ineffective model is one in which people take a stance and spend the majority of the time defending their position, concerned more with being heard than hearing. I believe skillful listening, which entails asking questions for clarity and processing with a critical ear and an open mind, is a more useful and effective approach; it is pragmatic.

Pragmatism is about inquiry, which, as Peirce asserts, means a new way of thinking. People develop their ideas as they engage in inquiry and dialogue, moving from firstness to secondness to thirdness. Through this continuous process of praxis (practice and reflection thereon), we gain clarity. Peirce would assert that we make ourselves vulnerable to correction, to

\textsuperscript{11} Some might question the specific identification of these three “Queen Mothers.” They are a part of a culture that respects and honors the elders. While none achieved an education beyond high school, they were my first teachers on the role of faith and response to social issues. Elaine B. Rucks, for example, in addition to investigating claims of discrimination, played a key role in the desegregation of public schools in Springfield, MA. As a community organizer, she mobilized neighborhoods to secure resources and prevented in some situations demolition of houses. Forty years later, one such initiative now exists as a NeighborWorks© organization. She and Lucias Rucks opened their homes to protect and intervene on behalf of victims of domestic violence, and welcomed people from different races and people who were LGBT. Before her death, Elaine publicly thanked God for “…the gifts that you have bestowed upon me and have allowed me to use them to help others.” February 8, 2003.

\textsuperscript{12} West almost exclusively uses male scholars and historical figures to develop his prophetic pragmatism and to construct a line of African-American critical thought. The initial development of an African American tradition as a formal academic discipline was male dominant. Thus, West is, in some respect, a victim of his time in which the seminal thinkers were male and privileged to hold professional positions where they could develop their theories and publish their work. To West’s credit, he has included women scholars in various anthologies and has collaborated with African American women such as bell hooks. Scholars such as Eddie Glaude and James Cone have incorporated into their body of work womanist and black feminist thinkers.
enter into the experience, and to open ourselves to new insights. Pragmatism promotes “living a
life with habits that are discerning and that serve to live a life worth having.”

I believe that an important habit is to take time to understand and to learn the point of view of “the other.” This entails the pragmatic approach of standing back and looking at what is going on, seeking clarity by asking questions and critical analysis. My research attempts to model that approach. In chapters two through four, I have elected to use the basic approach of first framing the main arguments, ideas, and perspectives presented by each thinker as it relates to the subject at hand. I have read their primary works and have, as objectively as possible, attempted to present each one’s ideas and their development of thought up to their most recent positions. Each chapter begins with an instructive approach followed by a summary of key points that will be important to my analysis and my critique. In the final chapter, I will attempt to put in conversation the basic tenets of each thinker. In this respect, I am constructing a theoretical framework that combines key elements from the classical pragmatists, neopragmatists, and postmodern intellectuals. In a sense, I am utilizing the pragmatic approach to develop my pragmatic framework.

CHAPTER TWO
CLASSICAL PRAGMATISTS

To understand pragmatism and its potential usefulness in this postmodern society, it is important to consider first its historical development and its introduction to contemporary society. Scholars note that it is very difficult to identify universal concepts that describe pragmatism and its usefulness in several distinctly different disciplines—natural science, psychology, analytical philosophy, and social sciences. Richard Bernstein’s concept of “metanarratives”—which includes the contested metanarratives by other pragmatists—explains pragmatism’s historical developments as narratives. Despite this difficulty, there are key aspects of pragmatism that are important to know both in terms of its historical development and in determining contemporary applications. Bernstein notes that though we should take the present and future seriously, we can learn much from the classical pragmatists and we must take our commitment to pluralism seriously.¹ I agree with Bernstein and to his point, I add that we learn from the classical pragmatists the importance of maintaining the pragmatic tradition of inquiry, the pragmatic tradition’s treatment of truth claims, and its usefulness in various disciplines, such as addressing social and cultural issues. Moreover, pragmatism’s basic tenet presents a charge and a challenge, which is that what one “thinks is to be interpreted in terms of what [one] is prepared to do.” What one ought to do must go hand in hand with what one chooses to do.

Since its inception over 100 years ago, pragmatism has evolved from its use as a method to examine metaphysical truth claims into its usefulness in philosophical discourse to being

instrumental for addressing contemporary issues. Three basic usages are important to my research: the use of pragmatism as a method of inquiry, as a means to understand truth claims, and as a mechanism for social change. These three aspects may be useful in mediating public discourse and navigating the extremes that result in impasse and polarity. Therefore, I will begin with key highlights and themes of pragmatism according to the classical pragmatists William James, Charles Peirce, and John Dewey.

**William James (1842 –1910)**

**Pragmatism Defined**

According to James, pragmatism represents the empiricist attitude in philosophy; it is a method and a theory of truth. He believed that “the whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.”

Initially, James used pragmatism as a method of inquiry in his examination of religion. Although Peirce introduced it over twenty years prior, pragmatism was considered a relatively new and controversial philosophy and concept. James’s efforts to provide practical examples of the pragmatic method and its usefulness in addressing a variety of philosophical problems is best portrayed through the collection of lectures compiled in the book *Pragmatism*. He delivered this series of lectures at the Lowell Institute that was convened in Boston, Massachusetts during the months of November and December 1906 and at Columbia University in New York City in January 1907. In the lecture “What Pragmatism Means,” James explained the pragmatic method, with the infamous

story of a group of men deliberating about the direction in which a squirrel and a man are going around a tree. James concludes that it is a matter of what one “practically means by ‘going round’ the squirrel.” If the direction of “going round” were north to east, then south to west would determine one answer. Whereas if it were determined by first front, then to the right, then behind, and then to the left, another answer would ensue. He concludes, “Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute. You are both right and wrong according as you conceive the verb ‘to go round’ in one practical fashion or another.”

Pragmatism, for James, represents the empiricist attitude in philosophy. The pragmatist rejects a priori reasoning, fixed principles, and absolutes and origins. Rather, he or she ascribes to concreteness and adequacy, facts, action, and power. An example is James’s demonstration of the use of the pragmatic approach to define a word. One begins by examining the word in terms of its “practical cash-value,” in other words in terms of one’s approach or method. This leads to further inquiry regarding the ways that existing realities may be changed. In this sense, “theories become instruments rather than answers to enigmas, in which we cannot rest … we move forward.”

Pragmatism “unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work.” Therefore, James reasoned, science and metaphysics could work collaboratively because the pragmatic method, which does not stand for any particular truth, indicates how current realities can be changed. The metaphysical quest of describing the universe does not stop at naming it. Whether the word is God or Absolute or Reason, the quest does not end there. The word’s cash-value, its work within one’s experience, must be examined and applied to experiences. It asks

3. William James, Pragmatism, 44.
4. Ibid., 52.
5. Ibid.
What particular fact could have been different by one or the other view being correct? To highlight this point, James cited an Italian pragmatist named Giovanni Papini, who described pragmatism as lying

in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it, in one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.⁶

The Pragmatic Method’s Usefulness in Solving Philosophical Problems

Several of James’s lectures provide practical examples of the pragmatic method and its usefulness in addressing a variety of philosophical problems. Some examples are his treatment of religion, to examine metaphysics, and his analysis of knowledge and common sense. James used the pragmatic method to examine several issues, including belief, truth, and reality, and he reasoned, “pragmatism may be a happy harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking with the more religious demands of human beings.”⁷ He concluded that pragmatism lead him to determine that he must call Absoluteness true because it at the least has cash value for causing comfort and it makes room for the differences of each person’s experiences.⁸ In terms of theology, James concluded that if theological ideas have value, that they have some good, they are true.

Regarding his examination of the metaphysical problem of substance, James demonstrated that

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⁷. Ibid., 69.

⁸. Ibid., 75. James also noted that a person who believes in the Absolute would disregard criticism of others if they consider those criticisms painful towards something they believe to be most precious. This point will be important to Rorty’s position regarding the role of religion in public discourse.
the pragmatic method “shifts the emphasis [from looking back] and looks forward into facts themselves,” with questions such as, “What is the world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself?” This shift means that the philosophic questions are treated less in the abstract and more scientific and individualistic.\(^9\) His “Pragmatism and Common Sense” lecture exemplifies his use of the pragmatic method and the question of knowing as regards to whether or how it completes itself, which leads to the question of “Common Sense.” Knowledge grows and gradually aligns new ideas with previous opinions. New truths, concludes James, are the result of the modification of new experiences and old truths. His understanding of F.C.S. Schiller and John Dewey’s concept of instrumental truth shaped James’ concept of truth.\(^10\)

**Pragmatism as a Theory of Truth**

Schiller and Dewey’s understanding of “instrumental truth” is “that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience.”\(^11\) Truth in our ideas means their power to work which occurs when they cause old ideas to be re-examined and subsequently modified. Truth is actualized through the “process of generalization.” An idea becomes new and adopted as true when the old opinion is met with new experiences that cause one to reflect. After an internal struggle and contradictions are discovered, the old incorporates the new experience until a new idea surfaces that can mediate the two.\(^12\) For James, older truths are important to understanding

\(^9\) William James, *Pragmatism*, 122.

\(^10\) Ibid., 169

\(^11\) Ibid., 57.

\(^12\) Ibid., 60.
pragmatism. He writes, “The pragmatist clings to facts and concreteness, observes truth at its work in particular cases, and generalizes. In this view of truth, a new opinion must incorporate both old truths and new facts. Older truths enable the individual to assimilate the new in his experience into his existing beliefs.\textsuperscript{13} Where Schiller named this theory of truth Humanism, James named it pragmatism and treated the term truth as a class-name for various working-values in experience. Although the level of truth is dependent upon their relationship to other truths, James concluded that an idea is true because it serves a good in that it is believed to be profitable in lives. For the pragmatist, the notion of what is better for us and what is true for us are inseparable.

\textit{The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.... If there be any life that it is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really better for us to believe in that idea, unless, indeed, belief in it incidentally clashed with other greater vital benefits.}\textsuperscript{14}

Noting the inference to “ought,” James added that in terms of what is better, you could not permanently keep that separate from what is true for us. Pragmatism accepts both logic and senses, personal and mystical experiences, provided they have practical consequences.

James argued that truth is both an ends and a means and the practical value of true ideas is determined by the practical importance of their objects. True ideas must be useful from the outset. Truth, in pragmatism, is something dependent upon the way in which experience may lead toward other moments of experience. Similar to Peirce, James contends that ideas of the past are always true and are guaranteed coherence by the present. Expounding further on his

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 61.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 76.
concept of truth, James writes, in the “Author’s Preface to the Meaning of Truth,” that the standard pragmatism question is as follows:

Grant an idea or belief to be true…what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experimental terms?” The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that therefore is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known.15

Truth happens to an idea and it is made true by events. The verification process and the validation process are themselves events. The innumerable verifications of a truth lead to “direct verification,” which, once operating harmoniously, justifies all that happens. From the viewpoint of the pragmatist, true is synonymous with “the workableness of ideas.” In other words, the true is “the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.”16 For the pragmatist, truth and action coexist. Truths emerge from facts, which may not be true. These facts determine our beliefs, provisionally, and our beliefs, which are the truths, make us act. Upon acting, the truths provide more insight or new facts, and the cycle continues. James gives the imagery of a snowball that starts small first packed by hand and then pushed along by several children.17

James credits his friend and colleague Charles Peirce as having introduced the term pragmatism into philosophy.18 Charles Peirce later delivered several lectures intended to clarify and re-work his pragmatic method. Initially presented as a maxim for use in all aspects of

15. William James, Pragmatism, 303–304.
16. Ibid., 309.
17. Ibid., 225.
science, Peirce eventually narrowed pragmatism to its utility in reason, normative reasoning in particular. His contribution is that he provided a new method of inquiry that does not necessarily have the end in mind. Rather, through inquiry, thought is further developed and materialized and the movements of ideas are more fluid.

**Charles Peirce (1839–1914)**

Of the members of the Metaphysical Club’s various approaches to metaphysics, Peirce describes his approach as a scientific one rather than a spiritual one and as a decidedly British perspective, influenced by Kant. Peirce points out that although there are different scientific approaches, one key aspect evident in every pragmatist is the use of the experimental method to ascertain the meanings of words and concepts. He credits William James as the most prominent and respected in this school of thought. He writes, “William James defines pragmatism as the doctrine that the whole ‘meaning’ of a concept expresses itself either in the shape of conduct to be recommended or of experience to be expected.” Although Peirce and James differ in certain questions of philosophy, according to Peirce there are no theoretical differences in the two definitions. For Peirce, pragmatism has to do with intellectual concepts that as the “sign-burdens” have implications that convey more than just feelings and existential facts, namely, the “would-acts” of habitual behavior. Peirce writes, “I understand pragmatism to be a method of ascertaining the meanings, not of all ideas, but only what I call ‘intellectual concepts,’ that is to say, of those upon the structure of which arguments concerning objective fact may hinge.”

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20. Ibid., 401.
Peirce, James adds feelings of compulsiveness to meaning as the ultimate logical interpretant to a habit, whereas Peirce’s version of pragmatism has nothing to do with feelings. Peirce explains that although they arrive at the same practical conclusions, his pragmatist indoctrination is that of mathematics and science and James’s is that of psychology. Peirce was a proponent of the view that philosophy as a scientific method in search for truth requires both theory and practice. According to Peirce, practice shapes reason that philosophy draws from the reality of experience and from the reality of potential being. Phenomena are universal premises drawn from experiences. Consequently, argues Peirce, we are informed by both how things are and how things must be.

The emergence of pragmatism shed light on discussions of “dark questions” and was a method to assist in philosophic inquiry begun in Old Cambridge by “The Metaphysical Club.” According to Peirce, one can trace the concept of pragmatism back to antiquity and named in its “ancestry” Socrates, Aristotle, Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant, and Comte. The Metaphysical Club formed during a time when metaphysics was “being frowned upon and agnosticism was growing.” Jeremy Bentham was a participant who stressed “the importance of applying Bain’s definition of belief, as ‘that upon which a man is prepared to act.’” Thus, Peirce considered Bain the grandfather of pragmatism. Peirce pointed out that pragmatism is not a doctrine of

22. Ibid., 419.
23. Ibid., 35.
24. Ibid., 546. The Club consisted of philosophers, historians, meta-physicists, lawyers, professors, supreme court justice (Oliver Wendell Holmes).
25. Ibid., 399.
metaphysics nor an attempt to determine any truth of things but “…merely a method of
ascertaining the meaning of hard words and of abstract concepts.”

In his lecture delivered in 1903, entitled “The Maxim of Pragmatism,” Peirce called
pragmatism a “maxim of logic.” In this respect, pragmatism is not a system; rather, it is a useful
guide in science and in the conduct of life. This lecture launched a series of lectures that Peirce
intended to “examine the pros and cons of pragmatism.” Hoping to show the value of such an
approach, Peirce starts by framing it as a philosophical theorem:

Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in
the indicative is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its
tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional
sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood.

Three propositions of truth represent the character of pragmatism. First, conception is
given to us by perceptual judgments. Second, we are able to make universal propositions due to
the general elements contained in perceptual judgments. Third, there is no sharp line between
perceptual judgment and abduction.

Peirce’s maxim of pragmatism is “Consider what effects that might conceivably have
practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have then, our conception of those
effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” He uses several examples to
demonstrate this method’s usefulness in resolving problems. One example is in the theory of
probability, specifically calculating the probability of every player winning one franc. According
to the maxim, two questions one must ask are, first, “What is meant by saying that the


27. Ibid., 133.

28. Ibid., 135.
*probability of an event has a certain value, p?*” then “What practical difference it can make whether the value is p or something else.” Then a series of other questions follow. The goal, concludes Peirce, is to determine an appropriate guide to action. In the case of his example, it is whether it is worth taking the chance of sitting at the table to play. His hypothesis is that pragmatism, while not exhaustive, is a viable method of inquiry. As a maxim, pragmatism is the theory that the nature of belief and the proposition believed in is nothing but a maxim of conduct, that is, the adoption of a particular formula as a guide to action. 29 Though not the solution, the maxim teaches that what one “thinks is to be interpreted in terms of what [one] is prepared to do. In other words, what one ought to do must go hand in hand with what one chooses to do.” 30

At the end of his lecture entitled “The Nature of Meaning,” Peirce disclosed that the doctrine concerning pragmatism is the Logic of Abduction, which he adopted from Auguste Comte. He modified the hypothesis as follows: “…the hypothesis must be capable of verification by induction.” By demonstration, the hypothesis is sustained or operative. 31 His position is that as logic of abduction, one cannot prohibit grounds of inquiry as it relates to how practical conduct ought to be shaped, neither can one omit any logical hypothesis if it may be verifiable by experience. 32 In his illustration of pragmatism as logic of abduction, Peirce reframes the maxim to emphasize the relationship between logic and action: “A conception can have no logical effect or import differing from that of a second conception except so far as, taken in connection with other conceptions and intentions, it might conceivably modify our practical conduct differently

30. Ibid., 142.
31. Ibid., 225. He goes into further detail in his lecture, “Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction.”
32. Ibid., 234.
from that second conception.”

According to Peirce, pragmatism should perform two functions: eliminate all ideas that are not clear and make ideas clear. In the case of the latter, it must have “satisfactory attitude toward Thirdness” which is representation of perception because of experience.

Peirce spent several years developing his proof of pragmatism as a maxim, its usefulness in addressing the concept of belief, and its usefulness in science. This led him to his concept of signs. In his article, “Issues of Pragmatism,” he restates the maxim as follows: “The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol.” Additionally, pragmatism (or rather, as Peirce now called it, pragmaticism) holds that the meaning of any concept is its influence upon our conduct, which is based upon the past. When we conceive that we ought to conduct ourselves according to this past, we accept it as true and thus as having meaning. Future conducts are the only conducts that a person can control because reasoning is a conclusion that “must refer to deliberate conduct.”

**John Dewey (1859-1952)**

Dewey’s contribution is the expansion of pragmatism from its philosophical treatment as a method of inquiry to treating it as a philosophical system and its usefulness in understanding the relationship of the individual and society such as the public versus the private and habits and conduct. In essays such as, “Summary of What Philosophy Is,” “The Great Philosophic
Separation,” and “Philosophy and Science,” Dewey exemplifies the pragmatic thought by discussing situations that reinforce the unified relationship of intellect and action. He argues that historically scholars have separated these two, which should not occur because action is essential, and thus the two must go together.

Where James presented a series of circumstances by which the pragmatic method may be applied, Dewey treats pragmatism as a system in order to explain present-day situations. His use of it as a “system” is reflected in his treatment of a number of critical social issues, such as in education and politics. This treatment of pragmatism as a system is expressed in his theory of learning and is represented in his essay, “School Conditions and the Training of Thought.” 36 In this essay, he integrated thought, action, and inquiry as a means not necessarily leading to a particular outcome or end. Dewey argues that training develops and cultivates curiosity, suggestions, habits of exploring, and testing. Therefore, education’s demand of more preparatory training has an integral role, particularly in developing critical thinking skills. Education, reasons Dewey, “exacts sympathetic and intelligent insight into the workings of individual mind, and a very wide and flexible command of subject-matter—so as to be able to select and apply just what is needed when it is needed …. Since problems of conduct are the deepest and most common of all the problems of life, the ways in which they are met have an influence that radiates into every mental attitude …. Indeed, the deepest plane of the mental attitude of every one is fixed by the way in which problems of behavior are treated.” 37 Dewey concludes that habits of active inquiry and careful deliberation on proper conduct are the best guarantee that the general structure of the


37. Ibid., 339.
mind will be reasonable. This theory plays out in later works, for example in his understanding of “habits” and his political philosophy.

Dewey’s pragmatic viewpoint as it relates to his understanding of philosophy is reflected in his collected works, entitled *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey’s Philosophy.* For Dewey, “philosophy is a phenomenon of human culture and is intrinsic to social history and civilization.” Philosophers as parts of history are “…caught in its movement; creators perhaps in some measure of its future, but also assuredly creatures of its past.” According to Dewey, the history of philosophy, like all historical distributions, “provide the intellectual scheme of histories of politics, industry, or the fine arts….“ He argues that as a revelation of eternal truths, history of philosophy is significant as a revelation of the social movements of humanity and the history of civilization. In demonstrating philosophy’s role in history, and similar to James’s view of the relationship between the old and the new, Dewey writes:

the life of thought is to affect a junction at some point of the new and the old, of deep-sunk customs and unconscious dispositions, brought to the light of attention by some conflict with newly emerging direction of activity. Philosophies which emerge at distinctive periods define the larger patterns of continuity which are woven in effecting the longer enduring junctions of a stubborn past and insistent future….Philosophy thus sustains the closest connection with the history of culture, with the succession of changes in civilization.

Philosophy is change itself, not just something that changes. It is a significant aspect of human history, and it transforms culture. It marks a change in culture and forms patterns that will influence future thought and action.


39 Ibid., 246.

40 Ibid., 249–250.
Dewey’s Concepts of Habits and Social Discourse

Dewey equates habits to functions and argues that it is important to understand their engagement in the environment. For Dewey, habits as habits cannot be changed directly. Change must occur indirectly by intelligent selective modification of the conditions that engage attention and influence desires. Change does not necessarily come from exhortations; it occurs when the objective arrangements and institutions change. Both change in heart and environment can occur and must occur, but the first effort must be change in the environment. However, it may take the heart (i.e., a desire to jumpstart the environmental change), but even that is sparked by some external experience. Habits, according to Dewey,

involve skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective material. They assimilate objective energies, and eventuate in command of environment. They require order, discipline, and manifest technique. They have a beginning, middle, and end. Each stage marks progress in dealing with materials and tools, advance in converting material to active use.

Habits reflect social customs and bind us to “orderly and established ways of action.” This approach, notes Dewey, places emphasis on objective forces, which may be impacted by either personal or social elements. Personal desires and beliefs are functions of habits and customs. Virtues and vices are impacted by either personal or social elements. Ethics is social and it reacts to activity. Since ethics is always social, conduct is always shared. As a collective

41. This is similar to Peirce’s view that the only conduct one can control is the future.

42. In the Civil Rights Movement, the media coverage showing children being hosed down by officers was so compelling that it sparked action from Northerners and across the country, as did seeing the brutally mutilated body of Emmitt Till, the 14-year-old child who was lynched by the KKK.


group, larger society as well as sub-groups are always accessory before and after the fact. Activity proceeds from a person, then it reacts in the surroundings or either rejects or accepts. Because conduct is always shared and is social, neutrality is non-existent and it is unrealistic to separate a person from his/her environment and the person’s mind from the world. Regardless of whether it is good or bad, individuals and groups react. They approve, disapprove, protest, encourage, share, and resist. Even letting a person alone is a definite response, as are envy, admiration, and imitations. Dewey, quoting James, writes that habits are “the fly-wheels of society.” Groups and customs influence the formation of habits and habits constitute customs, systems and institutions. Dewey argues that

the influence of habit is decisive because all distinctively human action has to be learned, and the very heart, blood, and sinews of learning is creation of habitudes. Habits binds us to orderly and established ways of action because they generate ease, skill and interest in things to which we have grown used [to]…Habit does not preclude the use of thought, but it determines the channels within which it operates.”

Dewey contends that the error of moral theories is to separate motive and acts. He argues that because they explain character and conduct and due to habits and the continuity of habits, motive and acts go together. *Habits are the will and constitutive of the self.* Knowledge originates from habit and ideas are not spontaneously generated; they depend upon habits. Habits must precede the act, which must precede the thought, which requires a habit before an ability to evoke the thought at will. They shape desires, furnish us with our working capacities, and rule our thoughts, determining which ones appear and which become obscure. Habits are the active means that project themselves and their ways of acting. Means, according to Dewey, are only

such “when they enter into organization with things which independently accomplish definite results. These organizations are habits.”

Human acts have consequences upon others—directly or indirectly, real or perceived, says Dewey. Thus, we must consider acts and their consequences and observe the consequences in connection with these acts. Each action or behavior is “modified by its connection with others…. What each person believes, hopes for and aims at is the outcome of association and intercourse.” Therefore, society over time changes because of these consequences and their associated actions. That is why society—or the public, to use Dewey’s term—is experimental. By virtue of these changes of knowledge, action, and inquiry, the state (government) must always be rediscovered.

Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Jeffrey Stout, and Victor Anderson were all influenced by Dewey. For example, in The American Evasion of Philosophy, West makes clear that his concept of prophetic pragmatism incorporates Dewey’s “historical consciousness” and as a cultural criticism, his “conception of creative democracy.” Rorty embraces Dewey’s pragmatic approach of placing emphasis on the moral importance of social sciences in terms of their role in widening and deepening our sense of community.

47. Ann Boylston, ed., Middle Works, 22.
49. Ibid., 34.
Summary

Several American philosophers qualify as classical pragmatists. As stated earlier, I selected Peirce, James, and Dewey because of their influential and constructive work in pragmatism. Their contributions include developing language, creating maxims, explaining its concepts, and demonstrating its usefulness to various disciplines. From this analysis, I have extrapolated three basic uses of pragmatism: as a method of inquiry, as a means to understand truth claims, and in social and culture critique and discourse. In addition to these three characterizations, going forward several key aspects of the pragmatic tradition will be important and kept in the forefront of this discussion. Inherent in this tradition is the diversity of thought and methodological approaches, which are both an attribute and a challenge, because as Richard Bernstein notes these conflicting narratives have always been a part of this tradition. This is evident in the thinkers highlighted below. Rorty, Stout, Anderson, and West also place a different emphasis on the significance of history as it relates to truth claims, conduct, norms, and the concept of value.

Peirce provided a new method of inquiry that does not necessarily have the end in mind. Rather, through inquiry, thought is further developed and materialized and the movements of ideas are more fluid. He argued that pragmatism should perform two functions: eliminate all ideas that are not clear and make ideas clear. In the case of the latter, it must include a representation of perception because of experience (aka “Thirdness”). Peirce’s maxim of pragmatism will be the essential guide throughout the remaining chapters. It states, “Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the
object." This maxim is important to assessing the contemporary pragmatists and neopragmatists and my central argument for a public theology. I accept Peirce’s hypothesis that pragmatism is a viable method of inquiry; that as a maxim, pragmatism is based on the theory that the nature of belief and the proposition believed in are nothing but a maxim of conduct. The question to keep in the forefront is that which Peirce posed almost two centuries ago: will the arguments, the rationale, and/or the subsequent conclusions make a practical difference and be useful in determining appropriate guides to action?

James argued that pragmatism un stiffens theories and limbers them up and sets each one at work. In his analysis of language, he concluded that the quest does not end at the description; rather, we must examine the word’s work in our experiences—its cash-value—asking the question, what particular fact could have been different by one or the other view being correct? Noteworthy also is James’s emphasis on Papini’s depiction of pragmatism being like a corridor with many rooms where people with different ideologies (metaphysical, atheist, theist, and so forth) are exploring or examining a variety of issues, but they all own and must pass through the common corridor to get to their respective rooms. As it relates to truth, James concluded that what is true for us is inseparable from what is better for us, that an idea is true because it serves a good in that it is believed to be profitable in lives. James treated the term truth as a class-name for various working-values in experience. These observations will be important as I assess Richard Rorty’s treatment of pragmatism and his vision of a post-philosophical culture.

Peirce, James, and Dewey considered the past important. For James, a new opinion must incorporate both old truths and new facts. Older truths enable the individual to assimilate the new in his experience into his existing beliefs. Peirce held that the meaning of any concept is its
influence upon our conduct, which is based upon the past. When we conceive that we ought to conduct ourselves according to this past, we accept it as true and thus as having meaning. Future conducts are the only conducts that a person can control because reasoning is a conclusion that must refer to deliberate conduct. For Dewey, as a phenomenon of culture, philosophy is intrinsic to social history and civilization. It provides the intellectual schemes of history and philosophers, argued Dewey, as parts of history, are caught in its movement, creators of some aspects of its future and creatures of its past. Dewey viewed the history of philosophy as a revelation of eternal truths and thus significant as a revelation of the social movements of humanity and the history of civilization. Groups and customs influence the formation of habits and habits constitute customs, systems, and institutions. Dewey argued that human action is learned, and learning is creation of habitudes. Knowledge originates from habit and ideas are not spontaneously generated; they depend upon habits. Habits are the will and constitutive of the self; thus motive and acts are inseparable because they explain character and conduct. Habits must precede the act, which must precede the thought, which requires a habit before an ability to evoke the thought at will. Dewey asserted that we must consider acts and their consequences. Because each action or behavior is modified by its connection with others, the public is experimental and must always be rediscovered because over time, by virtue of these changes of knowledge, action, and inquiry, society will change.

Critique of the Constructive Phase of Pragmatism: Looking Back

Often, intellectual genealogies tend to show the progression or development of thought from one individual scholar or one school of thought to another. For example, Peirce and James were members of the Metaphysical Club and Harvard alumni, as were Oliver Wendell Holmes,
Jr. and Chauncey Wright. John Dewey was a student of Johns Hopkins University during Peirce’s tenure. James, Peirce, and Dewey had a shared interest in American philosophy, specifically the concept of pragmatism.

Historically, as it relates to the development of intellectual thought, the contributions by white men were treated as the sources of authority. Rarely were African-American men and women and white women’s experiences and intellectual developments included in the public discourse—academic or otherwise—despite the fact that they were making historical contributions as well. Rarely mentioned in the genealogy of pragmatism are two relatively famous African-American scholars and activists, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) and Alain Locke (1885-1954), who studied under William James at Harvard; yet, they embodied and employed the basic tenets of pragmatism highlighted above. They both graduated from Harvard with honors and used philosophical methods to address the problems of race in America. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a PhD at Harvard, and Locke was the first African-American Rhodes Scholar. Both Du Bois and Locke applied their philosophical inclinations to social analysis and praxis. Through inquiry, social critique and analysis, and education, they challenged traditional truth claims. They worked as professors and administrators in higher education, published several books and articles, and edited and promoted scholarship and artistic expressions of other African-American scholars, activists, and artists.

As social analysts and critics, Du Bois and Locke dedicated their professional and personal lives to advocate for equal rights and support efforts that promoted the social uplift of African Americans. They were also members of the American Negro Academy. Formed in 1897, the academy’s membership consisted of African-American male scholars and authors. Both Du
Bois and Locke were actively involved in the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1934). As a leader of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke published a book, *The New Negro: An Interpretation of Negro Life* (1925), which was an anthology of literature and art by and about African-American thought and culture. Du Bois was the editor of the *Crisis* magazine, which was widely circulated (over 100,000) during this period.

Du Bois and Locke were raised in middle class families who were able to support their respective educations. By contrast, two of their female contemporaries’ life stories are measurably different. Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964) and Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) were born into slavery and freed by virtue of the Emancipation Proclamation. They both pursued formal education, including higher education, and had to pay their own way. Their educational development was also impacted by their roles as caregivers. Wells was orphaned at the age of fourteen when both parents died of yellow fever. She worked to provide for herself and siblings, paying her way through Rust College. Cooper received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Oberlin College. After her first year of doctoral work at Columbia, she had to leave to care for her great nieces and nephews who were orphaned. Cooper eventually became the first African-American female to earn a PhD from the Sorbonne and was the fourth African-American female to earn a PhD in the United States.

Although they never formally identified themselves as pragmatists, their work as intellectuals and activists suggests otherwise. Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper were self-made women who worked as leaders along with W. E. B. Du Bois and others on issues of social

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uplift, injustices, and atrocities lodged against African Americans. Wells and Cooper helped to form the NAACP. Cooper was an educator who was committed to helping African-American students gain access to higher education. Cooper’s writings explore issues of race and gender, noting the challenges of African-American women in particular, who are impacted by both race and gender. Her book, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman from the South* (1892), argued for the value of women, especially black women, having access to higher education.

Wells, a journalist, editor, and co-owner of a newspaper, was the voice, at the risk of her own life, against the lynching of blacks. She was an investigative reporter whose findings challenged the lynchings of innocent black men and the bogus charges used to justify the lynchings. Wells effectively led a crusade to advise African Americans to leave Memphis, Tennessee, arguing that Memphis did not protect the African American against the violence perpetrated by white men. Those who did not leave Memphis boycotted local stores. Wells wrote and published *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States* (1895), which was an evidence-based account of all of the recorded lynchings in the U.S.

In addition to the scholarship and public leadership of these notable African-American scholars and leaders, during their lifetimes and the life spans of the classical pragmatists James, Peirce, and Dewey, and particularly during their respective professional careers, a number of historical events occurred in the U.S. Among these was the Reconstruction Period that followed

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the Civil War. Several amendments to the U.S. Constitution passed to ensure equal access and equal rights for people, regardless of race and gender. President Lincoln penned the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). The U.S. was involved in several foreign wars, most notably World Wars I and II. Though Dewey supported the wars, believing they would ultimately be beneficial to the larger society, he seemed to ignore the discriminatory treatment of African-American veterans returning from war. Dewey spoke very little to the various issues related to segregation, voting rights, and the discriminatory treatment of African Americans and women.

Peirce’s and James’s published works give an impression that they were oblivious to events outside of the academy. As pragmatists, James and Peirce apply their work exclusively within the academic setting, thereby cultivating the development of thought among a select group of primarily white male scholars, despite the fact that Du Bois and Locke were Harvard graduates of distinction and former students of James. Similarly, Dewey, though known for his concern with social change, does not engage in any substantive way with social issues as they relate to race and gender. Even though his colleague and close friend Jane Addams dedicated her professional work to operating Hull House and on issues relating to poverty, gender, and race.

This begs the question of whether or not, in the development of their respective methods, maxims, analyses, and theories, the classical pragmatists considered the major transformative events that were occurring around them. Another question to pose, particularly to James and Dewey, given their expressed interests in instrumental truth and the usefulness of pragmatism, is whether they engaged in conversation with African-American scholars and educators. African-American philosophy, according to Cornel West, is the interpretation of history and experiences of African Americans to provide new self-understanding and solutions to pressing problems. Du
Bois’ and Locke’s published works and activism are reflective of this perspective, as is Anna Julia Cooper’s writings and work. Going forward, scholars need to bridge the problematic relationship between pragmatism and the prevailing African-American scholarship, building from Giovanni Papini’s depiction of pragmatism as being a corridor that opens in inclusive and multidisciplinary directions.
Going Forward

As evidenced by the work of these classical pragmatists, we see that pragmatism has existed in some form for over 130 years. To reiterate, because it is difficult to identify universal concepts that characterize pragmatism, it is important to have a working knowledge of its constructive stage. Worth noting is Bernstein’s suggestion that to understand the historical development of pragmatism and its various nuances is to view them as being narratives and metanarratives. I also think Papini’s depiction of pragmatism as being a corridor is a helpful way to conceptualize pragmatism and its inclusive and multidisciplinary nature.

For the purpose of this research, James’s notion of truth and Dewey’s treatment of pragmatism in the social science and culture are foundational to understanding the various nuances of pragmatism as treated by Rorty in particular, but West, Stout, and Anderson as well. Rorty relies heavily on the works of Dewey and frequently cites James. In the following section, I will demonstrate that as it relates to his treatment of religion, history, and method of inquiry, Rorty’s version of pragmatism is fundamentally different from those of Peirce, James, and Dewey. I will begin with a brief summary of Rorty’s arguments relative to philosophy of language, religion, and pragmatism, followed by my critique.
CHAPTER THREE

NEOPRAGMATISTS

Richard Rorty (1931–2007)

Richard Rorty is credited for a narrative of pragmatism known as “neopragmatism.”¹ To explain the diversity of the pragmatic movement, Richard Bernstein uses the term founding narrative of pragmatism to Peirce and James and notes that Dewey characterized his version of pragmatism as being instrumentalism, experimentalism, or instrumental experimentalism. With the deliberate intent to be provocative, Bernstein uses nostalgia and sentimentalism to describe the period of decline in American philosophy and pragmatism, in which it was “invaded by foreign influences” and consequently, American philosophers were marginalized in the philosophy departments.² It is in this context that Bernstein credits Rorty for helping to make pragmatism “intellectually respectable,” even though, Bernstein notes, Rorty’s version is arguably different from the classics and many philosophers are hostile towards Rorty.³ Rorty has effectively shown a way to read thinkers such as W.V. Quine, D. Davidson, and H. Putnam. Cornel West credits Rorty as the one who “single handedly reconstructed American

¹. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty provides a survey of philosophy, particularly the analytical philosophy movement, and he is critical of philosophy and analytical philosophy in particular. Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. Consequences of Pragmatism is a collection of essays written by Richard Rorty between 1972 and 1980. They are arranged in order of composition and do not necessarily build off one another. He published them in response to feedback from readers of his book Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Readers expressed that having access to these essays would be a helpful companion to that book. Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985. Most of the citations utilized in this section of my research are from these two books - Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (which going forward is cited as Mirror) and Consequences of Pragmatism (cited as Consequences).


³. Ibid., 62.
For Cornel West, Jeffrey Stout, Victor Anderson, and Eddie Glaude, Richard Rorty was a pivotal figure in pragmatic thought, and all refer to his work in their respective discourses.

Rorty is not a proponent of traditional philosophy and argues for a culture in which philosophy does not perform a predominant role. His version of pragmatism incorporates the philosophy of language, reasoning that it is useless to continue the same quests and discourses as they relate to theories of knowledge, truth, and the essence of humanity. Rorty takes an ahistorical approach, arguing that language, which originates from the person, is the important discipline because it is responsive to contemporary issues and presumes no metaphysical problems or answers. It provides humanity a way of engaging the world as it is presented to them, at a fixed moment in time. Rorty rejects science and theology as having a substantive role in philosophical discourse and envisions a post-philosophical culture in which these disciplines in particular do not play a significant function. Rorty is expressly adamant, and remained so throughout his published career, that religion is incommensurable with pragmatism and deems it inappropriate in public discourse.

Although Rorty’s vision of a post-philosophical culture may have some benefits, there are aspects of his view that are not consistent with pragmatism as presented by the classical pragmatists previously discussed. I also disagree with Rorty’s position that religion is incommensurable with pragmatism and ought not to be a part of public discourse. To support these claims, I will begin with an overview of Rorty’s understanding of pragmatism, discuss his philosophy of language and his vision of a new conceptual framework, which he calls post-

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philosophical culture, and his stance on the incommensurability of religion to pragmatism, and provide my critique of Rorty’s assertions as it relates to these three areas. I will then follow up with a discussion on the scholarship of Stout, Anderson, Townes, and West, whose works provide a counter-response to Rorty’s claim.

Rorty’s Understanding of Pragmatism

Rorty identifies three characterizations of pragmatism. First, it is anti-essentialism applied to notions of truth, knowledge, language, and morality. The pragmatist asserts that a vocabulary of practice rather than theory and of action rather than contemplation is the context in which one can say something useful about truth. Rorty’s second characterization of pragmatism is that there is no difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, or between facts and values, or between morality and science. The pattern of all inquiry is “deliberation concerning the relative attractions of various concrete alternatives.” Rorty’s third and final characterization of pragmatism is its doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones.5 Rorty states that he prefers this third way of characterizing pragmatism because it focuses on the fundamental choice of accepting or evading the contingency of starting points. By acceptance, Rorty means that our fellow humans are our only source of guidance. Acceptance is the best alternative because evasion results in becoming a “properly-programmed machine,” whereas unrestrained inquiry may give us a renewed sense of community. For Rorty, community includes society, political tradition, and intellectual heritage,

and it is managed, made, and shaped by the human beings rather than by nature.⁶

Rorty’s Philosophy of Language

Rorty’s philosophy of language is illustrated in his discussion regarding the differing views between realists and pragmatists. According to Rorty, pragmatism had received a barrage of criticism primarily because of pragmatists’ views regarding philosophy and the quest for truth. Realists, for example, challenge several aspects of pragmatism, such as the pragmatist’s criticism of the correspondence theory of truth. Unlike the intuitive realist, the pragmatist does not think that there are philosophical truths, nor are there any isolatable truths against which to test vocabularies and culture. The pragmatist is not concerned with the conditions for a sentence to be true, and Rorty states that the pragmatist ought not to treat true as an explanatory notion. Rorty reinforces this point by highlighting William James’s definition of true, which he writes is “the name of whatever presents itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.”⁷ Rorty points out that the pragmatist determines that there is no practical difference between the nature of truth and the test of truth.⁸

Rorty calls for a philosophical view that captures the differing points of view between the realist’s and the pragmatist’s treatment of intuition.⁹ He reasons that in light of the transcendent culture’s future treatment of each, the quarrel between the pragmatist and the intuitive realist

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⁶. Richard Rorty, Consequences, 166.
⁷. Ibid., xxv.
⁸. Ibid., xxviii.
⁹. Rorty writes, “The issue is one about whether philosophy should try to find natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions, or whether all philosophy should do is compare and contrast cultural traditions. This is, once again, the issue of whether philosophy should be Philosophy.” Ibid., xxxvii.
should be more about the *status* of intuition rather than how to synthesize or explain intuitions.

To do this, says Rorty, a pragmatist must admit that the realist's intuitions are as deep and compelling as he or she says they are. Then the pragmatist should ask, “And what should we *do* about such intuitions—extirpate them, or find a vocabulary which does justice to them?”

Rorty’s position is that rather than preserve tradition and the elements of every intellectual tradition, intuition should not be used to legitimize vocabularies because these intellectual traditions “have not paid off” and are not beneficial. For Rorty, *better* is not due to previously known standards; rather, it is better in spite of them. The pragmatist thinks that new and better ways of talking and acting emerge by virtue of these vocabularies and cultures being played against one another.

Rorty calls this new and better way a post-philosophical culture. He proposes a culture in which the philosophy of language is the prevailing discipline. For Rorty, the philosophy of language is more useful because the contemporary task of philosophy is the use of vocabulary and language to understand culture. In a post-philosophical culture, philosophy looks much like what is at times called *culture criticism*. The modern Western cultural critic is the *all-purpose intellectual* who has abandoned pretensions to philosophy and is free to comment on any and every thing.

Rorty notes that intellectuals question this hypothetical post-philosophical culture, i.e., this new intellectual tradition, viewing it as decadent because there will not be a criterion to determine reality or truth. No one is considered any more rational or more scientific or deeper

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11. Ibid., xxxvii.
than another is. No culture is exemplified for others to aspire to, beyond the current intra-disciplinary criteria. With no philosopher to explain things, there would be only specialists who have no particular expertise or prevailing problem to solve or any particular method or discipline. The urge to search for some final vocabulary, known in advance, to be the common core of all the vocabularies would be repressed. In other words, philosophy as Philosophy would not exist.

Where some intellectuals are critical of this, Rorty argues that some culture critics welcome the possibility of such a culture where there are no criteria other than those instilled within the individual, in which one’s own conventions are the source for the standard of rationality or rigorous argumentation. In a post-philosophical culture, the individual will be alone and finite, not connected to anything beyond the self. Post-philosophy is a culture of doing without God. Rorty claims that the pragmatist considers positivism as the halfway stage in the development of this culture. Although it preserved the idea of God in its notion of science, positivism, according to Rorty, produced a scientific method to questions of political and moral choice as the solution to our problems. Pragmatism does not treat science as filling the place held by God but as one genre of literature equal to scientific inquiry. The questions pragmatists seek to address are about what will be helpful in getting us what we want or should want. Though Rorty is not confident that pragmatists and their opponents will ever reach agreement on issues such as the concept of truth of pragmatism or the adequacy of philosophical language or existentialism, he believes that Dewey laid the groundwork when he created a vocabulary and

12. Richard Rorty, *Consequences*, xlili. However, Emilie Townes challenges the tendency to treat public policy as exclusively political or social. She asserts that there are religious and theological underpinnings that are so deep that we are no longer conscious of them, but they do drive our public policy decisions. She uses four stereotypes applied to African-American women to illustrate this. Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and Cultural Production of Evil* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).
rhetoric of American pluralism.  

Dewey’s version emphasizes the utility of narratives and vocabularies rather than the objectivity of laws and theories. This approach is balanced, says Rorty; it encourages respect for diverse opinion and describes the way our minds are naturally designed. This approach is more open to “refutation by experience and does not block the road of inquiry.” Rorty's basic argument is that eliminating traditional notions of objectivity and scientific method will enable one to see the social scientists, such as anthropologists, psychologists, historicists, sociologists, etc., as interdisciplinary, which consequently enlarges and deepens our sense of community. Rorty explains that in Dewey’s version, humanity creates a harmonious environment among a diversity of interests and ideas. This approach is optimistic and allows “room for unjustifiable hope and ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity.”

Rorty’s hypothetical post-philosophical culture begs the question of how conflict is addressed in this multidisciplinary culture that is void of criteria except that of linguistics. Rorty addresses this issue by framing it in the context of a discourse on commensurability and incommensurability. Rorty rejects the effort to construct universal language and translatable terms, which he calls *commensuration*. He rejects any desire for knowledge and any desire to find foundation, frameworks, and objects, viewing these efforts as constraining and confrontational. According to Rorty, “holistic, antifoundationalist pragmatist treatments of

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13. Rorty considers that the issue between religion and secularism has been decided. He does not expound as to how that is and what the decision is, other than in providing the historical development of analytical philosophy and the progression from religion to science to literary criticism.


15. Ibid., 208.
knowledge and meaning… abandon the quest for commensuration.”\textsuperscript{16} Rorty maintains that there is no language with a commensurable matrix to formulate ideas, though epistemology attempts to create commensuration by translating into a set of terms that Rorty argues blocks inquiry. He writes,

The line between the respective domain of epistemology and hermeneutics is … purely one of familiarity. We will be epistemological … when we understand perfectly well what is happening but want to codify it in order to extend, or strengthen, or teach, or ‘ground’ it. We must be hermeneutical where we do not understand what is happening but are honest enough to admit it … This means we can get epistemological commensuration only where we already have agreed-upon practices of inquiry (or more generally, of discourse)—as easily in ‘academic art, ‘scholastic’ philosophy or ‘parliamentary’ politics as in ‘normal’ science. We can get it … because when a practice has continued long enough the conventions which make it possible—and which permit a consensus on how to divide it into parts—are relatively easy to isolate.\textsuperscript{17}

Commensurable occurs when something is able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict…. These rules tell us how to construct an ideal situation…. What matters most is that there should be agreement about what would have to be done if a resolution were to be achieved. In the meantime the interlocutors can agree to differ—being satisfied of each other’s rationality for the while.\textsuperscript{18}

He notes that his version of commensurable is not the one used when discussing Kuhn, which is to assign the same meaning to terms. Rorty considers the latter version useless and that it is unenlightening to state a fact about not being able to resolve an issue.

Yet, acknowledges Rorty, understanding is essential, particularly for incommensurable discussions. When the goal is to understand, and though it may not be easy, it is possible to understand people, argues Rorty, and hermeneutics provides the opportunity to do so.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 312.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 316.
Hermeneutics goes beyond the normal or familiar into the abnormal or unfamiliar, and as the expression of hope, it moves the culture to a stage where confrontation and constraint are not experienced. Rorty writes, “Hermeneutics is, roughly, a description of our study of the unfamiliar and epistemology is, roughly, a description of our study of the familiar.”¹⁹ He adds, “Hermeneutics is not ‘another way of knowing’—‘understanding’ as opposed to (predictive) ‘explanation.’ It is another way of coping.”²⁰

Rorty on Pragmatism as Hermeneutics

Rorty is critical of traditional philosophy, arguing that it makes all knowledge-claims commensurable. Rorty argues that we cannot envision a post-philosophical culture that is independent of epistemology unless we set aside epistemologically centered philosophy. In order to do that, we must first set aside the discourse that the “essence of man is to discover essence.”²¹ Rorty’s claim is that hermeneutics is the attempt to do so. Hermeneutics, writes Rorty, “is the struggle against the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse is commensurable.”²² He borrows this version of hermeneutics from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s term hermeneutic phenomena to indicate “an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them to the totality of our experience of the world.”²³ He explains that in this respect, Gadamer places emphasis on the goal of remaking

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²⁰. Ibid., 356.
²¹. Ibid., 357.
²². Ibid., 316.
²³. Ibid., 358.
ourselves by virtue of learning in a nonmetaphysical sense. The more we read, talk, or write, the more we are able to say new, interesting, and more important things about ourselves. We are thus less interested with what is “out there” or what has happened in history and more interested in what is useful in nature and history. Gathering facts in order to gain understanding, in this respect, is useful in preparing us or equipping us with tools for self-expression and coping with the world. Rorty writes, “From the educational, as opposed to epistemological, point of view, the way things are said is more important than the possession of truths.”

Rorty replaces Gadamer’s term *education* with *edification* to depict this new, better, and more fruitful way of speaking. Rorty argues that edifying discourse, by its very nature, is intended to be abnormal “to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.”

This hermeneutical approach, argues Rorty, places everyone on a level field because there are no “privileged representations.” Disciplines such as the arts and the sciences are all a part of our repertoire from which we can choose. Because selections of sentences are used to depict our diverse attitudes, it is disastrous, says Rorty, to have a “value-free vocabulary which renders these set of factual statements commensurable … [and] … make it impossible to get edification into focus.” It is also impossible to find common ground and all we can do is to “be hermeneutic about the opposition—trying to show how the odd or paradoxical or offensive things they say hang together with the rest of what they want to say and how what they say looks

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25. Ibid., 360.
26. Ibid., 362.
27. Ibid., 364.
when put in our alternative idiom."28 Hermeneutics, for Rorty, is a part of education (which Rorty terms edification) and is only possible when edification begins from the point of acculturation. Edification is first contingent upon our understanding of our culture’s descriptions of the world. As human beings and as part of the process of self-conscious and awareness, we must pass through the culture’s various stages of conformity and participate in its discourses. The edifying philosopher’s (the pragmatist’s) role culturally is help navigate us through this edification, by helping us “avoid self-deception which comes from believing that we know ourselves by knowing a set of objective facts.”29

The edifying philosopher keeps the conversation going by extending it beyond the normal discourse and by reacting to attempts to end conversations through universal commensuration. Rorty argues that the task of edifying philosophy is not to have descriptive vocabulary that provides “commensuration with all inquiries and activities”; rather, its task is to “send conversation off in new directions.”30 He writes, “The point is always the same—to perform the social function which Dewey called ‘breaking the crust of conversation,’ by preventing man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions.”31 Rorty’s position is that we should see knowing as a right to believe. In so doing, knowledge is understood through the context of conversation, and the focus shifts “from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification, and from there to the actual changes in those standards

29. Ibid., 373.
30. Ibid., 378.
31. Ibid., 379.
which make up intellectual history." The major change for Rorty is the rejection of religious expression as part of the hermeneutical process, because in Rorty’s new conceptual framework religion is incommensurable with pragmatism and ought not to be a part of public discourse.

Rorty and Theism

According to Jeffrey Stout, Rorty believes that it is poor taste to employ religious premises in public conversation. He quotes Rorty’s “Religion as a Conversation Stopper”: “The main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.” Stout continues to quote Rorty’s response regarding someone who introduces religion into a political discussion: “The ensuing silence masks the group’s inclination to say ‘so what?’ We weren’t discussing your private life, we were discussing public policy. Don’t bother us with matters that are not our concern.” According to Stout, Rorty believes that the perception of religion as a conversation-stopper is a good enough reason to keep the expression of religious premise out of the public political discourse. Rorty’s rationale according to Stout is that religious premises have nothing in common with political discourse.

As a panelist for a discussion about Jeffrey Stout’s book Democracy and Tradition, Rorty affirmed Stout’s depiction of his positions and he agreed with Stout’s view that “the pragmatic accounts of truth, knowledge and moral obligation are tailored-to suit the needs of democratic societies.” Rorty, unlike Stout, took a more aggressive stance against the inclusion of religious

32. Ibid., 389–390.
34. Jason Springs, et al., “Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout’s Democracy and
views as participants in democratic societies. He affirmed his belief that “non-theists make better citizens of democratic societies than theists.”\(^35\) Though not completely dismissive of theism, Rorty explicitly rejects the Christian view of theology and the assertions of theism as a reliable source for guiding action. Rorty contends that language cannot provide any analogy to explain, as he puts it, nonhuman involvement. He is, however, willing to consider the possibility of analogous language to describe God as looking down at the universe and “getting everything right,” provided it fits his understanding of Dewey’s “spectatorial account of knowledge.” This type of account, explains Rorty, is the accurate representation of knowledge that is independent of human needs and interests.\(^36\) Still, “perfect knowledge” from the pragmatist’s position is not available and rejects the notion of words that do not represent a reality.\(^37\) Rorty contends that the whole point of pragmatism is the insistence that human beings are not answerable to atoms or to God but only to one another, who as human beings are their own conversational partners. Rorty sees theism as self-reliance’s enemy and metaphysics as theism’s surrogate and its “insistence that we humans need to abase ourselves before something non-human.”\(^38\)

Rorty’s position is that as conversational partners, the pragmatist’s task is to move the discussion beyond questions regarding a higher authority or objectiveness of ethics. Rorty suggests that a way to get around this impasse is through changing terms and substituting “a god of love for a god of power.” In this respect, these phrases promote a sense of self-reliance by

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 419.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 420.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 421.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 423.
using common human imagery and the capacity of the individual to act with power/authority and with love. Rorty equates the imagery of loving parents enabling children to function independently to Jesus as having done the same to humanity, through a process of kenosis. Rorty states that

in this all-encompassing act of kenosis, then one will view the triumph of secularization as the consummation of the Christian religion…. [and will say as the Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo says] ‘secularization is the constitutive trait of authentic religious experience.’ Christians, Vattimo hopes, will cease to think of Christ as Lord, and instead think of him as Whitehead’s ‘fellow-sufferer who understands.’ In this respect, Christ fits well enough into the tradition of Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey, much better than he does into that of Augustine and Aquinas. 39

Critique of Rorty’s Version of Pragmatism

Although Rorty has a clear and unswerving stance regarding the incommensurability of religion and pragmatism, his version of hermeneutics will be an important notion to maintain throughout my research. He argued that in order to gain understanding, to be properly prepared and equipped with the tools for self-expression and for coping with the world, edification is a better and more fruitful way of speaking. Rorty argued that edifying discourse, by its very nature, is intended to be abnormal “to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.” 40 This hermeneutical approach, argues Rorty, places everyone on a level field because there are no “privileged representations.” Rorty ascribes to edifying philosopher the responsibility of keeping the conversation going, by extending it beyond the normal discourse and by reacting to attempts to end conversations through universal commensuration. The edifying philosopher’s task is not to have descriptive vocabulary that


40. Richard Rorty, Mirror, 360.
fosters universal commensurability; rather, it is to “send conversation off in new directions.”

Certainly his protégés Stout and West have set out to do just that, as has his protégé Anderson.

Before discussing Rorty’s position on the incommensurability of religion and pragmatism, it is important to point out areas in which Rorty’s version of pragmatism differs from that of the classical pragmatists.

As discussed in a previous section, Rorty identifies what he considers three characterizations of the central doctrines of pragmatism. Briefly stated, his characterization of pragmatism asserts that whatever useful can be said about truth is through the vocabulary of praxis rather than theory; that inquiry is the deliberation about concrete alternatives; and thirdly, that the only constraint on inquiry is through conversations from “fellow-inquirers.” These characterizations, however, are not consistent with the classical pragmatist’s various depictions of pragmatism. Peirce identified three propositions of truths that are characteristic of pragmatism. First, our ideas are perceptual ideas. Second, we are able to make universal propositions due to the general elements contained in perceptual ideas. Third, there is no sharp line between perceptual ideas and abduction. Thus, universal propositions or generalities are a part of conversation, which through deliberation may become more concrete. Rorty’s characterization also risks placing constraints on this process of inquiry in that it imposes criteria such as the necessity of concrete alternatives; it determines what may or may not be discussed and it gives priority to action, thereby negating the contingent relationship between thought and action. Yet, based on Peirce’s third criterion, we must be open to the possibilities that exist or emerge through the pragmatic process of inquiry and determine the practical difference these

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conceptions may have, recognizing that facts, as James noted, may very well be incorrect, but they are the basis for beliefs and action.

Rorty’s rejection of truth claims and their significance in public discourse is in stark contrast to those held by James and Dewey, particularly as it relates to their understanding of instrumental truth. Rorty does not believe that there are truth claims that can be tested against culture, a position that he contends that all pragmatists hold. James clearly considered pragmatism a method and a theory of truth, and he ascribed to the theory of instrumental truth. He asserted that pragmatism sets the theories to work. For example, where Rorty opposes metaphysicians and theologians, James saw metaphysics and science as potentially working together, considering pragmatism as being the “happy harmonizer” between empirical thought and religious demands. James understood that the function of philosophy is to determine what definite difference a particular truth would make. Rorty’s portrayal of James and Dewey, and his position that this is a universal viewpoint held by pragmatists, not only contradicts his aversion to universals, it is incorrect. To support this claim, he quotes a portion of James’s statement, citing only the first sentence, “[true is] the name of whatever presents itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.” Rorty uses this quote as a rationale for developing a new intellectual tradition and to point out that the pragmatist determines that there is no practical difference between the nature of truth and the test of truth. In my reading of James, Rorty’s assertions do not align with James’s concept of instrumental truth. James places a condition on whether to act upon something that is determined to be better. He writes,

*The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.… If there be any life that it is really better we should*  

42. Richard Rorty, *Consequences*, xxv.
lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really better for us to believe in that idea, unless, indeed, belief in it incidentally clashed with other greater vital benefits.43

Truth for James is their power to work and is actualized through the process of generalization. James defined pragmatism as the doctrine that the entire meaning of a concept expresses itself either in the shape of conduct to be recommended or of experience to be expected.

As stated earlier, Peirce argued that pragmatism was useful for inquiry in determining or understanding the meaning of hard words and abstract concepts. For Peirce, pragmatism is a useful guide in science and the conduct of life. A question that Peirce asks in his depiction of pragmatism in the use of logic has to do with the practical difference something would make if it were true or accurate, after which a series of questions would follow. Peirce, James, and Dewey all followed this model of inquiry, of raising questions, using logic and reasoning to allow the responses or answers to enable them to arrive at conclusions. By comparison, Rorty’s stylistic delivery differs from that of the classical pragmatists. Rorty presents his questions and concerns in decisive and finite or absolute terms. An example is his treatment of the tensions between pragmatists and realists. Rorty poses the question of what one should do with the realist’s vocabulary. His response, absent of any significant deliberation, portrays the pragmatist as suggesting to “extirpate” the realist’s vocabulary. Rorty’s style seems to utilize a dismissive and dualistic approach to arrive at extreme positions and to prove his assertions. This approach is counterintuitive to the pragmatic method of inquiry, which in many ways appears to be a process that is both a means and an end.

Pragmatism, though difficult to place in universal terms or to categorize, has at least one

43. Richard Rorty, Consequences, 76.
significant characteristic and it has to do with the role of inquiry. Inquiry as presented by James, Peirce, and Dewey, is an integral aspect of pragmatism. Inquiry involves the process of critical analysis and probing questions that lead to outcomes such as discovery, resolutions, and conclusions. For example, Peirce’s discussion around probability involved a series of questions that one might ask. James’s illustration of the squirrel and his borrowing of Papini’s corridor imagery describes the diversity of thought and methodology that is possible through the pragmatic method. Dewey’s discussion in the *Public and its Problems* guides one through a discussion of the distinctions between causal and consequential impact. I take from all of this the view that the pragmatic approach or pragmatism when it is used as a method of inquiry does not necessarily utilize a binary method such as either/or as evident in Rorty’s approach. Instead, it is an analysis of the varied and conflicting claims for which, in the process of the exploration, the overarching question is one of usefulness—what practical value does the object/subject in question have on you or me?

Rorty states that he prefers the characterization of pragmatism that focuses on the fundamental choice of accepting or evading the contingency of starting points. While I agree with Rorty that we are guided by information that we inherit from others and through conversation, I disagree, however, with his assumption that individuals are the sole source of this information. This statement may be true for some but it is not for everyone, such as those who ascribe to some metaphysical or religious tradition. Some scientists, for example, believe that their scientific research and their faith and conduct of life are interrelated. Their belief informs their research on issues such as stem cell applications. Even Rorty’s atheistic beliefs inform his philosophical viewpoint. This is evidenced by his use of qualifying statements such as *human*
being are the only source of guidance, men are makers and not finders, and his discussions on finitude of each person and eventually of civilization.

Given that Rorty wants to take nothing from the past save the vocabulary, this does not square with James and Dewey’s emphasis on the relationship between the old and new or the past and the present. James and Dewey consider the past as influencing the new and future actions. Dewey addresses this in his theories on habit and James in his understanding of instrumental truths. James considered his version of truth to be profitable in lives through various working values in experience and that new truths are dependent upon old truths. Old truths function as facts that, regardless of their veracity, influence or determine action. These actions provide more insight and facts out of which new truths emerge, upon which we act, and so the cycle continues ad infinitum. Dewey recognized that these experiences and actions are not necessarily exclusive to the private self, that they affect others directly or indirectly and that we are not always conscious of the habits out of which our actions emerge.

Critique of Rorty’s Commensurable and Incommensurable

I agree with Rorty that conversation is important and must continue. I also agree that the edifying philosopher could and perhaps should play the role of keeping it going. The limitations center around the fact that Rorty makes no room for even a minimal amount of translatable terminologies or common points of view as the starting point for conversation. Rorty rejects the importance of history and experience, thereby operating against culture by proposing to construct an entirely new and different one, unlike, Dewey, James and Peirce who worked within culture—in philosophy and society—to understand and transform it by offering new ways of examining traditional concepts, to determine their usefulness, and to engage the community in
the discourse both in the academic setting and society. Furthermore, in his hypothetical, utopian, post-philosophical culture, Rorty assumes that people can be objective enough to be able to engage one another at a level that enables them to lay aside any of their own experiences, notions, or concerns. Rorty assumes that all humanity’s critical thinking is limited to a finite view of themselves and of others, that they are not nor would they become curious about matters such as meaning or purpose, and that their responses and engagements do not carry with them emotion and memory, unconscious or otherwise, or anything that is associated with experiences and past events.

I agree with Rorty that the question pragmatists seek to address having to do with what will be helpful in getting us what we want or should want is an important question. I assert, however, that individuals and groups representing a variety of disciplines and perspectives, including philosophical and theological perspectives, should ask this question. Moreover, the responses must be diverse, especially in a free and democratic society. I base my position on James’s assertion that true ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. This verification and validation process of truths, which are innumerable, when working harmoniously justifies ideas. Rorty himself cannot get around this. For example, even while he rejects commensuration as being useful in his version of hermeneutics, eventually commensuration occurs as is evidenced by his panel discussion with Stout and the public forum with Vattimo. As the panelist with Jeffrey Stout, in his closing statement, Rorty demonstrates how a discussion on religion is commensurable with pragmatism in that his statement reflects a point of view that differs from what he expressed thirty years prior in *Philosophy of Mirrors*. It suggests that he has found a vocabulary that enables him to engage in a philosophical discussion
that includes religious ideology. He demonstrates a similar shift in his response to a question posed to him at a public forum on religion. Rorty states, “We are gradually working out a form of social life in which atheists and Christians can live together in the same political arena. Three hundred years ago, this would have been thought impossible. Nevertheless, we achieved it. It was a great imaginative project and it turned out to be a successful project. I hope we can hold onto this project and that it will become a model for the future course of moral progress.”

I agree with Rorty that unrestrained inquiry may give us a “renewed sense of community.” I too am hopeful, as was Rorty’s Deweyan optimism, that humanity creates a harmonious environment among a diversity of interests and ideas and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity. I contend that the more people seek to understand one another and the more people understand, the more likely new language, common thoughts, and agreements will occur. At times, it is the desire to understand and to be understood that is motivating and helps us remain in the conversation to achieve what we want in a manner that is inclusive and hopefully comprehensive. Therefore, to experience this, we cannot categorically decide what disciplines can and cannot be a part of that discourse, especially if we treat everyone as part of that community. Cornel West addresses this issue of hegemony, as does Emilie Townes, whom we will discuss later. Townes cautions us as to its impact, contending that everyone must be at the table.

**Critique of Rorty’s Position on the Role of Theology and Religion**

Regarding the subordinate role of commensuration and his rejection of religion in public

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discourse, Rorty’s views raise several questions in a post-philosophical culture: How might this approach be useful to the larger public? Who are the specialists? In Rorty’s depiction of the philosopher, how does one legitimize or determine the usefulness of such a person? Moreover, how does Rorty reconcile the fact that in his theory of a new conceptual framework, atheism is the prevailing ideology? Furthermore, given that his understanding of social science and that anything to do with religion or theology is non-existent, how does he keep the conversation going with those for whom this is important? Rorty writes, “The point is always the same—to perform the social function which Dewey called ‘breaking the crust of conversation,’ preventing man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions.”

So the question arises that if the role is to continue conversation and it is done by preventing commensuration, why does Rorty reject religion and consider it a conversation-stopper? Is it because Rorty himself is stuck in the normal discourse which, in his case, is the culture of atheism? The responses to these questions lead to Rorty’s concept of edification and hermeneutics. Rorty argues that edifying discourse, by its very nature, is intended to be abnormal “to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.”

Yet because he equates edification to education, we must go beyond mere words in the search for understanding. This includes being self-reflective in order to determine what aspects of our old selves ought to be relinquished or identifying the significance of certain habits that have been ingrained culturally or by virtue of personal experiences. It is helpful for the process of inquiry and discourse to operate with a level field absent of any


46 Ibid., 360.
“privileged representations,” and as Rorty asserts, it may help get edification into focus. Unlike Rorty, I contend that value-free vocabulary may provide a common starting point and may be the means to promote understanding. The rejection of a value-free vocabulary places an unnecessary limitation and serves the purpose of preventing edification and shutting down inquiry. These outcomes are contrary to what Rorty is trying to achieve. Contrary to Rorty’s assertions, value-free vocabulary such as innocuous vocabulary is not necessarily disastrous. It may be limiting, it may need to be unhinged from the larger discourse, or unpacked and examined for its underlying meaning and purpose, but it is not necessarily disastrous. As stated earlier, inherent in a language or vocabulary is the person’s historical experiences or habits that may not be apparent until they are expressed, giving them life outside of the private self and are playing them out in the public arena. As Rorty duly notes, disciplines such as art and science are helpful in this edifying process; however, I expand his list to include disciplines such as theology as part of our repertoire from which to choose.

When the above occurs, hermeneutics can then perform the function as Rorty proposes, which is to seek to understand, through inquiry, the power behind the words. It is my contention that failure to achieve common ground can be frustrating and contributes to further alienation and objectification of the other. It can lead to resentment and stagnation. The challenge and perhaps the role of the edifying philosopher, and as I will argue later, of the organic intellectual and bridge leader, is to facilitate conversation in such a way as to foster understanding and inspire action that is a consequence of the experiences that emerge from these new learning opportunities. Recognizing that outcomes may or may not be favorable, and as the classical pragmatists assert, truth is the workableness of ideas, public discourse must allow individuals to
insert their understanding and experiences. To help in this process, frameworks—or as Stout calls them, norms—should be in place, such as in a democratic society’s Constitution or laws. Dewey argued against causal effects and argued for examining consequences. Discourse, it seems, is better served when using these approaches because it moves people from the extremes, it encourages analysis, inquisitiveness, and discussion, and it moves each to bring his or her unique perspectives into examination of the impact of circumstances and the development of possible responses accordingly. Dewey’s assertion that habits ought to be factored into this as well as an understanding of the concepts of private and public is also important in this endeavor. In this respect, both epistemology and hermeneutics are important, the level of which will vary depending upon any number of factors and circumstances as determined by the people who are engaged in the discourse.

My reading of Rorty is that he subordinates history and religious or spiritual experiences, deeming them useless. In Rorty’s discussion on culture, there is the implied assumption that the culture of which he speaks is a predominate culture of European, white American male perspective. He speaks of acculturation yet he makes no room for acculturation of the predominate culture into any other culture. Here, certain questions arise. Are we to assume then that the “abnormal” are the sub-cultures? Are these sub-cultures subordinate to a dominant culture, and are their reactions to this subordinate status the decision or act of challenging these objective truths via assimilation and conformity? Moreover, is one to assume that the abnormal response of the subculture is an abnormal response by this predominant culture? Depending upon the response to these questions, how are conflicts handled? Is there a quest for agreement or do we simply accept this incommensurability? If it were the latter, that would be ludicrous,
dangerous, and destructive, one would think, because the consequences include further alienation due primarily to lack of understanding and stilted edification, and eventually conversation stops. Meaningful discourse is replaced by extreme ideologies venomously spewed by their respective disciples and, as noted earlier, that leads to hegemony. Though Rorty ascribes to an edifying philosopher the critical role of keeping the conversation going and that narratives are important, he wants to exclude certain narratives from the discourse. I contend that in a democratic society, public discourse entails a recognition and respect for all narratives that are shaped by unique experiences and that offer a myriad of possible conversational starting points. As cultural critic, the pragmatist/edifying philosopher understands the importance of narratives as reflective of these unique histories and habits and their respective impact and usefulness in promoting meaningful and constructive discourse. I equate edifying philosophers with organic intellectuals who also function as leaders in a public setting. In this role, they are facilitators who help to keep the conversation going, which requires some level of awareness of biases—including their own—and the impact these biases have as to how people engage one another and foster inclusiveness.

As suggested earlier, apparent biases influence Rorty’s theories, particularly as it relates to his treatment of religion and his vision of a post-philosophical culture. This new intellectual discipline according to Rorty is not subject to any prevailing discipline or ideology. It is not founded upon any prior knowledge, truths, or ideologies. Yet Rorty’s own atheistic views, whether he intended to do so or not, are apparent. He uses terms and phrases that indicate the finitude of man and nature, that humanity is the maker and sole source of all knowledge, that the inception, evolution, and eventual conclusion of language is exclusive to humanity. His
references to religion are limited to one particular religious tradition: Catholicism. His references are exclusively to the Catholic Church tradition and the positions and scholarship of Catholic scholars, e.g., Pope Benedict XVI and Vattimo. Although Rorty’s rationale for his linguistics is that language adjusts to change, he has a myopic view as it relates to religion. He ignores the changes that religion has undergone in response to culture, for example the secularization of the Catholic tradition in response to justifying or making distinctions to performing ministry, and understanding religion in the context of the Church setting as compared to public ministry. He depicts religious expressions as being simply about social status and limited exclusively to the private realm.

Another bias is Rorty’s statement that non-theists make better citizens. This is a frivolous statement in that it is impossible to measure, it reflects his personal anti-theism bias, and it is not consistent with his argument for the role of the edifying philosopher in keeping the conversation going. This statement, which Rorty stands by, in and of itself, is a conversation-stopper because it is offensive and provokes the type of arguments that discourage substantive and meaningful conversation. His stance negates the work that many people of faith have done in the U.S. and other countries. For many people their faith is their fact. William James recognized this and he made note that regardless of their veracity, facts determine one’s belief, at least provisionally. We act on these beliefs and upon doing so, we gain greater insight, and this is a continuous cycle. Peirce asserted that pragmatism’s usefulness in the conduct of life is affirmed in his maxim that what we think is to be understood in the context of what we are prepared to do, which is dependent upon what we admire.\textsuperscript{47} Consider this understanding of pragmatism from the

\textsuperscript{47} Nathan Houser et al., eds., \textit{The Essential Peirce}, 133.
perspective of faith. For religious people, their faith in the Divine or respect for something beyond the concrete world of existence and the corresponding teachings are their source of facts. It is the basis of their moral framework and is their guide for action. Similar to nontheists, the source or basis of the theist’s conviction are at times inexplicable. Yet he or she acts on these convictions in response to, for example, human suffering. Faith, as their truths, is the fact upon which theists believe, and right action as determined by virtue of their faith enables involvement. In this respect, this behavior is pragmatic and is consistent with James’s instrumental truth when he asserts that truth happens to ideas and it is made true by events. This understanding of the relationship between belief as facts and as the determinate of right action is also consistent with Peirce’s point about the maxim of conduct, which is that “belief consists mainly in being deliberately prepared to adopt the formula believed in as the guide to action.” Therefore, I contend that it is important to engage those with religious ideologies in the public discourse. It is indubitable that perceptions help to construct systems that benefit some and marginalize others, and that perpetuate racism, sexism, or homophobia. People created laws and rules that are based on beliefs held by theists and nontheists alike. Some of these laws and rules adversely affect other people and they are courageously challenged by theists and nontheists. Rorty treats the influence of religion in public discourse as isolated events or acts of heroism and as fixed moments in history, having no significant bearing on the present or the future. Yet, American history, out of which pragmatism and American philosophy was born, suggests otherwise. For example, the language used in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights exemplifies the collective work of Christian, humanists, agnostics, and perhaps

atheists. The ideas that they espoused and the language they used in these documents suggest the existence of a Creator yet also reflect the role of human agency and their concern for religious tolerance and freedom. To illustrate this point further, in a later chapter, we will examine the role of people of faith in the development of the African-American tradition and its impact on the U.S. democratic system and culture.49

Rorty’s statement that nontheists make better citizens, while provocative, is absurd for the reasons stated above and because there is no practical difference as to what an atheist, scientist, or person of faith uses as his/her guide for action. Rorty’s stance also ignores Dewey’s argument that the private may conceivably have an impact on the public. Rorty, unlike James, makes no room for the possibility that after applying the pragmatic method of inquiry, there is for some people the idea of an Absolute and that this theological idea has value and some good. The value may be that belief in a Divine, a God, as evidenced in faith communities such as Quakers, Congregationalists, the Catholic Church, Baptists, and American Muslims, translates into action or service to others. By virtue of their understanding of their faith, they are compelled to use their resources and leadership and willingly collaborate with others to address a myriad of social and political issues. Consequently, they have helped to change public policies such as the Civil Rights Act; built institutions such as hospitals and universities; and provided social services such as social welfare systems. Historically, people of faith and secularists have worked and continue to work side by side as politicians, abolitionists, educators, activists, leaders, and

49. Stout and Rorty reference Rorty’s support of what they termed the Jeffersonian Compromise. This compromise is reference to a letter that Jefferson wrote to the Baptist Church in Connecticut. The U.S. Constitution suggests that government shall not impose, i.e., shape how the Church ought to be the Church. This addressed the issue of the oppression experienced by Baptists. Also noteworthy is that the courts have occasionally ruled in favor of religious communities when the actions of that community were intended to benefit others regardless of whether the recipient ascribed to any belief and provided that their rights are not repressed.
neighbors. Pragmatism provides a method of inquiry, of asking the “hard questions” regardless of the discipline; whether, as Peirce states, it is psychology or science, it has the same goal and intent. Certainty, or rather the lack thereof, is not exclusive to religion, or metaphysics, or linguistics and its language-games. There are no universally accepted guides for action. These are determined by factors such as the individual, culture, ideologies, and geography, to name a few.

Stout, Anderson, West, and Emilie Townes each offer a counter-response to Rorty’s position that religion is incommensurate with pragmatism and therefore ought not to be a part of the public discourse. As stated above, Anderson, who calls for a public theology that incorporates philosophy and academic theology, provides a way of reframing the discussion. Stout and Anderson focus on the work within the academy, whereas West claims that his prophetic pragmatism could be used by anyone regardless of political or religious ideology. Stout utilizes an approach in the democratic process that respects religion but calls for a religiously neutral language between secularists and religious communities that will enable them to work together in the public domain. In the remainder of this chapter, I will give a brief summary of Stout, Anderson, and Townes.

By comparison, Rorty presents a historical account of the development of philosophical thought, yet he does so in order to make his argument for a new conceptual framework. His approach, as stated earlier, is an unbalanced and biased approach in which religion does not exist at all and science only as needed. Anderson and Stout provide what I believe is an effective pragmatic approach to understanding the historical conflict between religion and secularism. They both give a historical account of the development of secularism and its various nuances as
it relates to secularization of religion and secularism as a distinct ideology. In doing so, they frame and re-frame the discussion, thereby bringing the discussion back to the center. Anderson frames the issue as concerning philosophy and academic theology, arguing for the development of a public theology. Stout, on the other hand, argues for the development of a public philosophy and frames the issue as concerning the historical relationship between democracy and tradition.

In the following two sections, I will examine Jeffrey Stout’s and Victor Anderson’s treatment of philosophy, religion, and secularism; their positions regarding the relationship between religion and pragmatism; and religion’s role in public discourse. Also, to bridge Anderson’s pragmatic theology to Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism, I insert a brief summary of womanist scholar, Emilie Townes. Townes takes what she terms a theoethic approach, arguing for equitable distribution of resources, inclusion in the public policy-making process, and collaboration by the academic community to help achieve it.

**Jeffrey Stout**

West describes Stout as “the most religiously musical, the most theologically learned, and the most philosophically subtle of secular thinkers.”

Stout describes the re-entrance of pragmatism into American philosophy “on little cat feet, first with this one tentative paw but then suddenly on all fours—a calming fog of blurred distinctions”. Implying that new pragmatism is intellectual empiricism, Stout concludes that if we treat the “twilight” of logical empiricism as equivalent to the “hazy dog” of a new pragmatism, then as argued by David Little and Sumner Twiss, we should not settle for anything.

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less than the “more thorough pragmatism” which W. V. Quine foresaw as early as 1951.52 Stout explained that Quine’s thorough pragmatism is one that does not stop at the imagined boundary between analytic and synthetic. Everyone has both a scientific heritage and a constant barrage of sensory stimulation. In this continuous practice of developing and revising one’s belief, pragmatism is the guide that helps integrate these scientific heritages into these sensory stimulations.53

The question that Stout wants to emphasize is that given the fact that disagreements exist, “What should be said about each case when we interpret, explain and draw our morals from them?”54 In order to make a rational choice we need to know whose choice we are considering and the epistemic situation. Moreover, given all of the details of the situation of choice, suspension of judgment must be one of the alternatives. Regarding the fears about disagreements and whether choices are subjective, we should remember that knowledge is always objective or nothing at all.55 Stout concludes that every disagreement cannot be resolved which does not necessarily imply a dialectical impasse. Rather, it is just a disagreement. Most disagreements fail to be settled rationally for a number of reasons, but eventually they may be settled.56 While we should not ask philosophy to perform tasks it cannot perform, we should be concerned because such failure can lead to violence or loss of something dear. Stout states, “The real hope for rational discourse lies in the will to create communities and institutions in which the virtues of

52. Jeffrey Stout, Flight, 203.
53. Ibid., 208.
54. Ibid., 262.
55. Ibid., 263.
56. Ibid., 266.
good people and good conversation can flourish. Philosophy is no substitute for that, but its value can be measured by the contribution it makes.”

In *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout writes “The religious dimensions of our political culture are typically discussed at such a high level of abstraction that only two positions become visible: an authoritarian form of traditionalism and an antireligious form of liberalism.” He adds that each uses the other to fuel his/her position, by presenting the other’s point of view as dark and unfavorable in order to elevate their position in a favorable light. The result is cultural warfare rhetoric. Stout reminds us that if we are to address the critical issues facing our society in a meaningful way, we must figure out a way to work around the impasse. He proposes that conversation is the solution, and it involves listening to the other’s views all the way through, trying to understand each other’s perspective and being open to criticism. He believes that the academy can facilitate and model this for the larger society and he conceives of a “public philosophy” as a type of pragmatism that “can transcend the current standoff between secular liberalism and the new traditionalists—and do so by borrowing crucial insights from both sides.” Stout hopes that the example set by the academy can extend to the larger society believing that if society is willing, the formation of “diverse coalitions and equally full expression of differences remain possible in democratic culture today.” Stout recognizes that though some liberal philosophers reinforce the traditionalist’s critique of modern democracy, the

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59. Rorty’s statements regarding religion are an example of this.
61. Ibid., 91.
latter remain skeptical and suspicious because they believe that the consequence of the liberal’s approach has been morally and spiritually empty modern democratic societies. In response to this cultural warfare, Stout presents a case for seeing this differently. He is realistic that while a stable consensus will not be achieved, overlapping consensus is possible when the public discussions focus on policy questions. Abstract discussions, reasons Stout, are too controversial and speculative and he suggests that a more effective approach is “democratic reasoning, dispositions, and attitudes that the people have in common.”

Stout’s conception of this type of civic engagement is to recognize that certain normative commitments guide the discussion, and they are dynamic and ever evolving. The concept of “tradition” in this respect serves as a means to keep focused. Stout proposes that participants, in this case all Americans, engage from the point of view of a citizen—as someone who accepts some responsibility for the condition of society and is a participant in its living moral traditions, in this case American. Norms afford us the freedoms and hold us, as participating citizens, accountable.

As Americans, we have inherited democracy. As such, democratic thought is a discussion that is articulated in words and actions and is reflected in the way we think and talk about ethical situations. It also consists of intellectuals’ reflective examination and critique of this democracy. Stout writes,

No one supposes that we would be better off if we made our commitments in a vacuum, independently of familial and cultural influence. No freedom that absolute is at issue. In cultivating their own piety, citizens will take sustenance from whatever traditional stories, exemplary lives, communal structures, poetic images, and crucial arguments prove valuable. It is up to them to make something of their inheritance and to discard those of its parts that insult the soul. The freedom they exercise is situated in a network of


63. Stout lists as examples norms as expressed in the Bill of Rights, and as implied in the Emancipation Proclamation, the Nineteenth Amendment, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address and Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” “And also norms still in the process of being hammered out by people who sense that democracy has unrealized implications for families, churches, corporations, and other forms of associations.” Ibid., 5.
evolving normative constraints. 64

Stout does not reject religious reasoning and participation in public discourse. Rather, we have a responsibility to respect the varying viewpoints and not assert that there is only one authority. Stout’s position is that both religious expression and secularist viewpoints ought to be protected and not restricted from being a part of the discourse. Both should be able to express their beliefs/position as completely and in whatever manner they can. Failure to do so, argues Stout, deprives all of us of the opportunity to learn and critically examine these views/positions. 65 His approach is to reframe the discussion, and he provides a model for how traditionalists and liberals could engage in public policy discussion.

Stout emphasizes the importance of common entry points and to understanding the various historical contexts and experiences. He cautions that constraints accompany expressive freedom and builds his case for the value of points of view. Stout addresses the problem of what happens to the person deemed unreasonable or who chooses to opt out in response to Rawls’s idea of a social contract and what constitutes a reasonable person qualified to enter into this contract, by arguing that collateral commitments vary from person to person and that Rawls’s theory relies too heavily on group thinking. Contrary to Rawls, Stout notes that there are a multitude of communities and individual differences within a community. Arguing that contracts are too static, Stout is a proponent of expressive freedom, which suggests that although there are an infinite number of forms, these freedoms must have constraints. Stout recommends three norms for incorporating religious premises into political discussions: in the effort to be

64. Jeffrey Stout, Democracy and Tradition, 41.

65. Ibid., 64.
respectful, avoid being condescending; use the rhetorical strategy of expressing one’s own view and being fair-minded and sincere in one’s critique of the other; and practice civility and listen with an open mind.\textsuperscript{66}

Stout asserts that the \textit{democratic intellectual} as cultural critic must maintain a balance in his/her indictment of society. If the indictment is too general or too vague, it may be self-destructive and the critic accused of being self-contradictory. The critic, as Stout notes, is obliged to condone and to denounce; however, these lines are blurred, and so he/she must perform the task very carefully, tactfully, mindful of one’s privilege. Neglect in this area can result in dismemberment and exclusion, thereby setting factions against one another and individuals disengaging from the larger society.

While recognizing the complications and misuse of the term and concept of history and historicism, Stout introduces the discussion on historicism in order to shine a light on the new historicism. He argues that historicism has also undergone changes over time. It has become more historical and less philosophical, and is better able to view itself as conditioned by historical context.\textsuperscript{67} Echoing Marx’s view of history, Stout asserts that ethical narratives are morally important. They bring to light the interaction of character and circumstances in which to locate the discussion on historicism. They shape our capacity to act freely and bring the past to consciousness. Narratives educate and are important in the “re-formation” of character and moral discourse and reflection. Stout writes, “It matters greatly that we tell stories, that we tell the right stories, and that we tell them well. Bad stories produce bad people—people who cannot act, or

\textsuperscript{66} Jeffrey Stout, \textit{Democracy and Tradition}, 85.

\textsuperscript{67} Jeffrey Stout, \textit{Flight}, 257.
who cannot act well, because they lack the virtues of a well-formed character.” Unlike Rorty, Stout believes that you cannot articulate a radically new view by just changing the criteria, because decisions are constrained by their living values and norms. One is “no freer to choose whatever moral principles it pleases than it is to accept whatever scientific theories and wishes were true.”

West’s understanding of historicism is similar to Stout’s and determines that Rorty’s version has “antiprofessional implications for the academy.” West, who considers himself a neopragmatist and argues for what he calls a narrative historicism, asserts that Rorty’s version is a symptom of the current crisis that has resulted in a demoralized academic philosophy. He claims that Rorty does not go far enough in leading the culture into, rather than simply to, the “complex world of politics and culture.” West argues that this interpretation of the American philosophical tradition is politically narrow and is symptomatic of “the ahistorical character of Anglo-American philosophical tradition.” Comparatively, Victor Anderson uses the respective positions of these neopragmatists, Rorty, Stout, and West, to frame the discussion regarding the legitimacy of theology in the public discourse. Anderson reframes the debate regarding the position taken by secularists such as Rorty and Stout who contend that academic theology is incommensurable with pragmatism and irrelevant in the public.


69. Ibid., 261.


71. Ibid., 207.

72. Ibid., 207.
Victor Anderson

Anderson’s conception of religious and cultural criticism is drawn from a variety of thinkers, such as H.R. Niebuhr and Howard Thurman. He credits both his advisor Jeffrey Stout and Cornel West for sparking in him an interest in American pragmatism. William Dean considers Anderson a third generation of what he terms *Princeton pragmatists*: Richard Rorty, Rorty’s students Stout and West, and their student Anderson.

In *Pragmatic Theology*, Anderson uses pragmatism as a framework to construct an American public theology, which he calls *pragmatic theology*. He describes it as a “religious interpretation of cultural fulfillment and transcendence.”73 These two constructs for Anderson represent the ends, the means, and the goods that contribute to human flourishing and identity, and the motives that underpin moral life. They are regulative ideals that we can employ in cultural studies, such as in academic theology, and are neither necessarily moral nor theological. He writes, “cultural fulfillment and transcendence can be construed theologically and in a manner that is agreeable with the aims and purposes of religious and cultural criticism.”74 He argues that in the constructive work of public theology, these constructs (cultural fulfillment and transcendence) should function normatively.

Anderson uses *pragmatic naturalism* to conceptualize a framework under which to construct his version of an American public theology. As defined by Anderson, pragmatic naturalism “constructs our ideas about the ways we think and act in the world from a strictly naturalistic point of view…. As a naturalistic ontology … it stresses the creative ways that nature


74. Ibid.
and human experience are open to transcendent potentialities and transformations.” In addition to constructing a public theology, Anderson’s intent is to continue the conversation between American philosophy and academic theology, particularly as it relates to public life. He attributes much of the disagreement regarding the legitimacy of academic theology to prejudicial assumptions about theology and criticizes theologians for not explaining clearly what they do relative to other disciplines. Thus, Anderson describes academic theology as the study of religions and religious discourses insofar as they are susceptible to descriptive, analytic, explanatory, interpretive, evaluative, and constructive forms of critique. Theology is academic in the sense that it is a faculty of the human studies or cultural studies in the university. It is theological insofar as the scholarly concerns of the theologian are derived from and focused on religious doctrines, teachings, and beliefs; their internal vocabularies and justifications; their cognitive and normative implications for interpreting the world, human life, and cultural meaning; and their relations and influences on cultural practices.

According to Anderson, Stout asserts in Ethics After Babel that the academic function of theology is publicly irrelevant. Both Stout and Cornel West maintain that academic theology is a viable source for moral and public education provided it is rooted fundamentally in church dogma and used for professional ministry. Yet Stout and West are less confident of its usefulness as an effective discourse in contemporary, public, or secular debates. Anderson challenges this position, attributing the plight of the intellectual enterprise instead to theologians’ willingness to assimilate secular discourses into their own justifications of theology and the increase of the professionalization of theological education. Regardless of these positions, concludes Anderson, they all “point to the pragmatic dilemma of academic theology.” In moral discourse,

75. Victor Anderson, Pragmatic Theology, 2.
76. Ibid., 4.
77. Ibid., 6.
in order to be a viable intellectual source, academic theology must be truthful about its use of moral language. In order to be effective and no longer marginal, it must cease being tied to dogma and professional ministerial education. Third, its relevance in secular and public discourse is contingent upon academic theology no longer being defined as Christian dogma and professional ministerial education.\textsuperscript{78}

Anderson agrees with Stout and West that to understand the problem between pragmatic philosophers and academic theologians, one must understand what he calls the “secular problematic” and the question of how we should treat secularism. Should we treat it as a doctrine, a world-view, or a particular philosophical discourse (in this case neopragmatism)? On the other hand, should we treat it as a historical process in answering fundamental questions of meaning and value?\textsuperscript{79} Anderson chooses the latter. He argues that academic theology and neopragmatic philosophy provide different answers to contemporary cultural questions and problems in public life, and secularization helps to account for the continuities and discontinuities between these two intellectual disciplines. Anderson reasons that based on the theory of secularization, American philosophical pragmatists and pragmatic academic theologians share a common history of secularization in American intellectual history and concludes that substantive conversation is possible.\textsuperscript{80}

In \textit{Pragmatic Theology}, Anderson explores the historical relationship between American pragmatism and academic theology, such as the metaphysical claims made by academic theologians to justify and validate their theological claims. In his version of pragmatism, he is


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 9.
concerned with the pragmatics of theological justifications as a viable source of religious insight and its operations and processes in the world. He is also concerned with the pragmatics of theological justification in relation to the competing assertions about the world and human life derived from American atheistic pragmatism.\(^{81}\)

Anderson agrees with the criticisms of contemporary theologians, who assert that a credible academic discipline in order to be intellectually and publicly relevant must have a “publicly communicable argumentation.” For Anderson, in philosophical debates, pragmatic naturalism is mediatorial and is central to his claims for a public theology. He argues for a religious interpretation of pragmatic naturalism in which public philosophy and academic theology are bound between cultural finitude and transcendence and their legitimacy is determined by the extent their interpretations of the world and human experience genuinely contribute to the commonwealth. Anderson rejects the notion of equating incompatible answers to these ideologies as being incommensurable. Rather, the classical pragmatists entrusted to American philosophical and theological discourse the criteria of pragmatic naturalism as a mediatorial for “adjudicating significant differences in public discourses.”\(^{82}\) Therefore, neopragmatists and academic theologians must share their interpretations of human intentions and be prepared to commend them for a public morality.

Anderson is critical of Rorty’s description of theology for several reasons: it disregards its historical developments and revisions; Rorty does not provide a substantive delineation of his

82. Ibid., 11.
version of theologians; and Rorty is “motivated by dispositional hostilities.”83 Though he views Rorty and Stout as having the same stance regarding the incommensurability of religion and pragmatism, he notes that for Rorty theology is a nonquestion, whereas Stout views theology as a consequence of pragmatism; it has legitimacy in moral discourse and is a viable aspect of secular criticism.84 He agrees with Rorty and Stout that the tensions of the present debates about the marginalization of theology in American public life can be attributed to a pragmatic secularization of theology. He disagrees with their depiction of secularization as the decline of theological influence. Anderson sees secularization as the historical process for understanding how philosophers and theologians came to arrive at different answers. Contrary, however, to Rorty and Stout, Anderson contends that pragmatism and theology are not necessarily incommensurable and that understanding and agreement are possible and desirous between philosophical pragmatists and academic theologians, though that understanding is contingent upon shared realities and orientation toward moral fulfillment of common goods.85 Because of the consequence of pragmatist reconstructive philosophy, Anderson suggests that science and philosophy separated from theology and theological arguments were reconstructed in terms of spirituality, faith, and unity. Due to the classical pragmatists’ optimism towards American theology, Anderson argues that they made possible a pragmatic philosophy and a pragmatic theology. Even though the consequence of a pragmatic theology was the abandonment of dogmatics, apologetics, and supernatural, the classical pragmatists deemed theology as having value and being pertinent to public discourse, such as addressing questions of meaning and

83. Victor Anderson, Pragmatic Theology, 17.
84. Ibid., 20.
85. Ibid., 27.
value, helping people to achieve balance between their limitations and fulfillment and
transcendence, and it orients people to wanting to live reasonably well together.  

As a theory of inquiry, pragmatism presumes the unity of experience to be basic. With
this basic presumption, questions of knowledge and truth shift inquiry to the complex,
continuous, and communicative character of human life. Anderson explains that “pragmatism
reconstructs the nature of inquiry so that meaning is a result and practical consequences of
human beings’ cooperative engagement with experience … [and] … knowledge and its
conceptual categories … are thought of as the many ways that self and historic communities
order life.” In reconstructive pragmatic philosophy, meaning and value are correlative
principles of life. The problem as Anderson sees it is whether pragmatic theology “can achieve a
unity of being and value in religious experience and public life. Pragmatic theology must
negotiate the intersections of a pragmatic philosophy of religion and the demands of a public
theology.” The contemporary public significance of the pragmatic theology, asserts Anderson,
is to reproduce conditions that will keep religion humanly vital.

Regarding the issue of incommensurability, Anderson questions the feasibility of even
having such a discussion, determining that it is in fact non-pragmatic. Anderson asserts that the
only way the argument can work is by treating pragmatism and theology as conceptual rivals.
His understanding of the classical pragmatists leads him to believe that they were not opposed to
theological ideas. Anderson adds that incommensurability, as properly understood by Kuhn and

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86. Victor Anderson, Pragmatic Theology, 28.
87. Ibid., 33.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid., 52.
in the philosophy of science, ought not to be confused with incompatibility. The question is whether two entities can coexist. Anderson argues that if in public discourse the opposing views cannot agree upon communicable terms or languages, there can be no public debate because they do not have terms or languages that they can use to agree or disagree. Thus, in this respect pragmatism and theology is incommensurable for lack of translatable terms. However, such a scenario is highly unlikely, regardless of how radically different the opposing views may be. Anderson cites Wittgenstein, who argued that holding different beliefs does not reduce to formal contradictions; it is a matter of thinking differently.\textsuperscript{90} Anderson proposes to drop the debate altogether and focus instead on compatibility, which is pragmatic and no longer separates the issue that places a wedge between the neopragmatists and the academic theologians. He writes, “For pragmatists, it is not incommensurability but incompatibility between certain kinds of naturalisms and metaphysical theologies that defines the contests over pragmatism and theology.”\textsuperscript{91} Pragmatic naturalism is not opposed to theological discourse. Its concern is “what these experiences point to and what they assert if anything about the universe.”\textsuperscript{92} Pragmatic naturalists insist that whatever criteria used in other experiences are equally applied in validating the religious experience. Pragmatic naturalism confines theological discourse to affective understanding and values and theological language as symbolic, constituting a second level of meaning, rendering it difficult to defend the incommensurability of theology on categorical

\textsuperscript{90} Victor Anderson, \textit{Pragmatic Theology}, 98.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 102.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 103, as cited by Kurtz, 1990.
grounds.\textsuperscript{93} Noting that not all pragmatic theologians agree that theology contributes cognitively to human inquiry, Anderson identifies four themes in their diverse theologies: descriptive, explanatory, normative, and metaphysical functions. Descriptively, pragmatic theology proposes a method of inquiry similar to all other human studies. As an explanatory discourse, academic theology is concerned with the intentions of human beings as expressed in religious operations. Third, meaning and value are addressed in pragmatic theology, which are oriented to human fulfillment or social betterment. Fourth, the principles of finitude and transcendence frame the public discourse of pragmatic theology.\textsuperscript{94} Thus conversation is possible, argues Anderson, if we make pragmatism the “communicable term between atheistic pragmatists and American academic theologians. Where pragmatism is the communicable term, our substantive disagreements may center on our preferences for certain kinds of naturalisms, whether materialistic, philosophical, atheistic, or theistic.”\textsuperscript{95} Anderson’s point is that regardless of the discipline, pragmatic sensibilities guide the inquiry; it is pragmatic theology when these ideas, concepts or claims are construed theologically. Nevertheless, as with other academic disciplines, these theological claims are analyzed, critiqued, and sometimes rejected.

Anderson writes that the task of public theology and of public philosophy is to “integrate the various languages of the multiple communities of discourse that constitute public life.”\textsuperscript{96} He suggests that the test of whether public theology is adequate will be determined by its ability to convey the relevance of its theological meaning of religious life in a democratic society. In

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{93} Victor Anderson, \textit{Pragmatic Theology}, 104.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 105–107.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 126.
\end{quote}
summary, “Pragmatic theology negotiates the intersections of pragmatic naturalism as an American philosophy of religion and American public theology.”\textsuperscript{97} Several criteria underlay Anderson’s pragmatic theology:

1. Religious inquiries must be predicated on an adequate conception of the social character of inquiry;
2. We ought to think of our public debates in public terms and in terms of common good. Vocabulary need not be compatible, but admission of incompatibility opens up the possibility of comparisons of various answers, which may lead to agreement;
3. We must be open to that which in faith is recognized to unify value and being and worthy of absolute trust and loyalty;
4. Faith and hope are regarded as genuine possibilities against the powers that threaten democratic cultural norms;
5. When public and private interests center on community and concern for free and open exchange about equitable distribution of goods, pragmatic theology is relevant to democratic, cultural fulfillment and transcendence;
6. Pragmatic theology supports the increase of human capacities to create morally livable and fulfilling communities, the enhancement of the free play of interpretation, and a social order where utopian, democratic expectations are envisioned and actualized.\textsuperscript{98}

Anderson writes, “the pragmatic question is whether the internal languages of theology (redemption, creation, sin, grace, reconciliation, and the like) are capable of disclosing and

\textsuperscript{97} Victor Anderson, \textit{Pragmatic Theology}, 132.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 127–134.
communicating genuine public meanings beyond the narrow boundaries of one’s own religious community, whether they can embrace the concerns and hopes of the public at large without also rendering the public theologian religiously insignificant.”99

Anderson concludes that in a pluralistic culture as it relates to public discourse and American democracy, theological languages cannot assume any particular public meaning nor can a specific religious institution and its respective creeds and doctrines. Whether public theology’s theological interpretations of American public life is heard and determined to be relevant depends upon the “compatibility with the widely shared public interests in health and safety, education, labor, and public administration than in their distinctive languages.”100 His concluding statement is worth quoting at length, as it contradicts Rorty’s position as it relates to pragmatism and its relationship to religion and theology in public discourse. Anderson writes,

The adequacy of a public theology is tested by its theological articulation of public meaning of religious life within a democratic form of life. It is the public character of an inquiry (whether philosophy or theology) that justifies its relevance to public life. Such a pragmatism constituted the motive behind the philosophies of thinkers as dispersed in time as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, Cornel West, and Jean Elshtain. Such a pragmatism is also central to Linell Cady and my own justifications of public theology.101

Anderson admits that he deliberately chose to focus on constructing abstract concepts more so than focusing on concrete problems. He reasoned that at this stage in development, if public theology were to advance substantively, it would be essential that academic theologians take some time to think responsibly about “the ways our religious commitments and theological


100. Ibid., 132.

101. Ibid.
languages are limited in their effects on the public realm.”

I agree with Anderson that academic theologians must be responsible for doing the intellectual work and that it is important to test the adequacy of these interpretations. To that end, in a later chapter, I will examine the historical leadership within the African-American culture and the Black Church in particular as sites for such a public theology as described by Anderson. Of the thinkers that Anderson lists, we have examined Peirce, James, and Dewey. In the following chapter, we examine Cornel West and his concept of prophetic pragmatism, which Anderson references. Anderson considers West’s prophetic pragmatism as an example of public theology. I believe that in addition to West’s corpus of work, Emilie Townes, as a womanist scholar, mirrors what Anderson proposes. Because it is important to the discussion going forward, at this stage I am including a brief summary of her intellectual work.

Emilie M. Townes

Although she is not self-identified as a pragmatist, Emilie Townes’s scholarship and her methodology embodies what Anderson describes as pragmatic theology. She explicitly uses religious language in her critique of democracy and public policy analysis. She also transforms these same phraseologies and imagery into symbols to critique culture and promote human agency. She treats reason and experience as equal methodological tools. She writes, “Experience pushes us to consider the radical messiness of life and opens the door to the realization that our theoretical viewpoints are often too constricted to accommodate the mélange of creation.”

Her critique of public democracy and the tragic or evil is concerned about the whole of society. She


analyzes the impact of public policy on healthcare and affordable access from a theoethic perspective. In *Embracing the Spirit*, she writes:

> It is time we blow the trumpet in our contemporary Zion and sanctify a fast. It will take all of us, peoples of color, White, male and female, young and old, to carry out a communal lament. For only a lament that comes from all of us can address the complexities of health and health care in our lives and the peculiar way in which this affects the African American Community.”

Townes wrote these words in 1998 and twelve years later, in 2010, President Barak H. Obama signed the Affordable Health Care Act. She is prophetic in her analysis of the historical development of the public policy process, in terms of who makes the decisions, how these decisions are made, and who is adversely affected such as the poor and marginalized. Her primary focus is to incorporate womanist thought into the various disciplines and to act as social witness in order to transform society. In addition to utilizing scholarship from theological and ethical disciplines, Townes incorporates the literary works of a variety of writers, such as Zora Neale-Hurston and Alice Walker. She is explicit that her Baptist tradition, her southern roots, and her experience in the academy inform her cultural and social critiques. Her works include anthologies and collections of writings from several womanist and black feminist scholars who address a myriad of theological, ethical, and social issues important to the black community and the Black Church. They include *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, 1993; *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*, 1995; *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, 1997; *Womanist Ethics and the Culture of Evil*, 2006; and most recently *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, 2011. She extends this critique to the role of the academy in addressing public concerns. For

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example, in *Embracing the Spirit*, she writes, “This anthology … is an attempt to expand the current discussions within the academy and the church as each seeks to understand and offer solutions to the thorny issues of our day.”

Her 2010 “Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion (AAR)” illustrates pragmatic themes as related to the academy and informed by her religious and intellectual experiences. In this address, Emilie Townes, who describes herself as a social ethicist, uses several classic elements that are characteristic of her style and her ideology. She incorporates poetry/prose, she uses scripture, and she incorporates literature, especially by black women. She says Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Tony Morrison help her “theological and ethical reflection.” In her address to the AAR, Townes adopts the phrase “Rim bones of nothing/ness” from Hurston, who introduced this phrase in her novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, written in 1934. Hurston used the phrase again in her book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Townes first heard the term used by Katie Geneva Cannon at a conference in 1990 in which the theme was “Walking across the Rim Bones of Nothing.” To provoke thought and action, Townes applies the term to the Academy. In the Academy, to walk across the rim bone of nothingness is to be in that space where our experience is at a level that is beyond language, thought, and knowledge. It is knowing that scholarship is more than the depth of our intuition and precision of our analysis. It means to place into the unknown everything we have learned and hope to say, research, and teach, into a creation where our scholarship and our form of the conversion vision “can be put to


good use in the fiercely mundane as well as in the fastidiously erudite.”

To Townes, the phrase “walking cross the rim bones of nothingness” presents a litany of meanings:

- It encourages us to tease through the possibilities and to reflect on the ways in which we know, see, feel, and do. …and must be done with precision and rigor.
- It requires us to be circumspect in our research, writing, and teaching when we veer too far one way or the other without considering what lies in between.
- It should entail rigorous, relentless scholarship that is responsible to current issues while pushing our understanding of the modern/postmodern worlds to help map out strategies for creating a more just and free society and world.
- It calls us to tarry and ponder prior to attempting to be rational, critical, analytical, precise, and rigorous in our scholarship and our teaching. We should ask questions such as –“Why do the research?”
- Scholars and teachers of religion must be a part of public conversations about religion, by providing ongoing resources and support for those who are in the public sphere, commenting on the current religious events.
- When this occurs, we are then moving from concepts in hermeneutical, historical, pastoral, theological discourses to tools that demystify and deconstruct that help build and enlighten.

Townes argues that the Academy is at its best when “we begin to talk with colleagues in other disciplines and begin to explore questions, ideas, concepts, situations, informed by another set of

108. Ibid., 3–12.
lenses that give us new vistas to explore.” She ends by stating, “Hurston challenges us to stride across infinity, to look at the immensity of the sometimes literally burning worlds in which others and we live. To drop, no, to be committed to scholarship that is rigorous, accessible, and can be used as tools for insight, knowledge, and wisdom to build a more just world within world.”

**Summary and Critique**

I have presented Rorty’s version of pragmatism as it relates to philosophy of language, his vision of a post-philosophical culture, and his position regarding the relationship of pragmatism and religion. I contend that this position is inconsistent with the classical pragmatists’ treatment of pragmatism and various disciplines, including religion. Rorty’s position that religion is incommensurable with pragmatism and inappropriate in public discourse is contrary to his own proposal for the role of pragmatism and the edifying philosopher in keeping conversation going. I also utilized the scholarship of Jeffrey Stout and Victor Anderson to provide a counter-response. They both assert that it is important to understand the historical development of secularization as it explains the current polarization between secularism and theology. Although Stout provides a more in-depth account, they both provide a brief history of secularization. Stout and Anderson assert that it is important to understand the nuances, in terms of their similarities and their respective differences, because such knowledge may provide common entry points or serve as conversation starters. While critical of the challenges presented by the various disciplines, noting the concessions that must be made, their respective frameworks

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110. Ibid., 15.
provide insights as to how public discourse may occur and how secularism and theology may work through the impasse.

Anderson and Stout’s inclusive approach reflects what I argue is important to public theology and is consistent with my understanding of the pragmatic tradition. Though their emphasis on the relationship of philosophy to theology is slightly different—Stout argues for a public *philosophy* and Anderson for a public *theology*—they both conceive an approach that involves the academy and incorporates philosophy, academic theology and religion. In addition to the integral role that the academy offers, Stout and Anderson identify mediating sources. For Stout the democratic intellectual functions as a cultural critic who must maintain a balance in his/her indictment of society. Anderson assigns the mediatorial role to pragmatism as providing communicable terms and the sensibilities to guide the inquiry.

The scholars examined have focused more on theory than praxis, yet pragmatism fosters the integration of both as important to the process of inquiry and cultural criticism. Rorty emphasized the significance of the philosophy of language and understanding the historical development of analytical philosophy. Anderson acknowledges that he has concentrated more on theory than praxis in constructing his notion of a public theology. He reasons that he believes that most needed at the present time are academic theologians to dedicate significant time for reflection in order to better articulate the relationship of religion to other disciplines. Stout’s earlier works emphasize more theory, whereas in *Democracy and Tradition* he puts in conversation the representative thinkers of liberalism and traditionalism, thus making a concerted effort to combine theory and praxis. His book *Blessed are the Organized* is a companion to this work and provides case studies of various social movements and groups that embody what he
has laid out in *Democracy and Tradition*. Townes incorporates praxis in some aspects of her work as evidenced by her approach to publishing womanist scholarship. As a theoethicist, she addresses the issue of health care, particularly as it relates to women and people who have HIV or AIDS. West, as I understand his work as a scholar and an organic intellectual, comes closest to the embodiment of the basic tenets of pragmatism, which is theory and action and a multidisciplinary approach to inquiry. West utilizes philosophy, political science, the arts, history, theology, and social analysis to construct his philosophical perspective and eventually to re-construct it in response to contemporary issues. He incorporates thinkers with whom he does not fully agree or ideologies he does not embrace, by extrapolating from their work critical notions useful to his larger vision. West, complex and engaging, moves fluidly, though not so quietly, between the academy and community with a keen understanding of “power, provocation, and personality”, (to use his phrase).

There remains in this stage of my analysis a need to provide a clear illustration of scholarship that incorporates praxis as part of their public discourse. In the next two chapters, we will examine whether Cornel West does so and how, and the historical efforts of the Black Church and its leaders as it relates to the development of the African-American tradition, its role in public discourse, and its influence in shaping U.S. policy.
CHAPTER FOUR
CORNEL WEST’S PROPHETIC PRAGMATISM AND ITS RELEVANCE TO RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN PUBLIC LIFE

Cornel West describes Richard Rorty’s neopragmatism as promoting a liberal bourgeoisie because it limits historicism to intellectual and homogenous narratives. A common error in pragmatism, according to West, is to focus on consequences at the expense of understanding historicism’s concern for specific practices. He maintains that Rorty’s depiction of historicism is devoid of the realities of power. West contends that one cannot historicize philosophy without dealing with politics, at least in part. One must include this complex relationship of culture and politics because failure to acknowledge the oppressive deeds done under these philosophical notions is to “write an intellectual and homogenous history, a history which fervently attacks epistemological privilege but remains relatively silent about forms of political, economic, racial, and sexual privilege. Such a history which suppresses certain oppressed people’s history hides the operations of power—both domination and resistance—in the past, present.”¹ West states, “The goal of a sophisticated neopragmatism is to think genealogically about specific practices in light of the best available social theories, cultural critiques, and historiographical insights to act politically and to achieve certain moral consequences in light of effective strategies and tactics.”² West calls his version of such a neopragmatism prophetic pragmatism.

I agree with Cornel West’s assessment of Rorty’s treatment of history, as noted in the previous chapter. West’s scholarship expands the discourse to include African-American

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² Ibid.
thought, which includes a religious bend, and his prophetic pragmatism provides a framework that challenges Rorty’s assertion that religion is incommensurable with pragmatism and inappropriate to public discourse. Moreover, West’s body of work provides a counter-response to Rorty’s argument and challenges his statement that nontheists make better citizens. In addition to West’s skillful blend of aspects of Marxism to his Christian worldview, West’s self-description as a prophetic Christian pragmatist does so in solidarity with countless others and provides a living counter-response to Rorty’s statement. In this section, I will provide a brief summary of the development of West’s version of pragmatism, particularly as it relates to African-American thought and the development of his concept of prophetic pragmatism. These are also important to understand in light of Anderson’s discussion of pragmatic theology as a form of public theology and my assertion that the Civil Rights Era is an example of the relationship between religion and secularism in public discourse, specifically as it relates to democracy and social change.

**Development of Thought—An African-American Perspective**

In the preface to *Prophetic Fragments*, his brother Clifton describes Cornel West as “the product conceived in a most special marriage between an inexhaustible discipline and a raw but talented passion. Herein lies the testament of personal conviction—a conviction of faith, an addiction to hope, and a profession of love.”

3 Though skeptical about the substantive contents of Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism, Richard Bernstein credits him as “the thinker who has most dramatically sought to retrieve, appropriate, and extend the radical democratic ethos of

American pragmatism.⁴ Cornel West’s concept of prophetic pragmatism is reflected in a number of venues: in several books, at various academic institutions, through media such as radio and internet websites, and in his participation in social movements, primarily in the United States. From the start of his published works, West began to construct this concept of prophetic pragmatism. Early on, he borrows Gramsci’s term organic intellectual and uses terms such as prophetic Christian gospel and the prophetic Black church to articulate the African-American philosophy and critical thought as demonstrated particularly through the Black Church tradition. His corpus of published work spans thirty years, four of which document the development of his concept. To illustrate this development, this section will focus on four of West’s published books: Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity (1982), Prophetic Fragments (1988), The Evasion of American Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (1989), and Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America (1993).

In Prophesy Deliverance! An African-American Revolutionary Christianity, published in 1982, West asserts that philosophy, including American philosophy, had never taken the African-American experience seriously. He notes that Royce and Dewey remained silent and detached during an era in which lynching and widespread violence against African Americans took place. West’s response to this negligence and his argument is that an African-American philosophy is an expression of an American philosophy that takes seriously the African-American experience. He understands philosophical inquiry as being a social endeavor infused with cultural concerns and political choices of which the participants are not always aware.⁵

In this work, West constructs an African-American philosophy that is informed by the African-American experience, particularly the Black Church. He emphasizes a concept he calls *prophetic Christian gospel* and identifies two streams—prophetic and priestly—that inform the Christian tradition. As it relates to this concept of prophetic Christian gospel, the prophetic aspect of the Christian tradition as presented in the history of the African-American experience is the one to focus on. West argues that African-American thought must take this influential source seriously because, since enslavement, the African and African-American’s theological reflection built upon and broke away from their non-Christian traditions as they attempted to “understand their lives and their servitude in the light of biblical texts, Protestant hymns, and Christian testimonies.” West reasons that this is inseparable from the Black Church perspective that, to God, everyone is equal and valued equally and should have the opportunity to live to his/her fullest potential. This, explains West, is the first fundamental norm and is the core of the prophetic Christian gospel. He calls this “the Christian principle of self-realization of individuality within community.” He asserts that, though this typically applies to the otherworldly, it should extend to this-worldly and “the fuller prophetic Christian tradition must thus insist upon both this-worldly liberation and otherworldly salvation as the proper loci of Christianity.” He adds to his concept a *heuristic* treatment of the Marxist thought. He explains that this version of Marxism is a secularization of the Christian gospel, in that it was born out of


6. Ibid., 16.

7. Ibid.

8. This term in explaining his version of Marxism is anachronistic in that he does not use it until his work in *Keeping Faith*, which he published in 1993.
Romanticism, which was influenced by Christianity. Thus, central to the Marxist moral worldview and the Christian worldview is the well-being—the socio-economic well-being—of the individual. West adds that at the heart of the Christian gospel are contradiction and transformation, the presupposition of what is and what will be, the realities of the imperfect human being—fallen, finite—and the expectations of transformation to something better. This dialectic is continuous and constant and constitutes human nature and human history. Human beings have the capacity to change self and circumstances, but perfection is never possible. The realm of the tragic is the realm of history, and humanity is doomed to deal with problems and obstacles. West sees the tragic as a positive element in history because transformation comes out of the tragic. Transformation is liberation in that it is the move to a betterment of humanity, which is a quest for freedom. Freedom consists of two concepts. Social freedom is the result of actualization of individuality and democracy. Existential freedom is the “divine gift of grace”; it sustains people, delivers them from bondage, and empowers people to fight for social freedom. West identifies two fundamental norms of the Christian tradition. First, individuality, as discussed above, reinforces the importance of community, common good, and the harmonious development of personality. Second, the dialectic of human history and nature in the Christian tradition produces democracy. Democracy requires accountability, which exists when the people are in control of the leaders and institutions and are at the center of any social action. These two norms (individuality and democracy) are inseparable.

The prophetic Christian norm of democracy reflects the dignity of person in that it accents potential for human betterment. It recognizes the depravity of persons in that it acknowledges human disabilities. The Christian dialectic of human nature and human history makes the norm of democracy necessary and possible; yet only the praxis of

imperfect human beings renders it desirable and realizable.\textsuperscript{10}

Similarly, this concept of negation and transformation is at the heart of Marxism. However, adds West, these worldviews differ in that in Christianity, it is a “dialectical relation of human nature to human practice to human history,” while in Marxism, it is a “\textit{collapse} of human nature into human practice and into human history.” In Christian thought, human history portrays the imperfectability of humanity, whereas in Marxist thought, in history, humanity will experience perfectibility.\textsuperscript{11}

Shifting to the application of this concept of prophetic Christian thought as a source for African-American thought, West’s argument is twofold. First, African-American Christian thought confronts candidly the tragic character and hope for triumph of human history. It does so in such a way so as not to cause the participant to become overwhelmed by what is at stake, thereby allowing a serious, anxiety-laden pursuit to challenge political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation of actual human beings. Second, prophetic African-American Christian thought elevates the notion of struggle to the highest priority. He concludes that “to be a prophetic African-American Christian is to negate what is and transition prevailing realities against the backdrop of the present historical limits. In short, African-American Christian thought imbues African-American thinking with sobriety of tragedy, the struggle for freedom, and the spirit of hope.”\textsuperscript{12}

A second source of influence in African American thought, asserts West, is what he calls the products of the pragmatic movement. Though West contends that American pragmatism

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Cornel West, \textit{Prophecy Deliverance}, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid..
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 19–20.
\end{itemize}
provides a context through which African-American thought might achieve philosophical legitimacy, he identifies three shortcomings of pragmatism that are incompatible with African-American thought: as a movement, it neglects the self; it does not take class struggle seriously; and it regards too highly the scientific method and community. In contrast, the task of African-American Christian thought emphasizes the uniqueness of human personality, the centrality of the class struggle, and the political dimensions of knowledge.\textsuperscript{13} African-American thought and American pragmatism are compatible in that pragmatism conceives of knowledge as intersubjective and communal. It is subject to public scrutiny. Inquiry is a process of dialogue, and social practice is an important component. Experience and history are important, as pragmatism’s “primary aim is to discern, delegate, and defend particular norms through highlighting desirable possibilities, present in the practices of a specific community or society.”\textsuperscript{14}

West defines African-American critical thought as

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an interpretation of African-American history, especially its cultural heritage and political struggles, which provides norms for responding to challenges presently confronting black Americans. The particular historical phenomena interpreted and justified by it consist in religious doctrines, political ideologies, artistic expressions, and unconscious modes of behavior. These serve as raw ingredients to be utilized to interpret the African-American past and defend the existence of particular norms within it.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

To construct such a philosophical framework, West proposes five tasks of African-American thought. First, construct an interpretive framework of the problem. Second, engage in a genealogical inquiry into the cultural and linguistic roots of the ideas of white supremacy, which have shaped the African-American encounter with the modern world. Third, provide a theoretical

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Cornel West, \textit{Prophecy Deliverance}, 21.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
reconstruction and evaluation of the African-American responses to white supremacy. Fourth, present a dialogical encounter between prophetic African-American Christian thought and progressive Marxist social analysis. Finally, provide a political prescription for or a strategic intervention into the praxis. West will continue this basic framework throughout the body of his work, broadening it to include the larger public, and as part of his public involvement in social transformation agendas.

West is very clear that such an undertaking is rigorous, demanding one’s complete self. Its expositor must be clear and removed intellectually from the uncritical elements of mainstream African-American life. This is because intellectual activity flourishes best when one is on the margin, which also includes being outside of the educational institutions and those distractions. Given that the African-American experience has helped shape American philosophy, African-American philosophy should express a variation of this. Moreover, it cannot separate itself, as African Americans are also American and even the attempt to escape from one’s “Americaness” is American. The challenge for Black Theology, notes West, is to determine what aspects of African-American culture and religion can contribute as a counter-hegemonic culture.

**Philosophical Framework**

West adopts Gramsci’s organic intellectual concept to provide a way African Americans

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17. Ibid., 24.

18. Ibid., 120. West uses four frameworks/categories of hegemony to explain cultural processes. They are hegemonic culture, pre-hegemonic culture, neo-hegemonic culture and counter-hegemonic culture. He writes, “Counter-hegemonic culture represents genuine opposition to hegemonic culture; it fastens an alternative set of habits, sensibilities, and world-views that cannot possibly be realized within the parameters of the established order.”
can overcome the challenge of presenting a counter-dominant culture. According to West, Gramsci held that *organic intellectuals* are “leaders and thinkers tied to a particular cultural group primarily by means of institutional affiliations, [they] combine theory and action, and they relate popular culture and religion to structural social change.”

According to West, the black religious leaders should assume this role because they have influence on the congregation, they have immense freedom, and they lead the *one* institution in the black community that is not accountable to the status quo. Coupled with this religious influence is Marxist social analysis. This social analysis is theoretical praxis that (1) presupposes a sophisticated understanding of the internal dynamics of power relations of a society or civilization; (2) is integrally linked to a praxis of faith or political movement; and (3) is capable of ushering forth a new order, of organizing, administering, and governing a more humane social order. In short, Marxian critique is a critique that is morally sensitive, utilizes a high-level of social analysis, and incorporates a praxis of faith or organized political movement.

In *Prophetic Fragments* (1988), West pronounces that contemporary American religious life was in crisis and losing its “prophetic fervor.” Noting a decline in vision, complexity of understanding, and quality of moral action among religious Americans, he identifies the legacies such as Sojourner Truth, Walter Rauschenbusch, Dorothy Day, Abraham Heschel, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who are dormant and nearly forgotten. West blames political and cultural conservatism for silencing most of the prophetic religious voices and taming the majority of religious houses of worship. He determines that prophetic religion is at a crossroads in

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20. Ibid., 122.
America.\textsuperscript{21} The consequence of religious accommodation, asserts West, is that the best in American religion is being suffocated and consequently an existential emptiness and political irrelevance is being promoted, which is idolatrous—it worships the gods created by American society and kneels before the altars erected by American culture.\textsuperscript{22} He defines emptiness as a lack of spiritual depth and a preoccupation with individual or personal interests. He indicts American religious life as lacking a social consciousness. West attributes this to a general loss of memory pervasive in American culture that is the absence of any sense for collective struggle and communal combat. This \textit{social amnesia} “prevents systemic social analysis of power, wealth, and influence in society from taking hold among most religious Americans,” which, adds West, is overcome only when one adopts a \textit{principled prophetism}, that is, a prophetic religion “\textit{that incorporates the best of modernity and secularity yet brings prophetic critique to bear upon the idols of modernity and secularity}.”\textsuperscript{23} His intent in this book is to present this principled prophetism. He explains the importance of \textit{prophetic} thought as follows:

Prophetic thought and action is preservative in that it tries to keep alive certain elements of a tradition bequeathed to us from the past and revolutionary in that it attempts to project a vision and inspire a praxis which fundamentally transforms the prevailing status quo in light of the best of the tradition and the flawed yet significant achievements of the present order.\textsuperscript{24}

In light of this explanation, West’s basic question is, “How does a present-day Christian think about and act on enhancing the plight of the poor, the predicament of the powerless, and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Cornel West, \textit{Prophetic Fragments}, ix.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., x.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., ix.
\end{itemize}
the quality of life for all in a prophetic manner?"25

Three themes are worth noting because they are carried forth throughout West’s work: the concepts of organic intellectual, prophecy/prophet, and political. For example, he attributes all three concepts to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. West identifies him as an organic intellectual who was informed by the prophetic Black Church tradition, a prophetic liberal Christianity, a prophetic Gandhian method of nonviolence for social change, and a prophetic American civil religion. As stated earlier, West borrows the term organic intellectual from Gramsci. West explains that the organic intellectual relates ideas to the everyday life of the average person. As an engaged activist, the organic intellectual is linked to movements and to institutions, whereas traditional intellectuals are academic and detached.26 According to West, this term “fuses sacred and secular and combines Christian historical themes of deliverance and salvation with political ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality.”27

The second Westian term is the concept of prophet/prophecy. In addition to using it in the title of two books, Prophesy Deliverance! and Prophetic Fragments, West frequently uses this term or variations of it throughout the corpus of his work such as prophetic Christian gospel, prophetic pragmatism, and prophetic criticism. Expounding on the worldview of the “prophetic Black Church tradition,” he explains that historically this worldview put the problem of evil (i.e., tragedy) as its central focus and

on marshaling and garnering resources from fellowship, community, and personal strength (meditation, prayer) to cope with overwhelmingly limited options dictated by institutional and personal evil. In short, this black Christian perspective indeed affirmed a

25. Cornel West, Prophetic Fragments, xi.
26. Ibid., 271.
27 Ibid., 4.
sustaining eschatology (that is, heaven-orientation) and a moral critique of pervasive white racism—but its emphasis was on survival and struggle in the face of an alternative of absurdity and insanity.\footnote{28}

A third and essential element in West’s philosophical framework is his concept of politics, both unfavorably and as an important power construct for the marginalized and for the organic intellectual/prophetic leader or institution. In his essay “Critical Theory and Critical Faith,” West addresses the political task of the Christian church in addressing the institutional forms of evil promoted for centuries by the U.S., Europe, and Russia. He identifies four different forms of oppression, corresponding social logics, and negative impact on public life. He defines social logics as “structured social practices over time and space which in effect and consequence dehumanize people,” and he accuses Europe, the U.S. and Russia of practicing them. These social logics are exploitation, repression, domination, and subjugation. Exploitation is the social logic of capital accumulation; repression the social logic of state augmentation; domination is the social logic of bureaucratic administration; and subjugation is the social logic of white supremacist, male supremacist, and heterosexual supremacists and practices.\footnote{29} To counter this social logic, West proposes the method of the “first world middle class church resistance.”\footnote{30}

From the experience/perspective of the prophetic Black Church, this first-world response would entail:

1. Self-inventory i.e., a critical history and social situating of self and institution in relation

\footnote{28. Cornel West, 	extit{Prophetic Fragments}, 5.}

\footnote{29. Ibid., 114. Similarly in 	extit{Womanist Ethics and Cultural Productions of Evil}, Townes applies four stereotypes to African-American women to illustrate this, asserting that these religious and theological underpinnings are so deep that we are not conscious of them, but they drive our public policy decisions.}

\footnote{30. This is very similar to what he outlined in the book 	extit{Prophesy Deliverance!} which he expands to include issues of gender and sexual orientation.}
to the operative social logics which shape the tradition and heritage.

2. Preserve and support the norms of individuality within community and democratic participation.

3. Reject social hierarchies that are based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.

4. Embark on a “critical pilgrimage” and bring prophetic judgment. Be in the forefront of the movement against these social logics as motivated by a “deep sense of justice.”

In *Keeping Faith*, 1993, West’s prophetic pragmatism continues to evolve as does in some respects an intellectual biography of his own self-understanding. West poses a series of reflective questions dealing with his self-identity and self-understanding, questions that, he states, were at the core of his “self” and his commitment to what he called a “prophetic vision” and a practice primarily based on a distinctly black tragic sense of life. His point of view sees the tragic and affirms moral agency and action. The latter is informed by a Christian tradition that by faith one can act for the good out of these bleak conditions. He adds that the love ethic of the Christian faith informs him and enables him to live a life of hope and not succumb to pessimism or misanthropy. In light of these reflective questions and self-identity, his prevailing question then is, How does a black philosopher keep faith? What are the sources for “brave thought and courageous action?” West’s response is to “put forward a prophetic criticism for our times.” He defines “Prophetic criticism” as “an intellectual inquiry constitutive of existential democracy—a self-critical and self-corrective enterprise of human ‘sense-making’ for the preserving and

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31. Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 119–123. This method is similar to the five tasks of African-American thought that West had constructed in his earlier work published in *Prophesy Deliverance*, 84.

expanding of human empathy and compassion.” Additionally, his focus on emerging forms of oppositional thought leads him to look for an “articulated assemblage of analytical outlooks.”

As stated earlier, his use of the term prophetic points back to the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, which promote resistance and critiques of injustice and social misery. They help to keep alive collective memories of moral struggle and nonmarket values. They are flawed because they tend toward dogmatic pronouncements to homogenous constituents.

Prophetic pragmatism gives courageous resistance and relentless critique a self-critical character and democratic content; that is, it analyzes the social causes of unnecessary forms of social misery, promotes moral outrage against them, organizes different constituencies to alleviate them, yet does so with openness to its own blindness and shortcomings….prophetic pragmatism is pragmatism at its best because it promotes a critical temper and democratic faith without making criticism a fetish or democracy an idol.

The pillars of prophetic pragmatism are “critical temper and democratic faith and its foes are despair, dogmatism, and oppression.” West reiterates that forms of prophetic pragmatism will vary, contingent upon the social theories and moral potencies of respective communities. In addition, prophetic pragmatism must accentuate the existential, communal, and democratic dimensions. The value of love guides these dimensions, which counters despair, loyalty as a counter to dogmatism, and freedom that resists oppression. (Keeping Faith 140)

West's challenge to this second wave of pragmatism is not to make the similar mistake as the first wave. Thus, pragmatism should operate with a cultural criticism that “keeps track of social misery, solicits and channels moral outrage to alleviate it, and projects a future in which

33. Cornel West, Keeping Faith, xi.
34. Ibid., 104.
35. Ibid., 139.
36. Ibid., 140.
the potentialities of ordinary people flourish and flower.”

At this point, West’s body of documented work has spanned a period of ten years, yet he affirms that he remains convinced by the prophetic Christian tradition. He notes that this tradition is not perfect, but its synoptic vision is relevant and its moral vision and ethical norms are transformative. He adds that the historicist turn in philosophy of religion’s stress on finitude and agency fits well and helps us understand that we are forced to choose transient social practices, contingent cultural descriptions, and revisable scientific theories by which to live. Additionally, West expresses hopefulness that the historicist turn in the philosophy of religion will enrich the prophetic Christian tradition and will enable us to work more diligently for a better world.

West’s Concept of Prophetic Pragmatism

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 1989, West shifts his focus to the broader American philosophical discipline, noting it is caught in an *interregnum*. The discipline is caught between traditional methods and unwillingness to move into the “wilderness of pragmatism.” Consequently, the academic rigor is void of substantive intellectual vigor. This interval, he argues, has contributed to a renewal of intellectual vigor occurring under the banner of pragmatism. It is present in several disciplines: academic philosophy, literary criticism, political theory, and religious thought. He attributed this rebirth to three issues, the first of which is disenchantment with the traditional mode of philosophical inquiry. This disenchantment has led to a preoccupation with the cultural investigation of power. This disenchantment has resulted in a

focus on human history, e.g., all forms of human agency. West concludes that the rise of American pragmatism at this moment in history is no accident. Pragmatism’s themes of shunning epistemology-centered philosophy; accentuating human power, transformation, and social hierarchies; and emphasizing morals and improvement are attractive. Especially, argues West, when one considers the bleakness of today’s culture, people are “looking for norms and values that can make a difference and they yearn for a principled resistance and struggle that can change our desperate plight.” West’s understanding of American pragmatism is similar to his description of African-American critical thought. Common themes include historicism, social norms and values, and institutional influence. West understands American pragmatism to be “a specific historical and cultural product of American civilization, a particular set of social practices that articulate certain American desires, values, and responses, and that are elaborated in institutional apparatuses principally controlled by a significant slice of American middle class.”

West’s fundamental argument is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy results in its conception as a form of cultural criticism. As such, intellectuals put forth the meaning of America in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment. He continues, “The pragmatist’s preoccupation with power, provocation, and personality… signifies an intellectual calling to administer to a confused populace caught in the whirlwinds of societal crisis, the crossfires of

39. Ibid., 4.
40. Ibid., 4–5.
ideological polemics, and the storms of class, racial, and gender conflicts. West adds that this calling requires the American pragmatist to be an organic intellectual, relating ideas to action by means of creating, constituting, or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes. In the search for intellectual and moral solutions, in addition to being an organic intellectual and to being preoccupied with power, provocation, and personality, the pragmatist grapples with the problem of evil and American theodicy. The pragmatists' use of the language of crisis is intentional as is their sense of urgency.

West situates his own interpretation as explicitly political, drawing particularly from Dewey and crediting him as the one responsible for the political engagement into American pragmatism. West describes his methodology as a social history of ideas that focuses on the political and moral aspects of American pragmatism and its influence in shaping social structures, particularly those that are oppressive and exploitative. He defines social history as “the intellectual sphere of history as distinct, unique, and personal sets of cultural practices intimately connected with concomitant developments in larger society and culture.” Emerson is his starting point, and he attempts to show how Emerson has cut across the various disciplines of knowledge as exemplified through the works of Du Bois, as historian; Reinhold Niebuhr, as theologian; C. Wright Mills, as sociologist; and Lionel Trilling, as literary critic.

In addition to his attempt at addressing the crisis of the American Left as he interprets it, West’s goal is to present a social history of ideas that is the “fusion of the intrinsic interest (or

41. Cornel West, Evasion, 5.
42. Ibid., 6.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
hedonistic effect) and the instrumental interest (or political use) of American pragmatism." He calls this fusion prophetic pragmatism. It is a concept that he developed over time, shaped by experience, tradition, and intellectual rigor. He describes it as a “perspective and project that speaks to the major impediments to a wider role for pragmatism in American thought.”

According to West, two books in particular, Prophecy Deliverance! An African-American Revolutionary Christianity (1982) and Prophetic Fragments (1988), reflect his personal self-inventory and identity shaped by aspects of the Black Church tradition, American pragmatism, and Marxist analysis. He situates his intellectual, personal, and activist works in these three traditions and perspectives. Thus, The American Evasion of Philosophy is in response to questions regarding his seemingly contradictory identification with prophetic Christianity and political praxis. Therefore, this book is his attempt to reconcile his philosophic allegiances with his participation in the U.S. democratic socialist movement, in the American academy, and on the margins of the Black Church. A third motivation to produce this book is his critical and unfavorable assessment of the intellectual, political, and cultural life of America. His criticism is that the scholarship and political positions have promoted only one particular viewpoint and have been self-serving, while, in the meantime, social problems have worsened. West’s position is that fundamental social change might occur by an initial step of reexamining American pragmatism and treating it as “a new and novel form of indigenous American oppositional

45. Cornel West, Evasion, 7.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
Naming Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) as the grandfather of pragmatism, West begins with a brief biography of this cultural critic, who focused on current social structures and concerns against human agency or the individual. While critical of the sinister aspect of America, Emerson was hopeful of American exceptionalism, i.e., the individual’s ability to overcome obstacles. West summarizes Emerson’s theodicy as asserting three things: that limitation is the only sin, that it can be overcome, and that the existence of an “overcomable” sin is beautiful and good.\textsuperscript{49} According to West, Emerson’s form of mysticism explains his detachment from heavy investment in effecting social change and his sense of political impotence. Emerson projects onto an inexplicable Power this sense of that power—to whom people have access—as being greater than political power and human capacity.\textsuperscript{50} In summary, West credits Emerson’s evasion of modern philosophy as the vessel out of which flowed American pragmatism. Emerson refused modern philosophy’s quest for certainty and foundations and instead pursued a quest for power and a hope in the expansion of the self.\textsuperscript{51} West writes,

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To evade modern philosophy means to strip the profession of philosophy of its pretense, disclose the affiliations with structures of powers (both rhetorical and political) rooted in the past, and enact intellectual practices, i.e. produce texts of various sorts and styles, that invigorate and unsettle one’s culture and society…. For Emerson this results in neither social revolution nor cultural upheaval but moral transgression based on personal integrity and individual conscience. The aim of Emersonian cultural criticism—and subsequently, most of American pragmatic thought—is to expand powers and proliferate
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\textsuperscript{48} Cornel West, \textit{Evasion}, 8.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 36.
provocations for the moral development of human personalities. 

Additionally, Emerson’s evading philosophy is his means of developing his intellectual self. West’s assessment of Emerson’s politics is that for Emerson, politics is a clash of power and pleasure and the place where moral development of individuals should occur. Emerson “prefigures the major themes (power, provocation, and personality) and crucial motifs (optimism, moralism, individualism)” of American pragmatism.

In addition to Emerson, Dewey, and Marx, social action type pragmatists such as W. E. B. Du Bois have shaped West’s philosophy. West argues that pragmatism needs a political mode of cultural criticism that incorporates various elements of Emerson (and his concerns with power, provocation, and personality), Dewey (and his stress on historical consciousness), and Du Bois (his focus on the plight of the marginalized). West asserts that given the fact that prophetic pragmatism is a product of the American heritage, and has as its concern the “wretched of the earth,” it provides the model for a type of cultural critique that is “Emersonian culture of creative democracy by means of critical intelligence and social action.” An Emersonian culture of creative democracy encourages human participation and enhances human personalities. Its social norm is experimentation and accountability, of which those who suffer have access to decision-making processes. Creative democracy is the deliberation by the people and it holds the professionals accountable. Citizens, by virtue of their participation, mold the civil consciousness. American pragmatism is political motivation and political substance, which for prophetic pragmatism is explicit. Political substance is citizenry in action. Political motivation of inquiry is

52. Cornel West, Evasion, 37.

53. Ibid., 212.
social and communal concerns, where in the acquisition of knowledge, people can converse and work cooperatively, thus “highlighting the requisite values and operations of power requisite in the attainment of the human production of truth and knowledge.”

In this respect, prophetic pragmatism is similar to the Deweyan understanding of “pragmatism as a political form of cultural criticism” and the “Marxist tradition of social analysis,” which West equates to “third-wave romanticism.” Based on Unger’s romanticism, it is the belief that social democracy can and must be better, despite the past effects of the previous historical waves. He explains that Third-Wave Romanticism surfaced in the 1940s and emerged from the disillusionment with Marxist-Leninism and Americanism. Gandhi in India, Maratequi in Peru, Nasser in Egypt, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States, along with Dewey and Antonio Gramsci, are all figures in this era. According to West, Dewey stands as the secular intellectual of twentieth century America, and his interpretation of socialism conceives of an experimentation that “embraces the idea of fundamental economic, political, cultural, and individual transformation in light of Jeffersonian and Emersonian ideals of cultural power, small-scale associations, and individual liberties.”

Human agency, which includes the historical narratives and social practices, is central to prophetic pragmatists. Tragedy, tradition, struggle, power, moral discourse and human agency are central themes in prophetic pragmatism, reasoning that social practices are all we have in human societies and histories. West explains that the prophetic pragmatist takes seriously moral discourse, particularly the ideals of democracy and individuality. The prophetic pragmatist


55. Ibid., 218.
utilizes strategic and tactical modes of thinking and acting that highlight the uses of powers and provocation for the development of human personalities. The prophetic pragmatist critiques and resists subjection to economic exploitation, state repression, and bureaucratic domination. Prophetic pragmatism works to maintain a balance between optimism and pessimism and the complexities of tragedy and revolution, tradition and progress. It requires the pragmatist to present a conception of and give attention to the tragic, which affirms Reinhold Niebuhr’s view of the tragic as the existence of institutional evil in social orders and the promotion of human agency and will. Prophetic pragmatism as a form of tragic thought confronts individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions. As a type of romanticism, experiences of evil are not considered as inevitable or necessary but rather the results of human agency. West adds that the relation of tragedy to revolution is intertwined with that of tradition to progress. Prophetic pragmatism tempers its utopian impulse with a profound sense of the tragic character of life and history; where tragedy becomes an impediment to progress, tradition may become its stimulus. Tradition is inescapable and cannot be expunged. Through the process of socialization, appropriation, acculturation, and construction, tradition is transmitted from the past to the present. Tradition is a problem when it is dominant; however, when it is a part of the human construct, it is dynamic and is a stimulus to human progress. Prophetic pragmatism supports the traditions that are ameliorative.

Human struggle is central in prophetic pragmatism and calls for strategic efforts that oppose status quo and yield social transformations. Since evil is ever-present, these strategies are the means and are never the ends. Prophetic pragmatism takes the best of the past in an attempt

to keep alive the sense of alternative ways of life and of struggle. Thus, the praxis of prophetic pragmatism is tragic action with revolutionary intent and always-visionary outlook.\textsuperscript{57} Prophetic pragmatism reconciles philosophy as a form of cultural criticism, as a historically circumscribed quest for a wisdom that presents new interpretations of the world that are politically relevant and are based on past. It views truth as a species of the good that promotes the flourishing of human progress. In order to motivate efforts to overcome the evil/tragic, prophetic pragmatism, through the forms of critique and praxis, by design highlights the ugly and unpleasant realities for the expressed purpose of being provocative in order to raise doubt, curiosity, outrage, or desperation to overcome them and to attempt to make things better.\textsuperscript{58}

Because prophetic pragmatism is not an oppositional culture, nor a material force for individuality or democracy, it can take place in a variety of traditions. Though it is compatible with religious outlooks, it does not require it. West used the term prophetic because biblical prophets had a sense of urgency and compassion to their critique. He writes, “The mark of the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage—come what may.”\textsuperscript{59} Prophetic pragmatism is not bound to any particular ideology or historical agent. Its ideals of individuality and democracy oppose any power structure that lacks public accountability; the marginalized have prominence, and they are the ones for whom everyone of good will is invited to fight.

West describes himself as having a religious conception and labels himself as a Christian prophetic pragmatist. This self-identity reflects his understanding of his Christian tradition that keeps him anchored. This self-identification is also political in that he sees relevance in the

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58. Ibid., 230.
59. Ibid., 233.
\end{quote}
biblical accounts of the marginalized, he identifies himself as religious in solidarity with the vast majority of others who do so as well, and it gives him a wider access into these life-worlds. He writes, “The prophetic religious person… revels in educating and being educated, and in terms of its political dimension, impels one to be an organic intellectual.” 60 An organic intellectual enjoys intellectual rigor but joins the ideas to praxis, generally through an affiliation with organizations, associations, and/or grass-roots movements, such as religious institutions. West argues that it would be political suicide to sever ties to religious community and would turn the self-pitying and self-deprecating pessimism of secular intellectuals into a self-fulfilling prophecy. West then puts forth a challenge to the religious community. In order to thrive beyond conversation, prophetic pragmatism must be inspirational, which would likely occur through religious practices. He identified the prophetic wing of the Black Church as the probable catalyst for social motion, noting the social movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. as representing the best of the political dimension of prophetic pragmatism. 61

**Summary and Critique**

West states, “The goal of a sophisticated neopragmatism is to think genealogically about specific practices in light of the best available social theories, cultural critiques, and historiographical insights to act politically and to achieve certain moral consequences in light of effective strategies and tactics.” 62 As noted earlier, West’s philosophical inquiry is a social endeavor infused with cultural concerns and political choices of which the participants are not

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61. Ibid., 234.
62. Ibid., 209.
always aware. His development of pragmatism evolved from his notion of African-American thought into a broader usage of pragmatism in political philosophy and public discourses.

I find several aspects of West’s concept particularly perplexing. He gives Emerson a pass as it relates to Emerson’s decision to remain silent on injustices imposed on women, African Americans, and American Indians. West goes so far as to note Emerson’s relative disconnect with the plight of the poor, even those in his own back yard—the Irish in Boston. In *The American Evasion of Pragmatism*, West attempts to explain Emerson’s evolution from viewing the black man as equivalent to an animal to viewing him as an intelligent human being on par with white men, explaining that Emerson used this to study human will and personality and that his narratives examined the development in human history’s imperialistic and European assertion of superiority over all ethnicities and nationalities. West notes that Emerson concluded that while this may be the current view of his contemporaries, by virtue of the cycle of fate, this view and dominance over others would eventually change. Yet, despite acknowledging that Emerson was not necessarily the poster child for social action, West utilizes what he calls the Emerson sensibilities to convey his idea of power, provocateur, and personality as essential components of his prophetic pragmatism. Another point that is bewildering is West’s obvious silence in regards to women. In my assessment, given the fact that West published *The American Evasion* in 1989, he had options. His book was a part of a series of books in “The Wisconsin Project on American Writers.” The book immediately following West’s was written by Susan Willis, entitled, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*. Also by this time, there was an emergence of female scholars. African-American feminist scholar and social activist bell hooks had published several books and numerous articles. As prophetic pragmatist, given the fact that
West is a scholar of philosophy, political science, political philosophy, and history, certainly he was aware of several women whom he could use to illustrate his points regarding his contextual framework for prophetic pragmatism and organic intellectual.

Third, I find it provocative that, in developing his version of African-American thought, West couples African-American religious influence with Marxist social analysis. West’s insertion of Marxist thought is more his point of view than that of the African-American tradition. Yet it is understandable when one considers West’s emphasis on human agency and justice as being important to the development of African-American thought and its history in general. Moreover, there is a historical relationship between socialism and African-American thinkers and leaders such as Ella Baker, A. Philip Randolph, Du Bois, Paul Roberson, and West. There are also historical accounts of the involvement of socialist groups in fighting for the civil rights of African Americans, particularly as it relates to labor. West argues that as theoretical praxis, Marxist social analysis presupposes a sophisticated understanding of the internal dynamics of power relations of a society or civilization and that it is integrally linked to a praxis of faith or political movement.

Finally, though he advocates for human agency, West places the burden of facilitating it, that is, of inspiring citizens to act, on the prophetic pragmatist/organic intellectual. Yet based on his description, these figures are formal leaders who tend to be more remotely involved with the larger masses of people. In the following chapter, I will discuss the distinction and importance of the types of leadership—formal and informal—both of which could fit West’s definition of the organic intellectual. Historically, the former are typically considered inspirational, provocative, and enlightening for certain; yet social change, as I will demonstrate, takes another type of
leadership. It takes leaders who interact with small groups of people on a regular, more personal basis. In this respect, I agree with Rorty, who argued for a post-philosophical culture in which there was a level playing field, where the philosophy of language could be useful in understanding culture and its subcultures and the all-purpose intellectual freely comments on any and everything and uses a multidisciplinary approach to problem solving. Such person, I argue, functions as the *bridge leader*. We recognize them as the seasoned scholar, the community builder and organizer, the deacon, or the church mother.

Prophetic pragmatism, argued West, must accentuate the existential, communal, and democratic dimensions. The value of love guides these dimensions, which counters despair, loyalty as a counter to dogmatism, and freedom that resists oppression. Key characteristics of West’s concept are the role of history and the tragic, the organic intellectual as the prophetic pragmatist, and creative democracy.

Prophetic pragmatism needs a political mode of cultural criticism that incorporates various elements of Emerson (and his concerns with power, provocation and personality), Dewey (and his stress on historical consciousness), and Du Bois (his focus on the plight of the marginalized). West asserts that, given the fact that prophetic pragmatism is a product of the American heritage and has as its concern the “wretched of the earth,” it provides the model for a type of cultural critique that is “Emersonian culture of creative democracy by means of critical intelligence and social action.” Creative democracy is the deliberation by the people and it holds the professionals accountable. Citizens, by virtue of their participation, mold the civil consciousness. Prophetic pragmatism is explicitly political motivation and political substance.

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63. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith*, 140.
Political substance is citizenry in action. Political motivation of inquiry is social and communal concerns, where in the acquisition of knowledge people can converse and work cooperatively, thus “highlighting the requisite values and operations of power requisite in the attainment of the human production of truth and knowledge.”

Prophetic pragmatism works to maintain a balance between optimisms and pessimism and the complexities of tragedy and revolution, tradition, and progress. Prophetic pragmatism takes the best of the past in an attempt to keep alive the sense of alternative ways of life and of struggle. Thus, the praxis of prophetic pragmatism is tragic action with revolutionary intent and always-visionary outlook. West sees the tragic as a positive element in history because transformation comes out of the tragic. Transformation is liberation in that it is the move to a betterment of humanity, which is a quest for freedom. Freedom consists of two concepts. Social freedom is the result of actualization of individuality and democracy. Existential freedom is the “divine gift of grace”; it sustains people, delivers them from bondage, and empowers people to fight for social freedom.

The prophetic pragmatist utilizes strategic and tactical modes of thinking and acting that highlight the uses of powers and provocation for the development of human personalities. The prophetic pragmatist critiques and resists subjection to economic exploitation, state repression, and bureaucratic domination. Organic intellectuals are leaders and thinkers who combine theory and action, and relate popular culture and religion to structural social change. The African-American religious leaders who have historically assumed this role in contemporary culture

65. Ibid., 229.
66. Ibid., 1.
should do so as well because they have influence on the congregation, they have immense freedom, and they lead the one institution in the black community that is not accountable to the status quo.

Anderson, who studied under West, considers his prophetic pragmatism as an example of public theology. West’s African-American thought and prophetic pragmatism also embody Anderson’s six characteristics of pragmatic theology. West’s corpus of work is predicated upon conception of the social character of inquiry that includes religious inquiry. He argues for public debates that are framed in public terms and in terms of common good. His concept, particularly as exemplified in the organic intellectual, conveys an aspect of faith in which value and being are inseparable and has respect for absolute trust and loyalty. Though West deals with the tragic and suffering, he understands faith and hope as genuine possibilities against the powers that threaten democratic cultural norms and he attributes the Black Church as the source of leadership. West’s pragmatism embraces theology and by definition it is concerned with democracy, cultural fulfillment, and transcendence. It is concerned with the free and open exchange about equitable distribution of goods. Finally, West argues for the increase of human capacities to create morally livable and fulfilling communities, the enhancement of the free play of interpretation, and a social order that envisions and actualizes utopian and democratic expectations.

My position is that academic theology and religious institutions have an important role in analyzing culture and in public discourse, such as in helping to shape public policy. As demonstrated by Stout, Anderson, and West, the application of pragmatic tradition to public discourse is inclusive and lends itself to a multi-faceted, multidisciplinary approach to cultural analysis and problem solving. It argues for the value of the role of the practitioner—the academic
and the community leader—in public discourse, regardless of their religious ideologies.

In the next chapter, I will use West’s prophetic pragmatism as the framework and examine the historical events of the civil rights efforts in the U.S. I pay particular attention to the role of the prophetic Black Church tradition, to the leadership within the African-American community, and the leadership during the Civil Rights Era. These three provide sites of investigation as to the ways in which pragmatism as defined here, i.e., the notions of the prophetic, the prophetic pragmatist/organic intellectual, creative democracy, and cultural critique, significantly affected the quest for equality and justice in these communities. The question posed is whether the African-American worldview and historical experiences as presented here satisfy the criteria for the pragmatic tradition and in particular a public theology as described by Anderson and West.
CHAPTER FIVE
CIVIL RIGHTS ERA AND THE BLACK CHURCH
AS SITES FOR DEMONSTRATION OF
PROPHETIC CHRISTIAN PRAGMATISM

African-American thought, by its nature, its inception, and its expressed work, is political. For West, the application of prophetic Christian thought as a source for African-American thought, is twofold. First, African-American Christian thought confronts candidly the tragic character and hope for triumph of human history. It does so in such a way so as not to cause the participant to become overwhelmed by what is at stake, thereby allowing a serious, anxiety-laden pursuit to challenge political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation of actual human beings. Second, prophetic African-American Christian thought elevates the notion of struggle to the highest priority. “African-American Christian thought imbues African-American thinking with sobriety of tragedy, the struggle for freedom, and the spirit of hope.”

African-American thought and American pragmatism are compatible in that pragmatism conceives of knowledge as intersubjective and communal. It is subject to public scrutiny. Inquiry is a process of dialogue and social practice is an important component. Experience and history are important as pragmatism’s “primary aim is to discern, delegate, and defend particular norms through highlighting desirable possibilities, present in the practices of a specific community or society.”

The prophetic pragmatist’s use of strategic and tactical modes of thinking and acting is critical of and resists subjection to economic exploitation, state repression, and bureaucratic


2. Ibid., 22.
domination. The prophetic pragmatist is an organic intellectual who must be inspirational and thus, that person is likely to occur through religious practices. As noted earlier, West identified the prophetic wing of the Black Church as the probable inspirational catalyst for social motion, noting the historical evidence of social movements in which the Black Church, whose congregants were active in organizations such as NAACP and social clubs, and cultivated leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

In light of the above and in accordance with West’s notion of the centrality of historicism in African-American critical thought, in this chapter I will examine the Civil Rights Era as the historical efforts of organizations and individuals, the role of the Black Church, and the ideologies that were critical in achieving great milestones in the area of human rights. I will argue that inherent in the Civil Rights Era—its leadership, its ideology, and its history—is the embodiment of the basic tenets of prophetic pragmatism as described by West and public theology as understood by Anderson. Moreover, the collaborative work between secular and religious individuals and groups, by example, provide a counter-response to Rorty’s position that religion is incommensurable with pragmatism and inappropriate in public discourse and that theists make better citizens. As part of this assessment, I will include the contribution of women, particularly in their capacity as leaders and as organic intellectuals. Their understanding of their Christian faith as social witnesses informed their religious ideology and worldview and compelled others to act for the well-being of others.

3. In Prophetic Fragments, West writes that, “historicism should be understood as merely claiming that background prejudices, presuppositions, and prejudgments are requisite for any metaphysical or ontological reflections on the way the world is.” (267).
Historical Background

African-American history is an integral part of the history of the United States of America in that the formation of the African-American identity and culture had a significant impact on U.S. identity and culture and vice versa. One example of this interrelatedness is the fight for and achievement of civil rights as pursued by and on behalf of African Americans. Often referred to as the Civil Rights Movement, it is a model for the pursuit and advocacy of human rights here in the U.S. and around the world. Typically, the Civil Rights Movement is treated as a particular event that occurred over a span of twenty years (1950–1970). Yet the Civil Rights Movement is one of a series of events that occurred over a much longer period of time, which we will call the “Civil Rights Era.” The Civil Rights Movement as a significant transformative event was the culmination of a series of complex historical moments that involved sacrificial and tireless efforts of dedicated men and women who shared a common commitment to securing freedom and rights for blacks and others. For the purpose of this analysis, I will use the event of the Dred Scott Decision, March 6, 1857, to mark the beginning of this particular era of the history of civil rights efforts in the United States, and I will use the event of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to mark the end. The period in the Civil Rights Era that spans a little more than one hundred years is marked by a series of legislative actions and socio-economic gains that affect African-Americans in particular.

4. The history of the fight for women’s rights, which was also impactful, parallels and often intersects the civil rights efforts with respect to African Americans.

5. The fight for freedom and civil rights of African Americans spans over 300 years. Regarding the struggle for equal rights, some would argue that this fight continues and not just for African Americans, but for several groups such as Latinos, women, and people who identify as LGBT. For the purposes of this discussion, we will examine the African-American struggle for civil rights during a particular period of American history.
The *Dred Scott* decision ruled that blacks were not U.S. citizens, and that, regardless of his status, a black man had no right to sue. A major event during this period was the American Civil War that began in 1861 and ended in 1865. Several actions that were the result of the Civil War included proclamations and changes to the Bill of Rights. The Emancipation Proclamation became effective on January 1, 1863, and decreed freedom for enslaved blacks detained in the Confederate states. The Thirteenth Amendment (January 31, 1865) abolished slavery. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 guaranteed citizenship rights. The Fourteenth Amendment (July 6, 1868) overruled *Dred Scott* and established the right to equal protection under the law. The Fifteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1870, assured blacks the right to vote. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 gave blacks equal rights in public places. Two important civil rights groups organized—the NAACP formed in 1909 and the Urban League in 1910—both with the focus of ensuring equal rights and access for African Americans. Other noteworthy historical events included President Truman’s commissioning the formation of a Committee on Civil Rights in 1946, his signing of the 1948 Executive Order to eliminate segregation in the armed forces, and, three years later, his naming of a Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity to monitor compliance.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s marks the end as it relates to this particular era in the history of civil rights in the United States. Notable historical events of this movement include the landmark case successfully argued by the NAACP, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954 and 1955), and the Montgomery Bus Boycott which lasted for one year (1955-__).

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6. Several issues sparked the Civil War. The right to self-government resulted in eleven slave-holding states attempting to secede from the United States and form the Confederacy. This conflict was further agitated by the Union’s procurement of federal sites and properties such as Fort Sumter. Another central issue was the Lincoln-Douglass debate regarding the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Frederick Douglass’s autobiographical entry entitled “Succession and War” in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, pp. 194-204 records the Civil War as providing the opportunity for blacks to secure their freedom by enlisting black men, both free and enslaved.
1956) and was successful. Several milestones occurred in 1957: desegregation at Central High
School, located in Little Rock, Arkansas; the passage by Congress of the Civil Rights Act
prohibiting efforts designed to prevent blacks from voting; and the formation of the Southern
Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). In 1963, over 250,000 people participated in the March
on Washington civil rights demonstration. In 1964, Rev. Dr. King led thousands on the five-day
march from Selma to Montgomery. The Civil Rights Act, passed in 1964, addressed public
accommodations and fair employment, and the 1968 Civil Rights Acts prohibited discrimination
in housing (sale and rental).

Despite the risk and subsequent realities of severe and deadly consequences, individuals
and groups were persistent and worked tirelessly. They sacrificed themselves and their resources
and strategically seized opportunities in order to push the agenda for freedom, equal rights, and
access as U.S. citizens. Efforts also included using the court system, though at times not
successfully and in some cases with detrimental effects. For example, the *Plessey v. Ferguson*
decision (1896) upheld the separate but equal practices in public facilities and sanctioned the Jim
Crow segregation laws. This law remained unchanged for fifty-eight years until the 1954 *Brown
v. Topeka Board of Education* decision.

Over the course of the Civil Rights Era and during the Civil Rights Movement, several
key figures and groups of people held different ideological points of view regarding the success
and survival of the African American. One example of different approaches is the promotion of

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7. The persistent effort to prevent black people from voting included imposing bogus rules such as the poll
taxes; literacy tests, and fabricated convictions (laws were written with the expressed purpose of convicting Blacks
for frivolous misdemeanors thereby thwarting their right to vote), challenging existing laws which were to the
detriment of blacks proved to be fierce and deadly.
the Talented Tenth concept. Black leaders and educators such as W. E. B. Du Bois\textsuperscript{8} and Anna Julia Cooper supported this concept. The belief was that by providing a select group of African Americans the opportunity to attend college, this would in turn provide opportunities for the entire black community. In contrast to this position, Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, and others contended that economic empowerment and self-sufficiency were the pathway to independence, achieved through vocational training and acquiring a trade skill.

Regardless of diverse views, as noted by Lerone Bennett, Jr., every level of black society was involved in the struggle for freedom; men, women, educated and uneducated were all pressed into service in that struggle. Throughout these ordeals, notes Bennett, the seeds of three institutions—the Black Church, the black lodge, and the black college—continued to grow. Out of their efforts, the black education movement founded public schools and black colleges. To protest disparities and atrocities, African-American leaders stimulated black scholarship and economic development and formed groups such as National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Urban League, Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).\textsuperscript{9} The Black Church was critical and integral in the fight for survival, the fair and respectful treatment of blacks as human beings, and the procurement of equal rights for blacks as U.S. Citizens. The larger African-American community has historically responded to and treated the Black Church as central and sacred, regardless of whether or not one regularly attended a church.

\textsuperscript{8} Du Bois changed his position and eventually re-framed it to include labor workers and called it the “New Tenth.”

The Role of the Black Church

West contends that pragmatism, despite its shortcomings, provides a context for African-American thought. He defines African-American critical thought as

an interpretation of Afro-American history, especially its cultural heritage and political struggles, which provide norms for responding to challenges presently confronting black Americans. The particular historical phenomena interpreted and justified by it consist in religious doctrines, political ideologies, artistic expressions, and unconscious modes of behavior. 10

In order to contextualize the role of the Black Church, it is important to present a brief synopsis of the development of the African-American community in terms of its leadership and its ideology or worldview. It is especially important to note that, notwithstanding its impact, this formation began long before the institution of slavery in the United States. As stated earlier, per Cornel West, African-American philosophy is informed by the African-American experience, particularly the Black Church, through the application of prophetic Christian thought. African-American Christian thought confronts candidly the tragic character and hope for triumph of human history. It entails compelling the participant to examine what is at stake, thereby allowing a serious, anxiety-laden pursuit to challenge political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation of actual human beings. As the prophetic voice, African-American Christian thought elevates the notion of struggle to the highest priority and imbues African-American thinking with the sobriety of tragedy, the struggle for freedom, and the spirit of hope. In West’s system, the role of organic intellectuals are as leaders and thinkers who are tied to a particular cultural group primarily by means of institutional affiliations.

In the Black Church tradition, these key functions are present as are the central themes of

10. Cornel West, Prophesy Deliverance, 22.
prophetic pragmatism: tragedy, tradition, struggle, power, human agency, and love. Theory and action are combined with relevant popular culture and religion to structure social change. Religious leaders assumed this role because they had influence on the congregation and immense freedom. In the prophetic Black Church tradition, historically the problem of evil (i.e., tragedy) is its central focus and the prophetic pragmatist/organic intellectual garners resources and personal strength to cope with overwhelmingly limited options dictated by institutional and personal evil. As West notes, this black Christian perspective affirmed a sustaining eschatology and a moral critique of pervasive white racism, but its emphasis was on survival and struggle in the face of an alternative of absurdity and insanity. And, as the prophetic voice, the organic intellectual or prophetic leader understands the relationship of politics as being an important power construct. The political task of the Christian church is to address the institutional forms of evil: exploitation, repression, domination, and subjugation.

As prophetic pragmatists and organic intellectuals, leaders of the Black Church were the prophetic voice for black people, and their tradition was their well from which to draw spiritually, socially, educationally, and economically. The Black Church traditionally played a number of roles in the life of the African-American community and was the most predominant institutional force against injustice. This was due primarily to the fact that, for the most part, it was exclusively owned and operated by African Americans. The Black Church taught the economics of accumulating money and reinvesting into the community. It provided the stories that enabled people to withstand the destructive attacks and preserved the history of the African-American people. Through these narratives, religious practices, and teachings, the Black Church was instrumental in not only shaping the identity and the culture but also ensuring the
sustainability and thriving of the African-American community.

In his book *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, Victor Anderson discusses a philosophy of racial consciousness that he calls *ontological blackness*. Although he proposes a new philosophical view that would be useful for post-blackness, his definition of ontological blackness is useful in this circumstance because it helps to explain the historical role of the Black Church in the development and articulation of the African-American experience, identity, and worldview. Anderson asserts that ontological blackness is governed by dialectical matrices, i.e., historical experiences in America that existentially structure African Americans’ self-conscious perceptions of black life.11 He adds that ontological blackness and religion are interconnected:

> Ontological blackness signifies the totality of black existence, a binding together of black life and experience. In its root, *religio*, religion denotes tying together, fastening behind, and binding together. Ontological blackness renders black life and experience a totality. It is a totality that takes narrative formations that emphasize the heroic capacities of African Americans to transcend individuality and personality in the name of black communal survival. In these survivalist narratives, the black community is often represented as surviving under unprecedented struggle for the development of a revolutionary consciousness that is itself representational of authentic black consciousness.12

Anderson explains that cultural fulfillment is the “integration of human social activity with the satisfaction of categorical and reflexive human goods.”13 Basic categorical needs are those things necessary to live and sustain life, such as safety, work, leisure, and knowledge. Social activities are those “communicative forms of action required for assuring subjective meaning and alleviating alienation, such as friendship, peace of mind, integrity of conscience,


12. Ibid., 14–15.

13. Ibid., 27.
and spiritual meaning.”¹⁴ The Black Church operates in this respect, i.e., as the mediating structure helping people to achieve cultural fulfillment. The church, through its proclamations and practices, affirms the love of God for God’s people and proclaims the power of God and the victory of Jesus over every oppressive circumstance.

Although the Black Church formation began long before this era of civil rights, the formation of the independent Black Church represents the second tier of the development of African-American identity and culture.¹⁵ The Black Church, states Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, functioned as a mediating structure, as the public space for both secular and religious groups. She adopts Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus’ use of the term *mediating structure*—that which constitutes the part of the public realm that stands between the private citizen and the public institutions—arguing that the Black Church stood between the individual

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¹⁵ Lerone Bennett Jr., *Before the Mayflower*, 80. Bennett chronicles the formation of the African-American community in the context of U.S. history. By 1780, four types of black intellectuals had formed in the black community. This group of men and women, working alongside thousands of unsung laborers and protestors, is credited for laying the cornerstones and creating the first tiers of the emerging structure of Black America. The first type of intellectuals pandered to the appeal of white America and produced intellectual material that buttressed their worldview. The second type used artistic expression and the authority of their work to challenge the system’s premises. The third category used anonymity and fictitious characters such as Othello to challenge, directly and militantly, the intellectual and cultural premises of the white dispensation. The fourth category of black intellectuals, such as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, spoke in muted tones but created influential and effective organizations such as the AME Church and the Masonic Lodge. Bennett also identifies four tiers that contributed to the formation of the African-American structure and its identity. The first tier was the founding of the Free African Society by eight African-American men on April 12, 1788, one year before George Washington was elected as the country’s first President. African-American Methodists (Absalom Jones and Richard Allen) helped to form this society, as did a few Quakers. It was, says Bennett, “a mutual aid society and an embryonic political cell.” Similar organizations formed and created a network to communicate and share ideas and programs. The second tier, the founding of the independent Black Church movement, started in the late 1770s and 1780s. A third tier, social and fraternal organizations, also formed out of the churches. From the efforts of these three tiers, a fourth tier of the African-American structure emerged, which is the movement for equal rights and equal education. Within this fourth tier, different dimensions were emphasized: founding of schools and businesses, organizing the community’s social capital, and fighting against discrimination and segregation.
black person and the state with its racially alienating institutions. A mediating structure was also formed during the time of slavery as the Invisible Church, and was the backbone of the newly forming African/African-American community. The Invisible Church provided the venue for devising freedom uprising plans and was the means through which people were made aware of freedom trains. During Reconstruction, the Black Church provided self-help and identity formation, opportunities for worship and social interactions, and leadership development. Traditionally, the Black Church has been the spiritual center as well as the social, cultural, political, educational, and economic center for the African-American community.

It is a widely accepted belief that organized civil rights efforts were born out of the Black Church. Prior to the Civil Rights Era, during the era and particularly in the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Church played a central role in social change. It was the place where people deliberated and developed a common agenda. It provided the space for meetings and political rallies. Thus, it “functioned as a discursive, critical arena—a public sphere in which values and issues were aired, debated, and disseminated throughout the larger black community.” Higginbotham asserts that the Black Church transcends polarity because the line between the secular and sacred are blurred, as are the eschatological and political, the private and the public. It is a complex and dynamic body having multiple discourses articulated within and between men and women. Examples include dual membership and active involvement by church people in secular social clubs, fraternal organizations, and unions.

Similarly, in his book *Exodus!*, Glaude examines the public role of religion and its


17. Ibid., 7.
relationship to race and nation in the early nineteenth century. He examines closely the operations of the National Negro Convention movement during the period between 1830 and 1843. The National Negro Convention convened a series of national meetings, which continued until 1861. These public forums were open to all African Americans who wished to engage in civil debate about their community.\textsuperscript{18} Glaude states that in the early nineteenth century, the Black Church provided \textit{vocabularies of agency}, which are the tools necessary to make choices for self and for others, socially and politically. He reinforced the widely accepted view of the historical role of the Black Church as addressing almost every need of the black community: schools, training (personal and professional), food, social, identity, and so forth. Glaude reiterates the respect given to the Black Church by even those who did not “go to church.” Everyone looked to the church as the guidepost for cultural identity and a belief system. The church protected the people and mediated on their behalf with racist institutions and the nation. Following Higginbotham’s analysis and using the term as understood by Dewey, Glaude calls the black religious institutions \textit{organized publics}.\textsuperscript{19} He writes, “Black religious institutions were, to a large extent, the consequences of the efforts of members of the community to address their common ills. They resulted from the organization of the publics for the protection of the interests shared by their members.”\textsuperscript{20}

\underline{Black Theology Defined}

Anderson writes, “the pragmatic question is whether the internal languages of theology

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  \item \textsuperscript{18} Eddie S. Glaude Jr., \textit{Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 22.
\end{itemize}
(redemption, creation, sin, grace, reconciliation, and the like) are capable of disclosing and communicating genuine public meanings beyond the narrow boundaries of one’s own religious community, whether they can embrace the concerns and hopes of the public at large without also rendering the public theologian religiously insignificant.”

Despite ideological differences within the African-American culture, the Black Church was central in the pursuit of freedom and equal rights and was very prominent throughout the Civil Rights Era and most certainly during the Civil Rights Movement. As a mediating structure, the Church’s perpetual and persistent efforts to promote self-reliance, identity, and dignity contributed to the individual successes and overall gains of the African-American community. The religious understanding of the African-American Church through its practices and teachings shaped the worldview and self-understanding of the African American and provided the essential resources for survival and achievement of the people and the individual. The articulation of this integration of the ideologies, efforts, and experiences is called Black Theology. Anderson writes,

When theology is a methodological function of the Christian church its task is to integrate internally the variety of religious beliefs and practices held and carried out by its members. Theology reflexively integrates the differences of its members’ beliefs under governing categories, which isolate object(s) of ultimate concern, devotion, and loyalty. They give meaning to members’ individual practices in light of communal beliefs and liturgical practices. Theology as a vocation serves a particular religious community. When it is successful, it reassures the community’s self-understanding as a religious community.

Black Theology is an ideology expressed through the institution of the Black Church, through movements such as civil rights, through its constituents and leaders, and through its representative scholars.


22. Ibid., 29.
Black Theology as a Source of Identity, Worldview, and Action

In *Exodus!*, Glaude explores the way the Exodus story was used by African-Americans as a model for resistance, particularly its relevance as a metaphorical framework for freedom and nation language. His argument is that the black nation identity emerged out of this black religious life, Christianity in particular. Glaude defines *nation* as a cultural artifact in that “it bears the marks of a cultural identity shared and constituted in a space made separate … by the actions of others. It is not so much a political ideology … as it is a set of experiences and a moral outlook that aroused deep attachments.”\(^\text{23}\) Nation language was the African American’s refusal to continue to accept the conditions of living in a “violently racist nation.”\(^\text{24}\) Black activists appropriated the Exodus story, argues Glaude, to develop a vocabulary to condemn the treatment and to talk about emancipation. He identifies three phases of classical Black Nationalism, the earliest occurring at the end of the eighteenth century and then phasing out around the end of the twentieth century. He uses Richard Rorty’s concept of *we-ness* to describe the particular type of racial solidarity that informed black politics of the early nineteenth century.

Similarly, as organic intellectuals and as the prophetic voice of the Black Church, African-American theologians and clergy were pressed to show the relevance of Christianity to the current state of affairs during the 1960s. According to James Cone, Black Theology was the black clergy’s effort to search for a theological basis upon which to stand.\(^\text{25}\) The formal


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 9.

development of this new tradition is an example of Rorty’s assessment of the conflict between
the pragmatist and the intuitive realist regarding philosophical starting points for new intellectual
traditions and the process for isolating truths as they relate to cultural traditions. The pragmatist,
argues Rorty, does not purport to preserve every intellectual tradition nor think that there is a
single text against which all other cultures and vocabularies can be measured against. However,
in the process of these cultures and vocabularies “playing off against each other”, new and better
ways of talking and acting emerge, the result of which is greater clarity.

The term Black Theology was coined in response to the Black Power Movement in an
effort to define African-American thought in the context of the Black Church tradition and its
understanding of black consciousness. African-American scholars attribute much of Black
Theology’s formal development as an intellectual construct to the National Conference of Black
Churchmen (NCBC) and scholars such as Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone. The term was
used in a published work for the first time in Cone’s book, Black Theology, Black Power. Not
only did these developments spark discussion, the conversation eventually expanded to include
the black female perspective and the perspective of African-American gay and lesbian scholars.

As an academic discipline, Black Theology began its formal development during this
period as well. Faced with the need to explain black existence (ontology) and relation to God,
black scholars and clergy determined that Western theological discourse was inadequate. They
argued that Western theology did not address the question of God in the black experience, which
was arguably different from that of white American and European theologians’ experiences.

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Some would argue that Black Theology in America has existed since its inception as an oral tradition during the
formative evolution of Africans into an African-American identity.
African-American scholars argued that this uniqueness is due primarily to their different histories in America and their social, economic, and political influences and treatments. Unfortunately, the seminary curricula did not deal with black people’s search for theological meaning in their fight for justice and equality. Thus, there was a need to construct a public theology that would speak to the unique black experience, especially as the events of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement unfolded.

In the 1960s, when African-American scholars gathered to construct this theology as a discipline, because of the absence of African-American theological scholarship they had to use Western sources. These theologians used material from representative thinkers such as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich in their discussions on Black Theology, attempting to answer the question, “What does it mean to be black and Christian?” Though they used the scholarship of Western thought in the seminal stages, eventually there was a shift to using the material comparatively to illustrate the differences between Western theology and Black Theology. These African-American scholars successfully articulated Black Theology as an intellectual discourse. Though they, out of necessity as well as shared ideology, drew from non-black sources, they also reacted to and drew from African-American sources such as an important and controversial work by Joseph Washington entitled *Black Religion* (1964), and early works such as *The Negro’s God*, written by Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph Williams Nicholson (1933). Their central argument is that there is a particular type of theology distinct in many respects from Western Theology that is unique to the African-American culture, a theology that is concerned for the health and well-being of the entire community and addresses the social issue of struggle and God’s involvement on behalf of humanity and against injustices.
James Cone defines Black Theology as “a theology arising from an identification with the oppressed black community [which] seeks to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of the liberation of that community.”\textsuperscript{27} He called it a survival theology because it seeks to provide the theological dimensions of the struggle for black identity.\textsuperscript{28} The search for black identity is the search for God, who is revealed in the black struggle for freedom. In this search for new ways of talking about God, there is the conviction that “the transcendent God who became immanent in Israelite history and incarnate in the man Jesus is also involved in black history.”\textsuperscript{29} In their introduction of the two-volume documentary on Black Theology, Wilmore and Cone described Black Theology as a “hardheaded, practical, and passionate reading of the most meaningful signs of times in the Western community as well as the Black. It is an elucidation of what we have understood God to be doing, particularly in the history of our struggle against racism.”\textsuperscript{30}

As in Western theology, in Black Theology, God is the ultimate concern. However, as Cone points out, the two theologies have different points of departure. While Western thinkers were debating the existence of God, African-American thinkers were concerned with the presence of God in their situations. There was not a question as to whether or not God existed; the average black person was concerned with God acting on his behalf against the injustices he was experiencing on a daily basis, from slavery up to the present time. The African-American scholars argued that in Black Theology, black people looked to God to deliver them out of

\textsuperscript{27} James Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, 6.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 13–14.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

bondage, persecution, and oppressive conditions. The emphasis was and continues to be on God’s involvement in history, past, present, and future (both the immediate future and eternity). Black Theology is an expression of the expectation and hope that God will act against the sins of injustices experienced historically and daily. Black Theology is hope in God as a deliverer who, because of the saving work of Christ, has promised deliverance from oppressive conditions.

In his book *We Have Been Believers*, James Evans notes that Black Theology is the continuation of the distinct way that people of African descent have traditionally conceptualized and spoken of their ultimate concern. He adds that Black Theology is the passion and expressiveness of African-American Christianity and is the formal, self-conscious, systematic attempt to interpret the faith of the Black Church. As a formal discipline, asserts Evans, it is neither linear nor dependent upon Western philosophical systems. It is passionate and incisive and interprets the African-American’s experience with the Gospel.\(^{31}\) Evans asserts that the African-American theologian has a threefold task: first, to clarify the contexts in which African-American Christian faith is affirmed; second, to articulate, interpret, and assess the doctrinal affirmations of African-American faith for the contemporary African-American community of faith; third, to examine the moral implications of the faith for Christian witness in the world.\(^{32}\) African-American women’s efforts in the Civil Rights Era exemplify this understanding of social witness, which I will address in further detail in Chapter Six.

**Summary**

Prophetic pragmatism is exemplified by the leadership and activism involved in the

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 3-8.
various movements and events of the Civil Rights Era. Prophetic pragmatists subscribed to the notion that action must follow thought, that as cultural critics leaders are charged with making the public aware of the tragic and through pedagogy teach the basic skills and essential tools that will empower and raise consciousness, thereby changing behavior (habit) and inspiring people to seek a collective well-being. The Era’s leaders through organizations, groups and institutions mediated on behalf of the greater good. They effectively analyzed culture and enlightened others such that they were compelled to get involved. Moreover, the various events within the Era demonstrate how religion and secularism can be integral to facilitating civic engagement in order to achieve human rights for everyone. As stated earlier, Dewey argued that change must occur indirectly by intelligent selective modification of the conditions that engage attention and influence desires. Change occurs when the objective arrangements and institutions change. Civil Rights efforts, though long and arduous, were successful because of change agents who may not have been familiar with Dewey yet understood this same theory of change, in some cases long before John Dewey’s. An example of these changes was the effort over centuries to amend successfully the Bill of Rights to ensure equal rights for African Americans as full human beings and citizens of the United States.

Pragmatism defined at its most basic level is the assertion that action must precede thought, and it must do so because the thought—the critical analysis or adoption of an idea—is so compelling that one must act. The Black Church since its inception created the seedbed for economic and social development and empowerment. Activism and organization was born out of this Black Church as the institutional structure and the interpreter of black identity. Social organizations were born out of the Black Church and extended their missions to the larger
society. Civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, SNCC, and SCLC shared resources and leadership to strategize and mobilize. These civil rights organizations embraced Gandhi’s secularist interpretation of his Hindu tradition and the promotion of nonviolence as the prescribed method of resistance and social change. They trained students in the nonviolence approach in order to support voting rights initiatives such as Freedom Summer and to support sit-ins and marches. Eventually these external efforts captured the national media, whose broadcasts entered the living rooms of the nation, thereby expanding the number of people involved in the 1960 civil rights movement. These organizations received assistance from and formed alliances with individuals and organizations whose religious ideologies and political ideologies in many respects were very different. Women suffragists, Quakers, the Communist Party, labor movements, professional organizations, and members of the Jewish and Muslim community shared a common vision.
CHAPTER SIX
WITNESSING AND TESTIFYING AS PROPHETIC CHRISTIAN PRAGMATIC PRACTICES OF BLACK WOMEN

In West’s published works, he does not incorporate the scholarship from women nor include in his discussions the role of women as leaders and their contribution in the development of an African-American worldview and identity. For example, West mentions Du Bois but is silent about Anna Julia Cooper’s contributions as a contemporary and colleague of Du Bois. She worked alongside Du Bois in the construction of the concept, for example, of the Talented Tenth. Ida B. Wells, a journalist and publisher, investigated and reported at great personal risk the numerous lYNCHes of African Americans. Cooper and Wells helped to create educational, organizational, and communication structures that served to further the agenda of the advancement of the African American and protest against the atrocities experienced by African Americans. Rev. Dr. King was effective in many respects due to the “on the ground” work and organizational work completed by women such as Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Fannie Lu Hamer. African-American women also made great personal and physical sacrifices and endured physical violence, public humiliation, and sometimes death in the fight for freedom and equality.¹

During the time that West had published a number of books, his contemporaries included

¹. This includes, for example the sacrifice of becoming widows of slain leaders. I respectfully acknowledge the sacrifices of Coretta Scott King (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), Betty Shabazz (Malcolm X), and Myrlie Evers (Medgar Evers), each of whom continued her husband’s work to achieve civil rights. Moreover, they did so as single mothers who also had to comfort their own children as they grieved over the violent deaths of their fathers. In his book The Cross and The Lynching Tree, James Cone’s chapter entitled “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” deals with the involvement of African-American women in protest against and as victims of lynching. He also highlights the work of Ida B. Wells and the impact that her reporting had on exposing the injustice and compelling others to act, as did the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), who made this their number one priority.
female scholars in a variety of disciplines—the arts, philosophy, theology, ethics, and sociology, to name a few. Three of his contemporaries, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde, as cultural critics, were controversial and provocative, and shaped the discourse—academic and the larger public—on issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Alice Walker introduced the term and concept *womanist* in the 1980s. This sparked additional research and discourse about African-American women in general, the impact of race, class, and gender, the African-American woman’s historical role in the U.S., the African Diaspora, and the relationship of women to Black Theology and feminist thought. Since the term’s inception, innumerable African-American women have identified as womanist scholars, and they have penned and published a significant amount of books and articles on womanist thought. Also in the 1970s–1980s, Audre Lorde, an African-American lesbian, as poet and activist, addressed issues of race and homosexuality and by the late 1980s, bell hooks had published several books in which she examined the issues of race, gender, and social movements.

To his credit, in later years West collaborated with the bell hooks and included scholarship by African-American females in several anthologies that he edited. Still, his inclusion of African-American women, as it relates to his treatment of key and pivotal thinkers in the shaping of African-American ideology, its historical overview, and the development of his concept of pragmatism, is glaringly non-existent. This section highlights African-American female scholars and African-American women leaders as prophetic pragmatists and organic intellectuals.

**The African-American Women’s Involvement in Social Movements**

The increased involvement and inclusion of women as scholars has enhanced several
disciplines, such as science, theology, sociology, education, and history. Women's published works have expanded the quality and depth of resources in several academic fields as well. Not only do they as individuals and by virtue of their experiences as women bring a unique perspective, they have also added to the body of information about the contributions of women throughout history, in every field, and all over the world. This is true regardless of their national origin and ethnicity. African-American feminists and womanist scholars have published an impressive body of work. Consequently, because of their rigorous scholarship on a variety of subjects, we also have documented accounts of the involvement of women in history that help us to understand particularly the work and perspective of African-American women.

Unfortunately, very few African-American female scholars have self-identified as American pragmatists. Pragmatism as a method of inquiry is multidisciplinary and lack of women in the field reinforces Anderson’s position that there is a need for academic theologians to reflect upon and articulate their relationship to other disciplines. For the purposes of this research I utilized scholarship from the following intellectuals: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Kelly Brown-Douglas, Katie Cannon, M. Shawn Copeland, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Jacqueline Grant, Melissa Harris-Perry, Joy James, Marcia Riggs, Belinda Robnett, Rosetta Ross, Emilie Townes, Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, and Angela Davis. They are clergy, activists, administrators, theologians, philosophers, historians, educators, ethicists, political scientists, sociologists, and sociologists of religion whose scholarship has provided a wealth of information and methodologies for examining culture and examining it from a unique perspective.

In explaining the relationship between feminist thought and womanist thought, a common definition of womanist is the abbreviated definition from Alice Walker’s *In Search of our
Mother’s Garden, that is, “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” In her book In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness, Emilie Townes unpacks Alice Walker’s definition of womanist, dividing it into four parts. Townes explains womanist as:

1. Womanish—the origin of the word womanist, warns of the “….dangers of Black girls moving beyond prescribed boundaries and socioeconomic determinants. A womanish young Black girl must not only be in charge, a gatherer of knowledge, but she must also be serious about her task. Who she is makes her dangerous to hegemony.”
2. Communal—“We must, the womanist must, recognize her location and responsibility in a community.
3. Individual—“the individual (as are the other aspects of womanist) is grounded in love. Love of self, love of community, love of the worlds of Black women, love of the Spirit.”
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender—“The womanist project is to take a fuller measure of the nature of injustice and inequalities of human existence from the perspective of women—Black women.”

Townes uses this explanation as the framework for her understanding of womanist as social witness and her interpretation of womanist experience, reflection, and spirituality, which is “individual, communal, and pithy in its acceptance of love and analysis.” The womanist wisdom grows out of the roots of the African-American woman’s experience as “daughters, wives, partners, aunts, grandmothers, mothers, other mothers, comrades, worshipers, protesters, wisdom bearers, murderers, and saints in African-American culture and society—and in the life of the church.”

Deloris Williams applies Walker’s definition in her constructive work on womanist theology. The liberation tradition, notes Williams, is retrieved in Walker’s implicit reference to Harriett Tubman. In this respect womanist theologians and ethicists are reminded that an

3. Ibid., 10.
important task is the retrieval of the “female tradition of catalytic action.” This is an essential model of authority, asserts Williams, in every struggle, maintenance and building of community institutions. Secondly, womanist theologians must search for any and every aspect of women whose “names have slipped into the male-centered rendering of black history. Third, the womanist theologian and the Christian womanist theologian are concerned with community building and maintenance, which must extend to the larger human community. Womanist theology must be mindful of the similarities and differences between womanists and feminists and certain distinctions are prohibited which are those which promote hierarchy and prohibit community building and respect for sexual preferences. Finally, important to womanist theology is the womanist dimension of mothering and nurturing, which may help to shape the criteria for justice and nurture male-female equity.

Williams notes that Walker incorporated into her definition, bell hook’s concept of cultural codes, which are “words, beliefs, and behavioral patterns of a people that must be deciphered before meaningful communication can happen cross-culturally.”⁴ These codes and their corresponding tradition, suggests Williams, are invaluable for womanist theologians because “they indicate and validate the kind of data upon which womanist theologians can reflect as they bring women’s social, religious, and cultural experiences into the discourse of theology, ethics, biblical and religious studies. Female slave narratives, imaginative literature by black women, autobiographies, the work of black women in academic disciplines, and the testimonies of black church women will be authoritative sources for womanist theologians.”⁵

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⁵ Ibid.
With the above conceptualizations in mind, it is important to note that, consistent with womanist thought, the intent of the following section is not to diminish, negate, or question the contributions and sacrifices of men, and black men in particular. The historical relationship between African-American men and African-American women is complex and complicated, and it is not the focus of this work. Rather, the focus is to examine the leadership of women involved in the civil rights efforts. The assumption is that, in this fight for freedom and for equal access, women were strategic partners who also functioned as organic intellectuals and prophetic pragmatists to ensure the rights to happiness, life, and liberty. Women such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Nannie Burroughs, Septima Clarke, and Fannie Lou Hamer were contemporaries of Du Bois, King, A. Philip Randolph, and Justice Thurgood Marshall. These women worked in concert with and at times in tension with their male counterparts but with a shared vision. They offered their expertise and resources to challenge the status quo and equip others to do the same, to finance and build educational institutions and civil rights organizations, to train students to be successful members of society, to change the political landscape, and to shape and affirm the African-American identity.

**Women in the African-American Church/Community**

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham studied the role of African-American women in the Baptist Church from 1880–1920. Higginbotham reasons that given the fact that these symbols and values birthed the largest voluntary associations in the black community, it would logically follow that the Black Church would introduce black women to public life. The church connected black women’s spirituality integrally with social activism. Higginbotham argues that Black Church women “were crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most
powerful institution of racial self-help in the African-American community.” These women protested and demanded the end of lynching and desegregation laws. They advocated for equal educational opportunities. They raised money to build schools and to provide a wide array of social welfare services. Black women’s ideas and experiences regarding gender roles were complex, yet they did not lightly accept a subordinate role in the struggle for their people. They were active participants serving in multiple roles as mediators in order to improve and to empower.

Black women figure prominently in the sacred and secular affairs of black communities. Inside the church, as deaconesses, teachers, and missionaries, they raised the money for church buildings, to establish schools, to help the poor, and to support social movements. Women formed auxiliaries and held special celebrations and annual events (Women’s Day, Mother’s Day), highlighting biblical figures such as Vashti/Esther, Ruth/Naomi, the virtuous woman, Deborah the judge, and Mary mother of Jesus to edify, affirm, inform, and empower. There was not a dissonance or disconnect between service outside the church and service within the church. As active members and leaders in their community, they formed and established community groups and social clubs. They understood their work in the community as an extension of their specific church and considered it church work. To further their agenda, they worked through their church groups, social clubs, sororities, and religious auxiliaries. They were protestors and resistors against racism and sexism. They influenced public policy, raised social consciousness, provided social service, and educated and trained women and children. Moreover, local and national groups of the NAACP, the Urban League, the SCLC, and the SNCC all owe their

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existence and their effectiveness to the contributions of black women.

**Black Women as Moral Agents in the Civil Rights Movement**

In *Witnessing and Testifying*, Rosetta Ross discusses the religious and moral practices of the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of the African-American women who were actively involved as leaders and activists. In her preface Ross writes,

> Theological and, by consequence, religious knowing among African Americans has pragmatic origins, embedded in a predecessor African spirituality but related directly to this prominent need to attend to survival concerns related to racial oppression…. As an exploration of religious and moral practice, this book argues women’s civil rights activism is their female enactment of Black religious values that reflected an internal concern for the Black community’s survival and flourishing and a related concern to address society’s formal and conventional sources of inequality.  

Ross highlights the work of seven African-American religious women who were active in the Civil Rights Movement: Ella Baker, Septima Poinsette Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Way DeLee, Clara Muhammad, Diane Nash, and Ruby Doris Smith Robinson. She explains that their narratives demonstrate similarities for hundreds of thousands of other female civil rights and community activists.

Consistent with West’s description of African-American thought and the themes and descriptors in his concept of the prophetic pragmatist, Ross states that religious duty, and racial uplift and social responsibility in particular, is the most important aspect of the African-American worldview. Moreover, survival and liberation themes have implications for the Black race and society as a whole. The former is born out of the African tradition of the belief that religious teachings and practices should help to sustain and enhance life. The liberation theme,

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also known as “freedom concerns,” entails discourse and practices for social change. Both are reflections of the view that life is a gift from God, and as God’s design, all human beings should live full and flourishing lives. Racial uplift and social responsibility are interdependent and are derivatives of these two themes. Educational achievement, entrepreneurship and economic empowerment, development of trade skills, cooperative economics, strategic alignment, and networking through organizations and social clubs—all of these efforts had the shared intent of the development and well-being of the community. Ross defines racial uplift as “the desire and striving of African Americans to survive slavery, gain independence, develop self-sufficiency and well-being, and engage as full participants in the body politic.”

She identifies two versions of racial uplift: the aspiration and formation of the black middle class and community building. The latter consists of individuals who are “community builders,” i.e., parents, educators, clergy, artists and business persons, who envision inclusive group advancement. Racial uplift also relates to social responsibility, which is to ensure that all African-Americans realize God’s gift of living as full members of society. Echoing Joyce Ladner, a sociologist and former SNCC leader, Ross notes that this sense of social responsibility was passed down from generation to generation. This legacy of racial uplift and social responsibility, reinforced by religious institutions, defines the African-American identity and sense of purpose. This sense of obligation originated as a response to the unique experience of the African American. Ross argues that since the time of enslavement, black religious women in the U.S. have practiced racial uplift and social responsibility. Black women understand this value of duty and that it extends beyond the African-American tradition to anyone in need. Black women were taught to be flexible, which is

important in determining the appropriate response to social needs, including social structures, reasoning that context influences the meaning and experience of human beings.\(^9\)

To illustrate this legacy, Ross incorporates the works of four womanist scholars, Katie Cannon, Deloris Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, and identifies four themes of social responsibility common to black religious women. They are: (1) responsibility to practice and to pass on particular virtues that attend to surviving and thriving as persons, (2) responsibility to work on partnerships with God for community survival and positive quality of life, (3) responsibility to attend to the needs of the least, and (4) responsibility to participate in community-building and community-sustaining practices.\(^{10}\) Black women’s religious practices and response to God occur through daily life as expressed aesthetically and through preconceived values. They extend beyond the social justice and conservation of traditions to a daily practice of preserving and enhancing the black community.\(^{11}\) Ross asserts that black religious women do this by participating in two religious rituals or practices, witnessing and testifying; these practices are used to affirm humanity and the belief of divine interaction. Witnessing and testifying by design intend a response and encourage the person to act or to persevere. Citing Thomas Hoyt, Ross asserts that witnessing and testifying as moral practice “are means of embodying and practicing particular virtues [and they] carry religious practices into the public square, and identify and pass on values that help form other individuals as religious

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10. Ibid., 11–12.

11. Ibid., 13.
persons.” Thus, argues Ross, these African-American women’s religious understanding of their responsibility as Christians informed their endeavors. By virtue of this understanding, these black women empowered themselves to use their resources to forge leadership opportunities, and they understood that they were compelled to act by faith for the common good and did so as witnesses of God’s involvement in the humanity.

**African-American Women as Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement**

In *How Long? How Long?*, Belinda Robnett analyzes black women’s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. She examines the movement’s mobilization as it relates to leadership and the dynamics of race, gender, and class. To examine the nature of women’s leadership and the nature of their interactions with male leadership and other female leaders, Robnett studied six civil rights organizations: NAACP, CORE, Women’s Political Council of Montgomery, Alabama, SCLC, SNCC, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Robnett's social analysis included interviewing several women who were active in the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

Robnett rejects the language of identifying black women as activists and replaces it with that of leaders in the movement. Her argument is that the leadership formation is a complex process that “builds within each person a constellation formed from experiences thematically linked to broader social structures ranging in size from small subcultures to large-scale signifiers such as class and gender.”

She reasons that there is a multiplicity of subtle identifiers of identity formation. Women, particularly those in the Civil Rights Movement, differed from men on

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several axes, such as gender and class. Robnett reinforces the fact that the Civil Rights Movement developed on a continuum and the efforts of black women contributed to the ideology and strategies of the movement. To frame her work, Robnett cites the research of David Snow, who identified four social psychological processes central to the recruitment process of social movements. The four processes are: *frame bridging*, or information to induce involvement; *frame amplification*, or compatibility of the constituent’s beliefs and values; *frame extension*, or widening the recruitment net to address valuable concerns; and *frame transformation*, or altering of individually held frames to achieve consensus. Robnett combines this social movement theory with the *collective behavior theory*, which is emotion and spontaneity, and the *resource mobilization theory*, which is rational planned activity such as political process. She reasons that these theories are compatible and that, by examining them at several levels, they provide a holistic approach to understanding concepts and assumptions. She then sets out to focus her research on four areas: social location and movement identity formation; definitions of leadership; reevaluation of emotion in movements; and dialectical flow of movement momentum.

Robnett’s position is that the perspective of womanist/black feminist leads to a clearer understanding of the social construction of “who does what for the movement and why.” According to Robnett, political opportunity, resources, shared relationships, and leadership are necessary components of mobilization activities. It is important to understand the distinctions in leadership and personal identity development, and their relation to the political identity and

15. Ibid., 14.
16. Ibid., 15.
development of the Civil Rights Movement. These identities are in constant flux and shifts as the identity interfaces with other discourses such as race, gender, class, and ideology.

Robnett identifies two types of leaders, formal and informal, both of which emanated from the institutional base of the Black Church. Clergy are the most obvious formal leaders. Formal leaders are those who hold the titled position within an organization. They are the ones recognized nationally as being responsible for decision-making. Robnett also notes other leaders such as center women and their integral role in network formation and consciousness shaping. She concludes that the definition of a leader is not necessarily one’s position or title as recognized by the state and such; rather, it is “the ability to influence others and to gain the loyalty of followers.” Movements are formalized and successful by virtue of their recruitment, mobilization, and sustenance, a role that African-American women as bridge leaders effectively performed.

Bridge leaders represent the informal tier of leadership and are predominantly women. She identifies four different types of bridge leaders: professional, community, indigenous, and mainstream. Robnett defines bridge leaders as leaders who utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community; and between pre-figurative strategies (aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness) and political strategies (aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state or other societal institutions) …Bridge leaders were able to cross boundaries between the public life of a movement organization and the private spheres of adherents and potential constituents.

In the pursuit and struggle for freedom and equal rights for African Americans, there

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18. Ibid., 19.
were internal tensions and differences within the various individuals and groups. Historically, African-American women have been impacted by the *tri-modal tensions*, to use Victor Anderson’s term, of race, class, and gender. During the Civil Rights Movement, these tensions were heightened by the imminent danger for black males and the dangers posed to them by virtue of their relationship with women, both black and white, who worked in the movement. Moreover, these differences and tensions increased as northern students and professionals became involved. Robnett in particular deals with this in her analysis of the black southern clergy and women and the organizational structures. According to her analysis, despite these tensions men and women were able to work collaboratively and get results such as leading the formation, the work, and the sustainability of SCLC, SNCC, NAACP, the march to Selma, and the voter rights efforts. The leadership structure as described by Robnett (formal leaders, local bridge builders) was effective: the work happened and communities mobilized. There were mixed views (and there continue to be mixed views) in regards to gender issues. Joy James, for example, portrays it in a very different manner from Rosetta Ross. Ross interviewed women, both black and white, who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. In the Ross interviews, the women appeared to respond as realists and pragmatists in that they considered the times and understood the risks of enduring physical beatings or being murdered by white male supremacists. Many of the women interviewed told Ross that the issue of women’s rights did not surface for them until beyond the Civil Rights Movement. Rather, during the movement they felt empowered.

Black church women during the Civil Rights Movement made significant contributions in the quest for equality and justice in these communities. As evident in Ross’s research, African-
American women’s involvement in social justice was for them a moral imperative that was shaped by their religious ideology and tradition. Robnett, in turn, demonstrates how the religious experiences as an axis of identity formation contributed to black women as effective leaders, as bridge leaders instrumental in mobilizing the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, these women were pragmatists who, as cultural critics, identified the crisis points and developed methods designed to preserve and cultivate the African-American identity as valued contributors to the larger American culture, thereby contributing to development of the American identity and transforming culture.

One notable leader whose contributions and methodologies exemplify these three approaches (involvement as a moral imperative, as a bridge leader, and as a cultural critic), is Ella Baker. Although Rosetta Ross, Belinda Robnett, and Joy James each represent three different approaches to analyzing black women’s involvement in social change during the Civil Rights Era, they each include Ella Baker in their respective work. They attribute to her the identification of pragmatist or describe her methodology as being pragmatic, particularly her creative use or integration of her religious ideology and socialist teachings.

Phrases such as “renaisance woman,” “midwife of the Civil Rights Movement,” “the godmother of SNCC,” and “one of the architects of the Civil Rights Movement” have been used to describe and pay tribute to Ella Baker. I would add to these Cornel West’s descriptions of prophetic pragmatist and organic intellectual. Instrumental in starting and/or strengthening several organizations, Baker’s ideologies and philosophical viewpoints have left an indelible mark in the history of social movements. Her development of an organizational structure as exemplified in the SNCC organization has been a model used by subsequent groups, women
organizations in particular. Rosetta Ross notes that Baker’s perspective on human dignity and human rights shaped the Civil Rights Movement as well as the character and direction of the New Left movements that originated in and evolved from the tumult during the 1960s.\textsuperscript{19}

Ella Baker (1903–1986) was born in Norfolk, VA.\textsuperscript{20} Her parents relocated back to their hometown in Littleton, NC, where she grew up.\textsuperscript{21} Baker’s family, by example and dedicated observation of religious rituals - such as Sunday school, worship, and missions—taught her the interconnection between faith and action. They taught her, to quote Joy James, the “religious practices of racial uplift and social responsibility.”\textsuperscript{22} Her family actively helped others in need. Her grandfather, who was a pastor and a former slave, used his resources to help countless others by providing land and produce. Her mother was a medical missionary who also helped others throughout their community. As an active missionary in her state’s Baptist Union, Ella Baker encouraged women to help the needy, reasoning that daily practices ought to be reflective of one's faith.\textsuperscript{23} By the time Ella Baker was ten years old, she had read the Bible a few times, a habit reinforced by Shaw University’s practices, and that continued into her adult life. She frequently traveled with her grandfather to preaching engagements and his community ministry. Initially, Baker wanted to be a medical missionary like her mother, but they could not afford the

\textsuperscript{19} Rosetta Ross, \textit{Witnessing and Testifying}, 32.

\textsuperscript{20} The following information on Ella Baker is primarily taken from Joy James, Rosetta Ross, and Belinda Robnett. Citations are made as much as possible; however, some information is general knowledge and in those cases, citation may not be noted.

\textsuperscript{21} Her father worked out of town and would return home on the weekends.

\textsuperscript{22} Joy James, \textit{Transcending the Talented Truth: Black Healers and American Intellectuals} (NY: Routledge, 1997), 33.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
Baker graduated from Shaw University with a degree in education. She moved to New York City, where she initially worked as a journalist and a labor organizer with black workers and laborers, cultivating her skills ultimately as a professional organizer. As a member of Friendship Baptist Church in New York City, she continued the habit of daily worship and regular worship attendance throughout her adult life. In her younger years, Baker immersed herself in the numerous public discussions on radical liberal thought. She met the black socialist intellectual George Schuyler, whose socialist views influenced her. His teachings on cooperative economics and radical social change inspired her to help to form the Young Negroes’ Cooperative League (YNCL). These buying clubs and cooperative ventures were lifesaving for the black community during the Depression and increased social and political analysis within black communities. Baker's work in New York included educating parents and adults, advocacy, and participation in anti-lynching protests. Over time, and having conducted a study of black female domestic workers in the Bronx corner markets, she began to develop a perspective on the impact of economics, such as the Depression, on human dignity. These women, despite the disparate and desperate situation, were able to negotiate as a collective body a rate for labor ten to fifteen cents higher than the standard hourly wage.

In 1935, Baker became the publicity director for the National Negro Congress. Beginning in the 1930s, she worked with the NAACP for over forty years, initially as a volunteer and then as a professional organizer. She served as its assistant field secretary and in the 1940s as the national director of branches. She traveled to various communities with predominantly African-

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American populations, studying the local problems and then organizing the people to address them. She participated in anti-lynching efforts, equal employment, and empowerment of black women. Her emphasis was always on “democratization and egalitarianism.” She was particularly critical of the NAACP’s “antidemocratic and disempowering” practices, so much so that in 1946 she resigned her post.25

In 1947, Ella Baker was a leader in the New York Urban League and focused on school desegregation. From 1955 to 1957, at the request of the mayor of New York City, Baker served as a member of the Commission on School Integration. By 1957, as a freelance consultant to civil rights groups, she worked with the organization In Friendship, initially to aid southern blacks displaced by economic reprisals resulting from the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. Later, the organization raised considerable money to support the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In Friendship, formed by Ella Baker, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Stanley Levison, was instrumental in the formation of SCLC. In 1957, Baker, Rustin, and Levison met several times in New Orleans with Rev. Dr. King. They encouraged King to capitalize on the success of the Montgomery Boycott and form the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). Baker served as its first field director and moved to Atlanta to help to build it. In this role, she helped to launch the first major voting rights program, Crusade for Citizenship. Despite the conflict with the charismatic emphasis of clergy, Baker continued to push the organization to advance beyond rallies and focus on education programs to expedite the registration process. Baker, believing the SCLC’s weakness was the absence of a “well-developed organizing

scheme,” connected the Crusade for Citizenship with the Citizen’s Education program. Septima Clark developed and operated the Citizenship Education Program at the Highlander Folk School. This school, funded by the Montgomery Ward Foundation, was a multiracial school located in the South. It trained blacks and whites on labor rights, labor unions, and voter registration, and had trained many women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

In 1960, capitalizing on the college student sit-ins, Baker convinced Rev. Dr. King to sponsor a conference at Shaw University and gather all of these students and the major civil rights organizations. Two hundred people attended, and the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed. SNCC’s statement of purpose had religious tones as its rationale for action and embraced Gandhi’s practice of nonviolent direct action. It reads,

> We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action…. Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man-to-man…. By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice becomes actual possibilities.27

Through Baker’s efforts, SNCC remained an independent organization and, as its advisor, she “influenced SNCC to adopt a group-centered style of operation and to focus on empowering and training leaders indigenous to local communities.”28 To that end, Baker connected the membership of SNCC to work with the leadership in Mississippi who had wanted the students to help them to further their advocacy efforts. Known particularly for their courageous and historical leadership as the Freedom Riders, the students of SNCC assisted with efforts such as

27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 45.
the Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s challenge to the Democratic Party Convention. Notable students are Congressman John Lewis, Representative Eleanor Norton Holmes, Bernice Reardon Johnson, and Prathia Hall. Bernice Reardon Johnson is the founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock and used Baker’s words to compose “Ella’s Song”: “Until the killing of black men, black mother’s sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers’ sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.”

All three scholars, Joy James, Ross, and Robnett, agree that Baker did more than make a significant contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. As an activist and leader with exceptional organizational skills and experience, she was brilliant, an astute strategist, and a hero of civil rights. Noting also that she organized against capitalism and imperialism, James called her an “organic intellectual” and writes,

Baker transformed criticisms of racism into critiques of both capitalism and liberal acquiescence to oppressive state practices and channeled criticisms and critiques into political opposition via grass-roots disobedience. Merging black liberation rhetoric with mass mobilization of black people, she embodied both political worker and intellectual, with a model of black intellectualism that presented mass resistance rather than intellectual elites as indispensable for a true democracy.

For Baker, baptism marked the interconnection of religious identity and practice. She committed her entire life to overcoming “contradictions” between professed belief and practice. According to Ross, four perspectives permeated Baker’s work: “that human dignity entails, among other things, liberty and control of one’s body, that human liberty consists of opportunity and responsibility for its exercise, and that organizing is a powerful weapon against

29. Joy James, Transcending the Talented Tenth, 84.
30. Ibid., 85.
injustice.” These four perspectives—personal control, opportunity, responsibility, and organizing—undergirded Baker’s life credo, which was to affirm human dignity, organize for change, and seek egalitarianism in human community.

In Ella Baker’s Words

In contrast to most of the civil rights organization leadership, including Rev. Dr. King, Baker argued that change occurred through people confronting issues on a local level where they were living with the violence. As an organic intellectual, Baker concluded that such changes were necessary, and her belief and strategy was to empower local areas to lead. The following quotations reflect several of the pragmatic themes discussed in previous chapters, such as habit, the pragmatic maxim, and use of religious language in public space. Moreover, they reflect Anderson’s six characteristics of public theology and West’s prophetic pragmatism. Baker was inspirational, and her conversations and ideology reflected a cultural critic whose particular view of the tragic was similar to that outlined by West. Yet, like West, there was overarching expectation of hope and love, and an understanding of the significance of power, provocation, and personality:

Part of the job was to help them to understand what that violence was and how they in an organized fashion could help to stem it. The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could encounter violence even if it were perpetrated by the police or, in some instances the state. My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they had against violence or injustice…. People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves.

32. Rosetta Ross, Witnessing and Testifying, 40.
33. Ibid., 41.
34. Ibid., 42.
According to Baker, the way to get people to support something was by appealing to something they could identify with, to get them to go beyond their long-held assumptions and justifications:

We get caught in that bag. And so you have to help break that down without alienating them at the same time... so what you do is cite examples that have taken place somewhere else.... You cite it, you see. This can happen to you.... As long as the violation of the rights of Tom Jones could take place with impunity, you are not secure. So you help to re-establish a sense of identity of each other with the struggle. 35

Similar to West, Baker was a Christian prophetic pragmatist, who incorporated socialist teachings. Ms. Baker’s perspectives on human dignity and egalitarianism were a blend of the religious values of her youth and the nonsectarian and leftist ideas cultivated during her early years in New York and incorporated into her religiosity. Social ideas fortified and enhanced Baker’s religious perspective, which included the critical social analysis and evaluation of social injustice. Baker recognized that local leadership was the key to gaining the trust and support of the rural masses, particularly in areas most resistant to change. She believed that organizing was the primary means by which people could effect social change, which Ross concludes, developed into a positive humanism. She writes that, “...in Baker’s correlation of being Christian with conviction, ‘[standing] for something’ is the assertion that having conviction precipitates certain practices.” 36

For Baker, as the prophetic pragmatist/culture critic, she understood that the absence of material security and exercise of human liberty reflected contradictions of religious and political proclamations that assert human value and liberty as priorities:

35. Rosetta Ross, Witnessing and Testifying, 43.

36. Ibid., 46–47.
I think this has been a major factor in ‘disturbances’ of recent years, [she said in a 1970 interview]…Many people feel that they will never be recognized as human beings. A poor child, who is also black, senses in our society an inherent attitude of disrespect for poor black people, an attitude that regards them as being so different that they are incapable of being considered equals. The contradiction of having children salute the flag and learn the prevailing slogans of equality—that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights, that all Americans have equal opportunity—and then have these children confront the realities of their lives is bound to produce an indigenous bitterness that grows and grows as their awareness of society becomes more acute. Is there any wonder that we come across what they call a disruptive child?37

And as an example of Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism, her theological origin of this view and of socialist ideas is evident in a 1964 speech. “I always like to think that the very god who gave us life, gave us liberty. And if we don’t have liberty, it is because somebody else stood between us and that which god has granted us…. so we have come here tonight to renew our struggle: the right to be men and women, to grow and to develop to the fullest capacity with which [God] has endowed us.”38 Ross adds that Baker’s understanding of human dignity applied to everyone and that her work for freedom was “for a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind.” Explaining this, Baker said, “as far as I’m concerned, I was never working for an organization[,] I have always tried to work for a cause. And the cause to me is bigger than any organization, bigger than any group of people, and it is the cause of humanity. This is the cause that brings us together. The drive of the human spirit.”39

Baker, notes Ross, insisted on this principle through her lifetime in everything she did, wherever she was. Though the predominantly male and clergy leadership disregarded her professional skills as an organizer, Baker did not succumb to it. Rather, she continued to assert

37. Rosetta Ross, Witnessing and Testifying, 46–47.
38. Ibid., 49.
39. Ibid., 51.
her abilities as a leader. Though locked out of any permanent formal leadership position, Baker began working to bridge several segments of the black population to the movement and to nurture the expanding energy of resistance sparked by the boycott. Ross concludes that as a bridge leader, Ms. Baker had a keen understanding of the need to build support from the bottom up, and this understanding was central to the mobilization of a mass effort.

**Summary**

African-American women scholars and bridge leaders were equivalent to West’s prophetic pragmatism. As noted by Rosetta Ross, religious duty, racial uplift and social responsibility were important aspects of the African-American worldview. African-American women, since enslavement, have understood and practiced these core values, which they extend to anyone in need. African-American women moved fluidly within the church system and the community, using their influence as bridge leaders to highlight injustices and to propose and implement strategic actions. As concluded by several contemporary womanist and African-American feminist scholars, though they did not generally hold positions as officers, African-American women utilized their skills and leadership and exercised those abilities wherever they found themselves. Their limited official power within the patriarchal structure of the Black Church and civil rights organizations such as NAACP and SCLC did not discourage them. Instead, operating with a sense of moral imperative and religious ideology, they understood the larger vision and were instrumental in organizing the civil rights efforts, and they used their resources to provide the financial support and organizational foundation for organizations such as NAACP, Urban League, SCLC, and SNCC.

As prophetic pragmatists, African-American female leaders involved in civil rights
understood the notion of power, provocation, and personality. They were vocal, creative, ingenious, and determined, and consequently, through their leadership roles in the church, secular women’s organizations, and other civil rights organizations, their contributions as bridge leaders were critical. The biblical narratives informed, encouraged, and inspired action, both within the church and as an extension of the church. They understood their faith as action, as being in service for the well-being of the community. They understood the importance of using their time and talents to maintain and build their community. They imparted their knowledge and skills regarding education in general, strategic nonviolence, citizenship education, and literacy to hundreds of others. They organized and led voter registration campaigns, freedom rides, and marches. They trained others who in turn continued the efforts and spread the word throughout their communities.
CHAPTER SEVEN

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Analysis

Pragmatism as a Method of Inquiry

Peirce proposed the treatment of philosophy as a scientific method in which the search for truth requires both theory and practice and serves to inform us in terms of how things are and how things must be. Pragmatism, as a maxim, is the adoption of a particular formula as a guide to action. The key teaching of pragmatism is “what one thinks is to be interpreted in terms of what one is prepared to do.” In other words, what one ought to do must go hand in hand with what one chooses to do. The pragmatic maxim, which is not as succinct as the key teaching, is as follows:

Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have: then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.¹

In other words, “the entire meaning and significance of any conception lies in its conceivably practical bearings … which in conceivable circumstances would determine how we should deliberately act and how we should act in a practical way.”² Pragmatism is a method of ascertaining the meanings of the structures upon which arguments concerning objective fact may hinge. The kernel of pragmatism is an intellectual concept predicated upon affirming its truth and existence of certain facts occurring under certain experimental circumstances. Peirce’s theory of


². Ibid., 145.
signs used to prove this claim is too complex to do justice to in these few pages. However, worth mentioning for the purpose of this research is his treatment of sign as mediator. A sign is anything that mediates between an object and an interpretant in such a way as to cause the interpretant to be determined by the object. There are four mental categories of general references: conceptions, desires (including hopes, fears, etc.), expectations, and habits. Of these four, habit is the essence of logical interpretant and is unconscious. Habit is a tendency to “behave in a certain way under similar circumstances in the future.” A person practices self-control through the modification of habits, which, for the purpose of this discussion is order, or through the attempt to maintain order in situations that may prevent him/her from doing so. For Peirce, sign mediates the issue.

When applied to cultural criticism, pragmatism as a sign mediates cultural criticism and serves to ignite and respond to the reality of change. Change as a moral agent works on the heart/desire and motivates changes in habits due to a raised consciousness. The Civil Rights Era, as a mediating sign, challenged or interpreted habits or order by determining the current laws and practices as unsound, valueless, and detrimental, and the challengers (the mediator) did so for the good of others (object). As a mediating sign, the Civil Rights Era, informed by the experiences within the Black Church tradition, entailed a multi-pronged approach comprised of individuals, interest groups, and alliances with a shared ideology. The results were a raised consciousness as it relates to what is valued—rights, human treatment, and civility. This habit of raised consciousness, ignited by this new knowledge, ultimately leads to action and evolves into new

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3. “Interpretation is an act that takes a sign to stand for a point in time in order to gain meaning.” It is the way we interpret the world, e.g. the experience or empirical habits are formed—order is established so that one can live and live well in the world. September 20, 2011 notes, Boston University American Philosophy Seminar Course GRS PH 630, Robert C. Neville, Instructor.
habits, and so forth, the response of which was so compelling (old ideas were disrupted by new ideas) that people acted and reacted, thereby forming new habits (order, ways of being). Social movements such as women’s rights also influenced this transformation in others, which continues to occur through movements such as gay rights, health care reform, and immigration reform.

Many of the individuals involved in the Civil Rights Era also were mediating signs. For Cornel West and Joy James, these are the organic intellectuals. James, for example, cites Ella Baker, who used theory and praxis, as a representation of this group, whose spin included the contention that key to progressivism was the empowering of strong people. These are those whom Robnett calls the bridge leaders and whom West calls the prophets or prophetic pragmatists. As cultural critics, these people articulated the problem—deeming the conditions and treatment of African Americans in the U.S. as unacceptable, as tragic—to constituents in such a way that was understandable, relevant, and compelling. Then they provided ways to examine alternatives and to equip people with necessary tools to act upon the new knowledge. Efforts such as community canvassing, media coverage, education, and marches were intended to raise consciousness. Other mediating signs included seeking legal recourse and using pedagogy to motivate individuals to effect change. For example, one piece of evidence presented in the case of Brown v. Topeka demonstrated the impact of the poor self-image of black girls, presenting a convincing argument for the need to desegregate public schools. Another example is the strategy used to train activists and increase voter registration. The Highlander Folk

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4. Joy James, Transcending, 86.

5. This experiment involved the choice between a black doll and a white doll. Black girls overwhelmingly chose the white doll, deeming her as good and the black doll as bad. A similar experiment occurred in the infamous film “Brown eyes Blue eyes,” which depicted a difference in the treatment experienced by students with brown eyes.
School’s Citizen Education Program successfully sought to change the habit by simply teaching to and meeting the immediate need. Bridge leaders cultivated the participants’ critical thinking skills by using civics to teach people how to read. This method equipped and empowered the participants to act by registering to vote and helping others to register. The right to vote is a mediating sign in that it validates one’s citizenship, it is empowering, and it asserts one’s identity and existence as a human being and adult. Another mediating sign is Black Theology/Ontological Blackness to articulate identity and faith. African Americans identified with and understood the biblical stories as relevant to their situation. Through exhortation and education, they understood themselves to be children of God and thus as having value. Even in the midst of the tragic, they had hope and power.

Regarding the concepts of object, interpretant, and mediators, the formal and informal leadership structure, abolitionists, activists, and individuals like Ella Baker, all mediated between the object (rights) and the interpretant (African-American citizens). Consequently, because of the various efforts—marches, laws, and organizing—the status quo (habit; the past upon which conduct is based) experienced by the predominant culture (southern whites) was disrupted. The status quo of southern whites (the interpretant), in particular white males, included the privilege of benefiting from the various conveniences without being compelled to question the legitimacy of the laws and the marginalization of others who were denied access.⁶ The various movements and responses to them, negatively and positively, were attempts to either change or sustain these habits, i.e., these ways of being, these comforts, and these fears by introducing new ideas to old knowledge.

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⁶ It is important to note that while African Americans were the predominant leaders of civil rights efforts, a diverse group of people were involved—black, white, Christian, Jewish, etc.
Organizations and social clubs were mediating signs as they relate to ideologies. In this respect, pragmatism became the mediatorial as described by Anderson. Diverse religious groups and political/secular groups such as Socialist parties, In Friendship, and labor organizations such as the United Auto Workers, shared a vision of freedom, equal access, and equal rights for everyone.

Pragmatism and Truth

As stated earlier, William James asserted that the question of value or worth is based on one’s understanding of truth, which is both an ends and a means, and its value is determined by the practical importance of its objects. The whole function of philosophy is to determine what difference it would make in one’s life if a particular world-formula were true. An idea becomes new and then adopted as true when the old opinion is confronted with new experiences that cause one to reflect and discover they contradict one another. After an internal struggle, a person modifies his/her opinion, incorporating the new experience until a new idea surfaces that can mediate the two. A new opinion must incorporate both old truths and new facts. It enables the individual to assimilate the new in his or her experience into existing beliefs. Facts are important to the pragmatist, who is also an observer of truth at work in particular cases and in generalities. The pragmatic method shifts the emphasis and looks forward into facts with questions such as, “What is the world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself?” When these questions are asked, the answer becomes apparent, which is that true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. In this sense, truth is practical in that it has meaning.

Contrary to Rorty’s argument, I contend that truth is shaped by one’s experience, which
is shaped by the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already. These beliefs and experiences determine what we notice; what we notice determines what we do; what we do again determines our experience. I embrace William James’s position that truth is not stagnant; rather, it happens to an idea and is made true by events. The verification process and the validation process are themselves events. Truth from the viewpoint of the pragmatist is synonymous with “the workableness of ideas,” i.e., the content of truth relations is experience, which may be physical, intellectual, actual, or potential. Thus, as James argued, pragmatism may serve a mediating role as the harmonizer between empiricist ways of thinking and the religious demands of human beings. West assigns this role to the prophetic pragmatist (the Black Church in particular), Stout assigns it to the democratic intellectual, and Anderson assigns to pragmatic naturalist, who does so within the academy.

One can apply William James’s notion of truth to the history of African Americans particularly as it relates to identity, to group affiliation, to social location, and so forth. As prophetic pragmatists and bridge leaders, the Civil Rights leaders and workers challenged truth claims, both in the larger community and to the African-American community. They used the organizational alliances and the economic, intellectual, and spiritual development of the entire community and individuals. Through these systems and structures, especially the Black Church tradition, they affirmed and validated the person. Black Theology, as articulated informally by individuals and leaders and formally through educational institutions and academic scholarship, reinforced the sense of identity and purpose. The Civil Rights efforts challenged the prevailing truth claims such as true meaning of freedom, the definition of a person, rights to citizenship, and rights in general. They believed that “black folk,” like all folk, have value and, as U.S. residents,
have rights as human beings and as citizens. Schools and training institutions educated African Americans and provided opportunity to pursue professional careers and trades and to develop the technical skills necessary for gainful employment. As prophetic pragmatists these formal leaders and bridge leaders assumed the role of *provocateurs* as described by Cornel West. In addition to black clergy, organizations such as women social clubs, women church groups, the SCLC, SNCC, and the Highlander Folk School were advocates and helped to empower others through strategic action. They used education, biblical narratives, and civic lessons to raise the consciousness of their participants by introducing new truth claims as they relate to human agency of personal power and the power to effect change.

As noted by Emilie Townes, history is subjective and dynamic. One example of this is the tendency of some to treat African-American history as a parallel history to American history. Such a method is misleading and contributes to habits formed because of these myths. A point noted by both West and Glaude, African-American history, as is true for others’ history, is part of and is integral to the history of the United States. African Americans affirm their heritage as Americans, which is inclusive of their multi-racial heritage and their African Diaspora heritage. Aside from contributions in various fields and disciplines, inventions, and civic engineering, one example of African-American contributions is in the political arena and influence (willingly and unwillingly) in the formation of American democracy and the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and subsequent executive orders. These laws and executive orders, and the sacrificial, detrimental, passionate, and painful responses to them are threads of the fabric that constitutes the United States of America. This Civil Rights Era also exemplifies one of Cornel West’s criteria of the prophetic pragmatism as having a political element. The efforts to sustain and
attain civil rights for African Americans spans over three hundred years, and, arguably, continues today, and for people of several affinity groups—women, people who are poor, people who identify as LGBT, and children whose parents brought them to the United States illegally but who are growing up as U.S. citizens.7

Pragmatism and Social Change

According to Dewey, philosophy is change itself, not just something that changes. It is a significant aspect of human history and it transforms culture. It marks a change in culture and forms patterns that will influence future thought and action. Dewey argued that the error of moral theories is to separate motive and acts because, due to habits and the continuity of habits, these go together. They explain character and conduct (i.e., motive and act). Activity proceeds from a person, and then it reacts in the surroundings. Even letting a person alone is a definite response. Dewey argued that given that neutrality is non-existent and conduct is always shared and is social, whether bad or good, it is unrealistic to separate the individual from her/his environment.

According to Dewey, one cannot directly change habits as habits. Change must occur indirectly by intelligent selective modification of the conditions that engage attention and influence desires. Change does not come from exhortations; it occurs when the objective arrangements and institutions change. Both a change in heart and a change in environment can occur and must occur, but the first effort must be change in the environment. However, though it may take the heart to desire to initiate the environmental change, even the desire is sparked by

7. Recently in the U.S., there is a marked increase of laws being passed that negatively impact women’s reproductive rights. In addition, President Obama lifted the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” ban for soldiers who identify as LGBT and who are actively serving in the Armed Forces. He also expressed his views regarding their rights as citizens to marry and live in committed relationships. There were mixed responses from elation to sheer anger and hatred. A similar response occurred when the president signed an executive order providing a brief reprieve to children who are illegal immigrants but live as U.S. citizens.
some external experience. We have seen this occur in recent times, in the public’s reaction to the murder of young Trayvon Martin, and the overwhelming reaction to the Komen Foundation’s initial decision to stop funding Planned Parenthood. In these situations, the heart was sparked by some external experience that ignited or fueled environmental response for change. In both situations the question of moral obligation involved both thought and action. The logic of freedom and rights was argued in the courts and appeals to U.S. presidents such as Fredrick Douglass’s visits to Lincoln, A Philip Randolph’s to Truman, and King’s et al. to Kennedy and Johnson. The presidents’ actions, though consistent with their own personal convictions, were influenced by the appeals. These leaders were compelled to make the appeal by virtue of their convictions that as human beings and citizens, the Constitution applied to them as well.

Dewey equates habits to will, and they constitute the self. Habits shape desires, furnish us with our working capacities, and rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and which shall pass from light into obscurity. They are the active means that project themselves and their ways of acting. The “will” or “willingness” was critical to the work of the civil rights efforts. The innumerable and nameless participants and the formal and informal bridge leaders embodied this. As prophetic pragmatists and organic intellectuals, they were driven by something deep within; some would identify it as a calling, others saw it as their social witness of their faith or moral conviction, and still for others, it was inexplicable. Something within them fueled their will to work, tirelessly and with great sacrifice, for change and to advocate for the rights of all. The civil rights efforts were about change—in systems, practices, and hopefully attitudes. Their efforts entailed attempting to raise consciousness and challenging systems and personal development through pedagogy, advocacy, acculturation, and provocation.
The will is the power and the courage to participate. Although there were several starting points within this span of three hundred years of the Civil Rights Era, its leaders, both formal and informal, and its intellectuals encouraged others to become involved. Pragmatists are organic intellectuals who are called to relate ideas to action, and, as cultural critics, must convey a sense of urgency in their search for intellectual and moral solutions. Pragmatists must grapple with the problem of evil and American theodicy. This entailed organized, coordinated, and unrelenting efforts by organizations such as the Black Church, social clubs, fraternal organizations, NAACP, SCLC, SNCC, and the Urban League, and through systems such as educational institutions, political structures, and businesses. Their theory of change involved using the public space and laws to communicate the realities of inequality and injustice, to highlight the atrocious actions and expectations imposed on African Americans; to broaden humanity’s perception of who is valued; and to change systems and influence the decision makers and beneficiaries of these systems. Individuals, informed by their understanding of the moral language of freedom, courage, rights, responsibility, and value, were compelled to act for the greater good. At issue for them was the negative impact of habit imposed on some and the need to do differently for the good of others, particularly as it relates to the health and well-being of the whole self and as citizens of the United States. These leaders and organizations dedicated their work to empower and enlighten, to transform and challenge the attitudes. They advocated for laws and practices that perpetuated the rights of individuals, protected each citizen’s ability to enjoy these rights, and created opportunities for people to learn and grow together.

The prophetic pragmatist is called to be inspirational and to speak the truth in love with courage, the goal of which is progressive and prophetic social motion. In previous chapters we
have demonstrated how this has occurred in the Black Church tradition. As organic intellectuals, formal and informal leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Rev. Dr. King, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ella Baker functioned in this prophetic role. Despite the internal and external obstacles and by virtue of their understanding of faith, these women and men acted as social witnesses and testifiers of hope and transformation. It is inarguable that the Black Church served as a catalyst for social change and shaping public policy. It created the space, provided the language, and was the strategic seedbed for women, men, and youth of various backgrounds and traditions to organize and work collaboratively to effect social change. Though individuals differed in their ideologies as to what was the best methodology to advance African Americans and who should publicly articulate it, there was a shared concern of justice and equity for African Americans in particular and society as a whole.

Pragmatism and in Public Discourse

Although I challenge his depiction as inconsistent with the classical pragmatists, I agree with one aspect of Rorty’s characterizations of pragmatism, which is that inquiry presents one with the fundamental choice between accepting the contingent character of starting points or attempting to evade it. Accepting the contingency is to accept it as one’s only source of guidance, whereas evasion gives up the hope of becoming a properly programmed machine. In doing the latter, we may gain a renewed sense of community. Ownership and the view that we can shape it heighten our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, and our intellectual heritage. Loyalty to and unity with humanity are most important.

Several factors are important in choosing evasion. The pragmatic approach includes an openness to ideas, critical analysis, and an appreciation and respect for narratives. West’s
prophetic pragmatism provides a model through which this may occur. Jeffrey Stout provides insight on the importance of narratives.

*The Significance of Narratives*

Stout asserts that ethical narratives are morally important because they bring to light the interaction of character and circumstances in which to locate our situation. Our capacity to act freely is shaped by our actual past and continuous activities that bring the past to consciousness through the narrative. Narratives educate and are important in the re-formation of character and moral discourse and reflection. Stout asserts that bad stories produce bad people—people who cannot act, or who cannot act well, because they lack the virtues of a well-formed character.

History, which I contend is a culmination of narratives, is important and is impactful. The history of the United States of America is a narrative. Its story, which informs its identity and what it symbolizes, is shaped by what is told and who tells it. I agree with West’s and Townes’s assertions that too often U.S. history is treated as one monolithic story, devoid of the diversity of thought and contributions that give America its unique and rich heritage. Proponents of civil rights press for this right of inclusion in the narrative of America’s story. American exceptionalism exists in part because of the stories of its diverse constituents—ethnic, gender, class, orientation, ideology, and belief systems. These collective narratives, including the tragedies and the disappointments, shape the larger American narrative. They shape its identity and its symbolism and thus make America exceptional. Therefore, these same citizens ought to be actively involved in the decisions. Cornel West makes this argument in his discussions regarding the central themes of prophetic pragmatism, its political aspect, and his concept of

creative democracy. Central themes of West’s prophetic pragmatism, which are also central themes in his version of African-American thought, are tragedy, tradition, struggle, power, and human agency. Human agency and the unique individuality of the person are important to the moral discourse and are valued and respected.

Secularism and Religion

Anderson notes that academic theology has a pragmatic dilemma of being intellectually viable while being truthful about its moral language. Nonetheless, he is confident that academic theology can be an effective discourse in contemporary, public or secular debates. To be effective and deemed relevant, asserts Anderson, academic theology must cease being tied to dogma and professional ministerial education. The risks of impasse and polarization are the likely outcomes, particularly if the basis for decisions is devalued and dishonorable and calls into question the moral authority, whether religious or secular.

American philosophical pragmatists and pragmatic academic theologians share a common history of secularization in American intellectual history, and Stout concludes that substantive conversation is possible. For Anderson, in philosophical debates, pragmatic naturalism is mediatorial and is central to his claims for a public theology. He argues for a religious interpretation of pragmatic naturalism that combines public philosophy and academic theology, whose legitimacy is determined by the constructive impact of their interpretations of the world and human experience genuinely. Anderson argues that understanding and agreement are possible and desirous between philosophical pragmatists and academic theologians who must share their interpretations of human intentions and be prepared to commend them for a public morality, though it is contingent upon shared realities and orientation toward moral fulfillment of
common goods. The problem as Anderson sees it is whether pragmatic theology “can achieve a unity of being and value in religious experience and public life. Pragmatic theology must negotiate the intersections of a pragmatic philosophy of religion and the demands of a public theology.” The contemporary public significance of the pragmatic theology, asserts Anderson, is to reproduce conditions that will keep religion humanly vital.

Noting that not all pragmatic theologians agree that theology contributes cognitively to human inquiry, Anderson identifies four themes in their diverse theologies: descriptive, explanatory, normative, and metaphysical functions. Descriptively, pragmatic theology proposes a method of inquiry similar to all other human studies. As an explanatory discourse, academic theology is concerned with the intentions of human beings as expressed in religious operations. Third, meaning and value are addressed in pragmatic theology, which are oriented to human fulfillment or social betterment. Fourth, the principles of finitude and transcendence frame the public discourse of pragmatic theology. Thus conversation is possible, argues Anderson, if we make pragmatism the “communicable term between atheistic pragmatists and American academic theologians. Where pragmatism is the communicable term, our substantive disagreements may center on our preferences for certain kinds of naturalisms, whether materialistic, philosophical, atheistic, or theistic.” Anderson’s point is that regardless of the discipline, pragmatic sensibilities guide the inquiry and it is pragmatic theology when these ideas, concepts or claims are construed theologically. Nevertheless, as with other academic

10. Ibid., 52.
12. Ibid., 109.
disciplines, these theological claims are analyzed, critiqued and sometimes rejected.

Stout reminds us that if we are to address the critical issues facing our society in a meaningful way, we must figure out a way to work around the impasse. He proposes that conversation is the solution and it involves listening to the other’s views all the way through, trying to understand each other’s perspective and being open to criticism. He believes that the academy can facilitate and model this for the larger society and he conceives of a public philosophy as a type of pragmatism that transcends the current standoff between secular liberalism and the new traditionalists by borrowing crucial insights from both sides. A public discussion that utilizes democratic reasoning and focuses on what the people have in common is an effective approach. The concept of tradition and engaging from the perspective of an American citizen are examples of normative commitments that can help to guide the discussion. Norms, such as the Bill of Rights and Emancipation Proclamation, afford us the freedoms and hold us, as participating citizens, accountable. As Americans, we have inherited democracy. As such, democratic thought is a discussion that is articulated in words and actions and is reflected in the way we think and talk about ethical situations. It also consists of intellectuals’ reflective examination and critique of this democracy. Stout emphasizes the importance of common entry points and to understanding the various historical contexts and experiences. Though constraints accompany expressive freedom, he builds his case for the value of points of view. Stout recommends three norms for incorporating religious premises into political discussions: in the effort to be respectful avoid being condescending; use the rhetorical strategy of expressing one’s own view and being fair-minded and sincere in one’s critique of the other; and practice civility

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and listen with an open mind. Stout asserts that the *democratic intellectual* as cultural critic must maintain a balance in his/her indictment of society. The critic, as Stout notes, is obliged to condone and to denounce; however, these lines are blurred, and so he/she must perform the task very carefully, tactfully, mindful of one’s privilege.

**Leadership and Ideology**

For West, as it relates to the political aspect of pragmatism, prophetic pragmatism is explicitly a politically motivated form of cultural criticism that takes seriously the ideals of participatory democracy. West’s fundamental argument is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy results in its conception as a form of cultural criticism. American pragmatism is a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment. As the culmination of American pragmatism, prophetic pragmatism speaks to the major impediments in the wider role for pragmatism in American thought. Prophetic pragmatism is courageously resistant and relentlessly critical of culture and of self. In this way, fetishism and idolizing of democracy is avoided due to the balance between being outraged by and organizing against unnecessary forms of social misery while remaining open to its shortcomings.

In prophetic pragmatism, creative democracy is the deliberation by the people who hold the professionals accountable. Citizens, by virtue of their participation, mold the civil consciousness. Prophetic pragmatism takes seriously moral discourse, the integrity and character of those engaged, the ideals of participatory democracy, and the uniqueness of each person. The

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prophetic pragmatist is an organic intellectual and a cultural critic. He/she uses methods of strategic thinking to provoke human agency by highlighting the operations of powers and articulating the existence of institutional evil in social orders. Thus, asserts West, the praxis of prophetic pragmatism is *tragic action with revolutionary intent and always-visionary outlook*. As a form of cultural criticism, the philosophical task of prophetic pragmatism is to provoke an emotional response to new interpretations of the world that is politically relevant and that enhances human dignity and progress. Several examples illustrate this point.

African-American women as social witnesses deliberately dedicated resources designed to develop the African American, to affirm his/her sense of identity and to cultivate self-sufficiency. Moreover, they lent their leadership to the various social movements. African-American feminist and womanist scholars expounded on the complex and historical experiences of Africans enslaved in America and on African-American women, their role in the cultural formation and sustainment, their cultural and social analysis, and their concern for the well-being/health of community. African-American females’ scholarly response to the initial construct of Black Theology expanded the discourse and added further legitimacy as a uniquely African-American perspective. Another example is the historical and contemporary scholarship of African-American scholars. They provide methodologies and critiques of the African-American culture and the larger American culture that is beneficial to this larger discussion; for example, how we might bridge this cultural divide between the academy and society and between the secular and the sacred. Scholars such as, West, Townes, Glaude, and Anderson, articulate pragmatic philosophies, public theologies, and social critiques and analysis while simultaneously engaging their colleagues in the academy and their constituents/affinity groups
without relinquishing the essence of their faith system and heritage. They share the common goal of promoting intellectual and organic inquiry and public discourse that is useful for African Americans and the larger society.

West’s prophetic pragmatism provides another example, as does Anderson who argues for a shared relationship between pragmatic theology and philosophy in the academy. Anderson’s book *Pragmatic Theology* is an expansion of his book *Ontological Blackness*. His recent published work *Creative Exchange* reflects many of the key elements he lays out in *pragmatic theology*. For Anderson, pragmatic theology can contribute to American public life because it tests ideas by probing their consequences and finding in the experience of shared consequences the appropriate grounds for connecting scholars and non-scholars. Anderson argues for a religious interpretation of pragmatic naturalism that justifies the public philosophy and public theology discourses and interpretations of the world and human experience that can be useful for a public morality. This type of conversation is possible because the public philosopher and theologian share a common history of secularization in American intellectual history. This is also applicable to the evolution of African-American philosophy and theological discourse such as Black Theology. In an effort to articulate the African-American identity and contextualize the concept of Black Power to the community, Black Theology emerged from the civil rights efforts and evolved into a formal scholarship in the academy. In its first fifty years as a formal discourse, Black Theology has been marked with self-criticism by a diverse group of African-American religious scholars and clergy. Consequently, theological developments and discourse have expanded due to the critique and the contributions by African-American women, particularly women clergy and womanist scholars. Current scholarship is stretching this
discourse in terms of its relevance in postmodern culture and inclusion of a diverse community of African Americans. The dialogue has evolved to a more multidisciplinary one that involves multiple dimensions of black religious and non-religious thought and implications for black ontology and culture. Moreover, this “new era” in Black Theology, to borrow from Dwight Hopkins \(^{15}\) is marked by research and publications centered on primary African-American sources, womanist and black feminist scholarship, and gay and lesbian scholars regarding the church and the academy’s theological beliefs. Thus, Black Theology and the Black Church tradition face many challenges to being relevant in this post-modern culture. They must address the fact that the African-American community has diverse views regarding religious faith, interpretations, and ideologies as to how the Black Church should function in a pluralistic culture. Moreover, in light of the manifold challenges facing the African-American community and the larger community, the historical response by the Black Church may no longer be the most relevant or effective response.

**Notion of Truth as a Worldview and in Public Discourse**

I agree with William James’s position that truth is both an ends and a means, and the practical value of true ideas is determined by the practical importance of their objects. As Townes notes, value is subjective and it works well for those who are included, but not for those who are marginalized and considered as not having value. In this regard, it is important that we are vigilant at making sure that truths are validated or at least understood as based on that person’s or group's experience and that we maintain a willingness to engage in respectful and

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critical inquiry rather than taking stances and negating the positions. As Stout suggests failure to engage the other in discourse limits our knowledge and closes off opportunities to learn and to grow. The role of the pragmatist as cultural critic is to be the prophetic voice as ascribed by West. He/she is called to raise the concerns of the crisis of conflict in such a way as to compel others to respond for the good. As the organic intellectual, she/he provides the people with options and capacities to pursue viable solutions. At times, this insistence on an inclusive and dynamic notion of truth can happen democratically through methods such as conversational and conciliatory means.

There are times when communicating is provocative, such as what occurred in the Woolworth sit-ins, the March to Montgomery, and the Freedom Rides. The Civil Rights Era, as articulated by certain individuals and leaders, challenged the truth claims, particularly of those in positions of power and influence. The various events raised consciousness by highlighting competing truths and deeming the habits informed by old notions as unacceptable and harmful because of their negative effects on the entire society. Consequently, upon being enlightened, people changed and determined new actions. Experience, knowledge, and truth, as part of the moral discourse, are important to the cultural critic, whose role is to mediate perceived or known facts and data. As mediators and interpreters, each venue’s narrator has an obligation to analyze new and old information, thus challenging truth claims and providing a revised history that does not negate, but, rather, builds upon competing truths.

Civil rights and the development of African-American identity and citizenship as contributors and beneficiaries of American life challenged America’s idea of true and deemed it important to do so in the pursuit for the good of all. These new truth claims and historical
insights have not only changed the line of questioning, but have offered new responses. These claims and responses have been assimilated, validated, corroborated, and verified. In this sense, truth, at least in this moment of time, is thus both theory and praxis. This is because cultural critics value the other, utilize various disciplines to analyze truth claims and include in the analysis the varying experiences and notions of truth expressed by women, immigrants and refugees, people who are gay or lesbian, and people who are poor or affluent.

Townes, for example, challenges her academy to provide its colleagues who are actively engaged in the larger community with the resources to help them do so effectively. Stout challenges these same constituents to take the time to converse and provide each the opportunity to articulate their respective positions as comprehensively as they can and to be open to criticism. Both recognize that this is ambitious, complex, and difficult. Both argue that it is necessary, because even though one’s reality or worldview is this struggle and ultimate relinquishing of habit, at stake is the well-being of others as human beings and as citizens, which includes the academy.

Conclusion

My thesis is that the pragmatic tradition—its basic conceptuality and role in discourse about public policy and social change—provides insight as to how academic theology, along with secularism, may be useful in shaping public policy. To support this claim, I examined the classical pragmatists’ and the neopragmatists’ treatment of pragmatism in public discourse, particularly as it relates to the issue of religion and secularism. I examined the important works of four neopragmatists and contemporary pragmatists, Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Cornel West, and Victor Anderson, and their respective treatments of the role of religious language in
public discourse. I assessed their critiques of culture and the legitimacy of theology in public discourse. These pragmatists had varied applications of pragmatic method to cultural issues such as examining metaphysical problems, determining the legitimacy of philosophy and academic theology in the academy, and mediating polarized positions in a democratic society. For the contemporary and neopragmatists, American pragmatism functions as a form of critique of culture.

Pragmatism as an intellectual discipline provided a method for West, Anderson, and Townes to analyze and articulate African-American thought and tradition. It offered a method of looking at the consequences of ideas and circumstances shaped by the African-American experience, for example, to convey and critique the implications of historical development of African-American thought, the development of womanist thought and its implications, and the involvement of the Black Church and its representative leaders in public discourse. Pragmatism provided African-American pragmatists such as West, Glaude, and Anderson a framework through which their respective works could cross over into the larger culture and be considered useful to the larger public discourse such as democracy and the academy.

My assessment of the historical development of pragmatism leads me to conclude that pragmatism is useful in a variety of disciplines, as demonstrated by Peirce and his use in logic (science and metaphysics), James and its use in psychology and to examine a number of philosophical and theological problems, and Dewey’s application of pragmatism in politics, education, and the arts. Its transition to contemporary times and usages by Rorty, Stout, West, and Anderson shows that pragmatism is still relevant. Rorty is credited for reviving an interest in pragmatism, and its current treatment is proving its usefulness to scholars in a variety of
disciplines, providing them a way to enter into discourse and to conduct research that addresses current issues and examines contemporary culture. As it relates to public policy and social change, the collection of work produced by Stout, West, and Townes and their respective methodologies and arguments provide examples of the pragmatic approach and demonstrate the basic conceptuality and role of American pragmatism.

I understand pragmatism as a method of inquiry and a guide for action, in terms of both personal reflection and the public sphere. As demonstrated in this research, pragmatism is useful in social analysis and public discourse. As a method of inquiry, pragmatism must operate within some level of constraint in order to foster rational and meaningful discourse. A number of factors determine the constraints: the discipline, the topic or problem examined, the participants, and the language are just a few. Stout, for example, in his discussion on democracy, suggested the use of norms such as American citizen. It is a universal term applied to all who fulfill the U.S. requirements for citizenship, and it implies a general understanding of the responsibilities and accountabilities applied to all citizens. In pragmatism as applied to social analysis, setting and maintaining parameters may be difficult because society and culture change and cultural criticism is not only a quantitative but a qualitative process and, to some degree, a subjective process that also allows for the new discoveries that emerge as a result of the process. Therefore, the pragmatic approach must incorporate reason, meaningful discourse, study, and a means of managing random statements and actions. It must foster critical thinking and sound analysis. This also means that it is important to define the terms and rules of engagements.

The pragmatic maxim is the guiding principle, and the overarching message is that theory and action are inseparable. As stated in earlier sections, the outcome (what is observed), should
be consistent with the input (the information, facts, ideas). If they are not consistent, then you must examine to determine the reason for the inconsistency. Pragmatism is not dialectical in the sense that its intent is to refute. Yet it looks at information critically to determine the value, usefulness, and legitimacy of a particular claim. Pragmatism promotes an open and inclusive approach to critical analysis of the claims, paying particular attention to the aspects that are contradictory. As James notes, pragmatism may be the harmonizer in that in its mediatorial role (to use Anderson’s term), it works within the dualism, looking for the consistencies, the meaning and so forth, in an attempt to reconcile the differing points of view or claims. West in particular demonstrates the pragmatic union of theory and action and the fluid nature of the pragmatic approach. He began his corpus by using the pragmatic method to critique American philosophy’s negligence in including the African-American philosophical perspective. He then constructed an African-American philosophical thought. Later he shifted his focus to critique the prophetic Christian tradition, building off of the framework crafted in his earlier works on African American thought. In recent works, he applies this framework to the academy and American philosophy. Throughout this intellectual process, West operates publicly as a provocateur and organic intellectual, in the academic arena and in the larger society. This development includes self-analysis as indicated in several of his writings and an attempt to reconcile Marxist social analysis, his appreciation of the arts, and his religious tradition.

Pragmatism provides a means to engage in public discourse through the application of critical and objective analysis and discourse. It is a continuous evaluation of information that is useful in the process of understanding an individual, group, or school of thought’s basis for their respective truth claims. Pragmatism considers the historical contexts and cultural nuances that
explain habits. Habits, as noted earlier, are facts and experiences and are determined to be true for a particular individual or group. In this respect, for the pragmatist, the philosophy of language and historicism may be useful. An example is James’s point that the correct response to the problem of the squirrel going around the tree is determined by the meaning of *going around*.

Pragmatism helps to gain clarity by defining terminology and its literal or symbolic use. It helps to clarify ideas, concepts, theories and assertions. In public discourse, it is important to understand the influence and impact of history and experience on people’s use of language, their perceptions, and actions. In this respect, pragmatism may examine the historical impact of an event on the concept of habit. Such awareness may provide points of entry or conversation starters, as well as continue the discourse.

Pragmatism, as a sign, mediates cultural criticism, and, as Anderson asserts, it mediates public philosophy and academic theology. As a mediating source, the pragmatic method of inquiry unpacks, for example, historical tensions in order to provide a means for addressing these tensions when they surface in public discourse, such as what exists between secularist and theological approaches to shaping public policy. Prophetic pragmatism as a mediating source, promotes the perpetual cycle of creating, identifying, or supporting mediating signs that are relevant and effective in contemporary culture and addressing emerging trends and patterns. The task of the prophetic pragmatist is to integrate reason and action to convey the new truths and realities that emerge by virtue of reflection upon experiences and revised histories.

I agree with Anderson that the classical pragmatists, Peirce and James in particular, made possible a pragmatic theology. They did so by using the pragmatic method to assess the practical value of theological and religious claims. They determined that because these claims were useful
to some, from a pragmatic view, they have value. I accept Anderson’s understanding of the task of public theology and of public philosophy, which is to “integrate the various languages of the multiple communities of discourse that constitute public life.”\textsuperscript{16} He suggests that the test of whether public theology is adequate is determined by its ability to convey the relevance of its theological meaning of religious life in a democratic society. Participants determine the adequacy of public theology. The determinations may vary depending upon a number of factors such as geography, experiences and knowledge. The type of institution and their respective cultures are also factors; universities and the church may have different standards, but standards are also different within each respective institution. The context in which public theology is assessed is also a factor, such as the relationship of public theology and science, politics, education, and health. Still, I agree with Anderson that the academic theologian is responsible for making this relationship clear to the other disciplines. For example, West posed a basic question, “How does a present-day Christian think about and act on enhancing the plight of the poor, the predicament of the powerless, and the quality of life for all in a prophetic manner?”\textsuperscript{17} The academic theologian as organic intellectual must set out to answer this type of question and ought to use the pragmatic method to do so.

As cultural critic and analyst, the organic intellectual/pragmatist raises consciousness (habit) and conscience (identity). In the pragmatist's quest for truth, old knowledge, experience, history, discoveries, and theories are all in play, which can generate conflict. Yet these competing truths ought to compel one to determine new ways to respond for self and for others.

\textsuperscript{16} Victor Anderson, \textit{Pragmatic Theology}, 126.

\textsuperscript{17} Cornel West, \textit{Evasion}, xi.
The pragmatist as intellectual and practitioner is in a unique position to mediate this process for the public. The prophetic pragmatist, as a provocateur and moral agent of whom experience is critical, serves to ignite and to respond to the reality of change. Townes and West exemplify this through their various mediating efforts to sustain and strengthen the connection of the larger society and social issues to the academy. In this respect, West’s assertions are valid. His fundamental argument is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy results in its conception as a form of cultural criticism. As such, intellectuals put forth the meaning of America in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.

As cultural critic, the prophetic pragmatist and pragmatists in general are responsible for paying attention to the impact of extreme thinking and its habits of conduct. The reality may be that in a particular moment in time, groups such as Nationalists and Separatists may not get to, let alone look at, the center or come to the table. The realities of hatred, anger, and illness may truly impair the ability of some to be able to participate in a public discourse or accept actions and decisions that extend the benefit to others. Nevertheless, as Stout reasons, we cannot allow that to stop and as Townes and West encourage us, we must be vigilant and responsible. Philosophers such as Rorty are important to scholarship, to provide critical analysis of philosophy and culture and to assist in constructive discourse in the public sphere and ensure that no one entity or ideology functions as the voice of authority. Thus, the challenge is to do so in such a way as to avoid the categorical dismissal of an entire group, whether they ascribe to a secular/nontheistic viewpoint or a religious/theistic one. Thus, positions such as Rorty’s that
categorically dismiss an entire group, in this case the religious perspective, cannot be the voice or the determinate as to who may participate, nor can anyone who ascribes to a religious ideology seek to exclude anyone who does not. That kind of dismissal contradicts the intentions of the classical pragmatists and stops the conversation. Prophetic pragmatism as a form of cultural criticism challenges positions such as articulated above. Moreover, it ought to serve as a guide for how people from different traditions and religious ideologies can work together as exemplified during the Civil Rights Era through the Black Church and its leaders, and as articulated by womanist scholars such as Townes.

Religion is Commensurate with Pragmatism and is Useful in Public Discourse

Earlier, I challenged Rorty’s position that religion is incommensurate with pragmatism and provided a number of reasons why I disagree with his position. American history is full of examples that contradict his claim, where social movements, such as the civil rights efforts and documents such as the Declaration of Independence demonstrate how a religiously ascribed ethic holds its own in public discourse. Moreover, Stout, Anderson, Townes, and West provide methodologies that are counter to Rorty’s position. In addition to Cornel West’s concept of prophetic pragmatism, Black Theology and womanist thought reflect the basic tenets of the pragmatic tradition.

In addition to the classical pragmatist’s pragmatically determining religion to be useful, Cornel West’s concept of prophetic pragmatism demonstrates how a religiously ascribed ethic can hold its own in public discourse. His method provides a framework through which religion could play a role in public policy and social change. West began his published career constructing a philosophical thought in which religion was an integral part. Both constructs,
African-American thought and prophetic pragmatism, integrate secular and religious notions. West provides a way to use religiously ascribed terminology to address public issues. For example, an integral component of West’s prophetic pragmatism is Marxist social analysis and the biblical and historical concept of the prophetic. The prophetic indicates the critical analysis and calling out of the tragic and proposing opportunities that promote transformation. Initially applied to the African-American community and their understanding of God’s involvement with their lived experience, the central message of tragedy, transformation and thus hope, courage, and strength are informed by history, literature, and biblical narratives. The prophetic voice of church and community leaders issues from organic intellectuals who helped to shape identity and promote human agency, self-sufficiency, and creatively used resources. The church plays a prophetic role in public discourse and the sacred texts used are the biblical narratives, literary writings, philosophical and theological scholars, and U.S. documents.

The historical events of the civil rights efforts in the U.S., and specifically the Black Church tradition during the Civil Rights Era, provide a site of investigation for ways in which pragmatism was used in the quest for equality and justice in these communities. With the space and support of the Black Church leadership, clubs, fraternal organizations, and civil rights organizations worked with individuals and organizations that ascribed to various ideologies and traditions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Humanism, Labor Parties, and Socialism—with the common goal of freedom and equality. African Americans used a variety of approaches to challenge the laws and to provide a counter-response to discriminatory and offensive behaviors that contradicted this claim. They were inspired and sustained through prophetic preaching, teaching, and worship, which were central to keeping them motivated in achieving
freedom and attaining equal and civil rights. Those who fought for equal rights during the Civil Rights Era were compelled to do so because of core values and beliefs as articulated by the Black Church tradition and align with the pragmatic maxim. Their beliefs and efforts were further cultivated and reinforced by organic intellectuals, who, as formal and informal bridge leaders, such as Ella Baker and Rev. Dr. King, exemplify West’s concept of prophetic pragmatism.

Religious institutions have an important role in analyzing culture and in public discourse such as in helping to shape public policy, cultivating religious leaders and community bridge leaders, and supporting social clubs and civil rights organizations. Black Theology, its formal inception, and womanist thought and methodology provide a site to examine how secularism and religion have worked pragmatically in public discourse. A type of public theology and certainly an example of West’s prophetic pragmatism is exemplified in the social movement of civil rights in the United States, the Black Church tradition and its influence in African-American culture and identity as citizens of the United States. There are also examples within the larger church institution that connected its congregants to the social issues. Similar to the Black Church tradition, the Christian Church is an institutional symbol for action on rights, justice, moral imperative, social development and civility. Some would argue that these positions are not broadly accepted and are considered archaic. Yet what is inarguable is that, in the U.S., the churches and the synagogues, mosques, and temples—conservative, liberal, or progressive—are impactful. As asserted by Dewey, silence is action, the responsibility lies in the involvement of its congregants and citizens of the U.S. to lend their voice, to articulate their faith and how it informs action, and what determines right action.
When examined from the pragmatic perspective of usefulness, theistic ideology may be useful for some and offensive to others. The reverse is also true, i.e., that the use of a nontheistic approach may be rejected by some and embraced by others. The pragmatist’s task is to mediate these positions. It is a challenge because historically these have become polarizing positions that are packed with emotion, bad experiences, and suspicion of the motives of the other. As Stout rightly noted, agreements and common entry points are not always achieved in a relatively short period of time, or may never occur in a particular lifetime. It is good to remain hopeful, because within U.S. history are numerous examples of change, though markedly slow and painful, as those involved in the civil rights efforts can attest.

Religion and Secularism are Equally Important in the Public Discourse

Religious and secularist ideologies are useful in identifying and assessing inconsistencies in public policies and provide viable methods for analyzing culture, understanding moral frameworks, and inspiring others to act. Civil rights efforts and academic scholarship as presented here provide examples of how reason and revelation, as regulative principles, work in an integrated way to resolve public policy that benefits the larger society. These principles are framed in language such as justice, rights, freedom, and equality.

Stout, Anderson, and West each provide examples through theory and through the application of theory. African-American women such as Ella Baker are historical examples of how this may occur. West, Stout, and Anderson use the pragmatic tradition to critique culture (academic, political, and the larger society) and to propose models for discourse that provide points of entry and frameworks through which secularism and theology may operate collaboratively. West and Townes acknowledge that they are shaped by a religiously ascribed
ethic, and model how this can hold its own in public discourse. Stout deals with the tensions of the polarities of these ideologies and provides guidance as to how they might engage one another in public discourse. Townes, as social witness, addresses the womanist response to the impact of injustice and evil on the health and well-being of society. Anderson’s public is the academy. He charges academic theologians to assume the responsibility of taking the time to be reflective and to better articulate clearly the relationship between theology and other disciplines. Their diverse approaches are inclusive and do not require a relinquishing of core values and beliefs.

Subordinating theology to secularism or secularism to theology contributes to misunderstandings, polarization, and hegemony. Prophetic pragmatism can function as a methodological framework through which religion could play a role alongside secularists in mediating the public discourse in order to shape public policy and social change. It is important to utilize such an approach because human experiences are diverse and influenced by a number of different factors such as history, traditions, and ideologies. Secularism and theology are integral to those experiences and are considered important by the individuals and groups who participate in public discourse. The task of the pragmatist is to facilitate the process of dismantling artificial boundaries through pedagogy to represent different approaches and identifying common points of entry or conversation starters, once the historical development of secularization is understood and the historical relationship between theology and secularism is understood. Dealing with the ideology of secularism and theology is equivalent to and presents challenges similar to those of any historically different ideological perspectives, whether democratic and republican, conservative and liberal, or capitalist and socialist; historically, there have been tensions, extreme actions, but eventually mutual respect and understanding. Each is
subject to or is at the mercy of the individual. Secularism and religion have flaws and they evolve as people and culture evolve, but exclusion of one or the other is not pragmatism. What makes it pragmatism is the fact that the different ideologies are at the table, as well as the methods employed to facilitate discourse and to analyze claims and culture, which by virtue of new information, new thoughts and action emerge.

This dissertation argues for a public theology that incorporates both reason and revelation as regulative principles in shaping the public policies of a democratic society that benefit and aid the individual and society. These regulative principles are fluid and are determined by rigorous scholarship, culture, and ideologies, and their applications in a diverse society. Therefore, it also argues for the value of the role of the practitioner—the academic and the community leader—in public discourse, regardless of their respective ideologies, to mediate dualisms such as secularism and religion.

Conflict and Public Discourse

In the preceding sections, certain characteristics of pragmatism were discussed and certain assumptions were in operation. First, the pragmatic method of inquiry in and of itself is quite complex. Consider the seminal works of Peirce and James; its development and the constructive stages as articulated by James and Dewey; and its revival and nuances ascribed to it by Rorty. Pragmatists such as West, Townes, and Stout incorporate much of Peirce, James, and Dewey and illustrate its usefulness in postmodern society, a society that is filled with a wide array of ideologies, opinions, diverse cultures and affinity groups, all of whom co-exist as citizens and guests in the U.S. This reinforces another assumption, which is the certainty that in public discourse and inherent in these competing truths is conflict or the potential for conflict.
Conflict is the passionate and/or cognitive reactions of people responding to situations based on their representative knowledge, their experiences, sense of truth, and sense of moral obligation.

Conflict, to the pragmatist, signals a number of things such as change, information, and inquiry. It could lead to new insights, discoveries, and to constructive outcomes. Conflict, for Peirce, is the tension between method of inquiry as a scientific method to attain new discoveries or to counter stagnation. It suggests new information that emerges because of new thoughts and actions and the subsequent actions and thoughts. For James, conflict is the method to operate between competing principles such as science and religion, which are informed by experience and which vary for each person and change over time. For Dewey, conflict is necessary if change is wanted. Conflict can spark the willingness or the decision to act on new truths or realities by virtue of the information that forces one to test the basic ideas or habits from which they have operated. For Rorty, it indicates the need for a new language that is secular and fosters conversation yet challenges the position of religion as the source of authority. For Stout, polarizing views may result in breakdown of public discourse. To West, the indication of the tension is the oligarchs and plutocrats overpowering and disempowering the masses and the opportunity for transformation. To Anderson, the presence of conflict indicates the need for a public theology that is compatible to these postmodern times. For Townes, the presence of conflict is the impact of adversarial structures that have imposed on society’s health and the well-being of every individual.

Conflict may be the indicator that something is awry and in this respect serves as the catalyst to cause people to pause and examine situations more closely. It is shaped by and shapes the discourse, including whether it will be a private or a public one, how it occurs, and who
participates. In public discourse, if managed properly, conflict may be useful in resolving public issues and shaping public policy, provided its purpose is clear, which is to raise consciousness and the conscience. Proper management includes opportunity for conversation, promotion of listening, understanding, and posing questions to gain clarity. In this respect, the evasion promotes critical analysis, discussion, and clarifying questions in order to enhance knowledge and awareness. It has the potential of resulting in the emergence of new ideals and transforming culture. Conflict resolution may require clarification of terms or reaching agreements on acceptable terms in order to provide the language to engage in discourse or to pursue a new endeavor. Reason is critical to performing cultural analyses of responses to pragmatic questions such as what difference would a particular claim make if it were true, or the importance of that claim. The pragmatist should test the responses against the questions of values and moral ought with respect to truth claims. For example, in the Civil Rights Era, the issues of truth and reality translated into freedom and rights or rights talk. The scholars and leaders asserted the value of the human being—people and their quality of life, their right to exist and benefit fully in humanity and in its political and social discourse. Cultural analysis thus was the critical analysis of systems, particularly as they related to equity, access, privilege, etc., and mediated through various frames such as institutions, ideologies, public policy, and public discourse.

The pragmatists, regardless of their particular ideologies or methodologies, are in a unique position to mediate conflict. Given the many tragic circumstances today, there is a need for leadership, to act as mediators regardless of what they are called: prophetic pragmatists, organic intellectuals, edifying philosophers, or democratic intellectuals. Pragmatism as mediator of competing truths and realities and as cultural critic has the unique ability to be integrated into
most academic disciplines and the larger society. Formal and informal leadership—prophet
cic pragmatist, edifying philosopher, democratic intellectual, bridge leaders, organic intellectuals
and cultural critics—mediate the differing points of view. Leadership exists in a variety of
settings: in the academy, in the community, and in institutions such as the Christian Church.
Bridge leaders, for example, functioned as informal leaders in the African-American community.
Yet there were also formal leaders such as Rev. Dr. King, who function as spokespeople and
represent the larger vision of the community, as do clergy for example in the Catholic Church.
Rorty’s edifying philosopher promotes hermeneutics and identifies vocabulary in order to keep
the conversation going. Whatever the title, the functions are similar: to initiate and facilitate
conversation, to clarify, and as cultural critics, to be provocative. The pragmatist must work to
maintain a balance between the dualism and be aware of his/her own bias, mindful of how it is
operating in the discourse.

Philosophy, argues Stout, can contribute to fostering rational discourse, provided there is
the will to create communities and institutions in which the virtues of good people and good
conversation can flourish. According to Stout, in order to make a rational choice and one that is
not arbitrary, we need to know whose choice we are considering and the epistemic situation. I
contend that pedagogy and academic rigor are useful in this process. Academic rigor is
interdisciplinary, involving research, theory, analysis, and discourse. Pragmatism requires
academic rigor and it promotes an interdisciplinary, pluralistic approach that incorporates reason
and praxis. Peirce argued that we gain clarity as we move through the stages of firstness,
secondness, and thirdness. We test our theories, or act out of our habits of mind, and we examine
the new information in the context of our old truths and we determine the usefulness of both
types of knowledge (old and new). Pedagogy provides a method for learning and listening that may result in raised consciousness and understanding. Designed to inspire action and provide tools for effective action, pedagogy can present other realities that mediate the present reality and lead to new ideas and habits. Conflict in this sense, though difficult, unpleasant, and tiring, yields good outcomes and holds the promise of new discoveries.

In public discourse within a democratic society, certain things will always present a challenge to any kind of change and quest for truth and discovery. The tensions between ideologies and cultural distinctions are a few examples. These challenges can hinder constructive discourse and public policy change, bring things to a halt, and lead to extreme tragic outcomes. Cultural differences due to experience and ideologies also influence the public discourse. Cultural differences, whether by virtue of ideological rhetoric such as liberal secularism and religious traditionalism, by virtue of cultural ignorance, or by virtue of survival, become apparent particularly in responses to social issues and public policy and are often brought to the forefront. Although an impasse should be a concern because such failure can lead to violence or loss of something dear, Stout notes that there are innumerable reasons why most disagreements are not settled rationally; this does not necessarily imply a dialectical impasse, they are just disagreements.

Secularism and Religion in Public Discourse

A prevailing conflict in the discourse on pragmatism and as it relates to public discourse is the issue of the relationship between secularism and religion. Anderson, West, and Stout all assert that to understand the problem between pragmatic philosophers and academic theologians, one must understand what Anderson calls the *secular problematic* and the question of how we
should treat secularism. In his version of prophetic pragmatism, West incorporates secularism, for example Marxist social analysis, and religion, such as notion of prophet and the clergy as organic intellectual. Anderson treats secularism as a historical process in answering fundamental questions of meaning and value. He argues that academic theology and neopragmatic philosophy provide different answers to contemporary cultural questions and problems in public life, and secularization helps to account for the continuities and discontinuities between these two intellectual disciplines.

As a cultural phenomenon, secularism has several different meanings, and understanding these nuances is important to appreciating the development of democracy and the diversity in a democratic social structure. For example, the U.S. Constitution was an attempt to address the secularism borne out of religious diversity (Congregationalists and Baptists) and the difficulty in articulating and validating biblical authority and ascribing to a unified expression of Christianity. For some cultures, this type of distinction between the secular and sacred is blurred and not always clearly defined, for example, in African-American tradition’s music nuances of the gospel and the blues. Understanding the historical treatment of secularism also is important to the understanding of how people of faith address contemporary issues. For example, Gandhi, with his understanding of Hinduism, led a non-violent movement that has since been adopted worldwide, most notably by the civil rights efforts led by SCLC and SNCC. The pragmatic framework enables the public conversation to coalesce around policy influencers from all sectors…the religious and secular and allows fundamental differences to coexist while building consensus around common goals and objectives.
Closing Thoughts

Social issues are much more complex than portrayed here. Further study is necessary which will require a broad-based interdisciplinary examination of the complex intersections of disciplines such as economics, sociology, anthropology, and history. Philosophy and theology are important disciplines that ought to be included in the discourse, pragmatism provides a way for that to occur, and the pragmatic maxim ought to operate as the guiding principle. The pragmatic approach entails a perpetual process of inquiry, research, conversation, analysis, and action. A public theology that incorporates both reason and revelation is most effective when it is mediated by pragmatic tendencies, such as the pragmatic method of incorporating both theory and praxis and mediating between binary positions. This method of inquiry must promote academic rigor, pedagogy, and understanding of the significance of language in public discourse. The pragmatic theologian or philosopher as prophetic pragmatist/organic intellectual has an important role in reframing and facilitating public conversations to address public issues and model civil discourse.

Proverbs 4:5-9 encourages the young to embrace the lessons given to them and says that acquiring wisdom and insight will be the most beneficial. Additionally, in Luke 7:36-46 is the story of Simon’s criticism of Jesus’ allowing a “sinful” woman to touch him, thereby defiling him as a Prophet. Jesus, as provocateur, engages Simon in a conversation that includes an analysis of the relationship between circumstances and expressions of gratitude. Pragmatism challenges us to engage in conversation in order to gain greater insight and understanding, being mindful to include those on the margins and those with whom we disagree. The desire to gain knowledge calls and/or obligates us to appreciate and respect the diversity of thought and
experiences. The process is not always easy, nor can we always anticipate the outcomes. Yet, what is certain is that new questions and ways of being emerge, and we have the opportunity to continue the process of gaining greater wisdom, new insights, and, hopefully, as it relates to these United States, a better democracy.

A Prolegomenon of Future Work: A Case Study of Emilie Townes’s Pragmatic Method

Typically, the basic genealogy of African-American pragmatists would follow as such: W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Cornel West, Victor Anderson, and Eddie Glaude. However, we must revise it and include African-American female scholars. A task for future research is to identify women—past and present—who belong in this lineage. Fortunately, this is possible due to the work of prophetic pragmatists and organic intellectuals such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the women named in this research, and many others. African-American feminist and womanist scholarship is forging an impressive presence in the academy and as formal bridge leaders and thousands of African-American women have received doctoral degrees since Anna Julia Cooper earned hers.

Unfortunately, history and current scholarship does not formally treat African-American female historical experiences and scholarship as being a part of the pragmatic tradition. Nor have African-American female scholars located their work in the pragmatic tradition. The intellectual work of Belinda Robnett, Rosetta Ross, and Joy James, their methodologies and the women they studied, provide points of entry for further examination. Additionally, I have argued that African-American religious women as informal bridge leaders are the living embodiment of pragmatism and have been since its early stages of development. Ella Baker is one representative figure of the prophetic pragmatist/organic intellectual, and Emilie Townes is another.
Townes is a representative figure of the intellectual discourses by African-American feminist and womanist scholars. She situates herself in several locations: the academy, the church, the classroom, and the community, and in this respect, she fits the organic intellectual as described by West. Townes’s intellectual work deals with the African-American culture and experience, especially African-American women. She critically analyzes structures such as public policies that promote a specific ideology and power dynamic that negatively affect the individual and the community. Townes affirms and validates the African-American culture and African-American women in particular and is concerned with the well-being of the individual and the community. Though Townes does not explicitly identify herself as a pragmatist, the genius of her methodological approach is her application of pragmatic themes in womanist thought. Townes calls her methodology *theoethical*. This method is influenced by theological constructs and ideologies. Moreover, Townes uses social history to perform what she calls *interstructured analysis*. Interstructures are the structures of race, gender, class, and sexuality, which are classic points of departure of womanist scholars.\(^\text{18}\)

In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes provides a concrete illustration of womanist thought and how it aligns with pragmatism. Townes’s work is a critical analysis of political and theological ideologies, practices, and truth claims. Similar to West, Townes deals with the issue of suffering due primarily to political and social hegemony, which West equates with the tragic and Townes with evil. Hegemony is evil because it marginalizes and perpetuates negative stereotypes and influences public policies to the benefit of a few and the detriment of many. For Townes, hegemony is the promotion of political, social, or religious

\(^{18}\) By comparison, African-American male scholars typically enter into the discourse from the experience of race and class.
control over others who become victims of these hegemonic structures. She examines how we internalize these hegemonic structures, how we treat them as truth claims, and how they play out through what she calls *fantastic hegemonic imagination*. This critical analysis includes an examination of the role of human agency as it relates to one’s involvement in the construction and perpetuation of fantastic hegemonic imaginations. Based on her analysis of social history, Townes determines that the development of individualism promotes and perpetuates hegemonic structures by attempting to create historical amnesia. Townes argues that this loss of memory—of not knowing—is worse than not remembering. She argues instead that individual and community are inseparable, for it is in community that one develops communal responses to address social problems.

Townes’s approach illustrates the usefulness of the pragmatic method for examining the underside of internalization and the subjugation of consciousness, which one might argue is very similar to Dewey’s discussions on habit and consciousness. To keep the conversation going, Townes, similar to Rorty, treats language or vocabulary as important symbols to articulate and contextualize issues. For Townes, the concern is the power of these symbols and their effect on the larger U.S. culture. In *The Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes deconstructs stereotypical imageries used against black women, arguing that these perceptions perpetuate political and social hegemony. Her process of deconstruction is to perform an historical analysis of their social development, a development to which the religious community and the nonreligious community contributed. Townes then transforms these images by re-using them as language symbols to analyze their power to address social issues such as health care and as mediating tools to transform community.
As it relates to pragmatism, in its mediatorial role, to use Anderson’s term, Townes utilizes a dialogical approach, placing the tensions and agreements of various scholars in conversation. Comparatively, to build their case for their respective versions of pragmatism and its usefulness in public discourse, West and Anderson utilize the intellectual work of others to build their case for a public theology. For Townes, public theology is an integral part of the public discourse, and she incorporates the voices of the African-American female scholars from various theoethical disciplines such as ethics, sociology, theology, and political science. She places their distinct works in a conversation that is enlightening and that critically analyzes in order to liberate and transform. For West, Anderson, and Townes, each intellectual contribution can stand on its own (individual), yet in the Townes womanist approach, the individual contributor strengthens the collective intellectual voices (community).

Intersections of Womanist Thought and Pragmatism

Womanist methodology is mediatorial and interdisciplinary, and treats reason and action as inseparable. The four parts of womanist thought discussed in Chapter Six are descriptive. To be womanish is to be responsible, courageous and, as Townes noted in the previous chapter, a gatherer of knowledge. The womanist recognizes the seriousness and risk of her work, particularly to those in power. She is communal, operating as one who is responsible to and working within a community. Finally, the womanist, grounded in love, is committed to addressing injustices and inequities, particularly as they relate to women. As noted in Chapter Six, Deloris Williams asserts that womanist theologians and ethicists must remember that catalytic action is a female tradition and an essential model of authority. It requires a womanist memory of recalling in their tradition that women were leaders and catalysts for action and social
change.

As a maxim of conduct, womanism is the critical analysis and the courage to move outside of social constructs and boundaries and to do so responsibly. Womanism is the commitment to work towards the well-being of the community. It entails operating within the tragic and transforming it into something that is liberating, which requires more than simply critical analysis and courage; it requires love. Love is its guiding principle—love for life, for self, and for others. Love enables the womanist to work in and through the spaces of tragedy and evil and the spaces of marginalization and disrespect. Love sustains, heals, and empowers.

As stated earlier, a task for further study is to first identify African-American females whose work we could situate in the pragmatic tradition, especially in philosophy and theology. Another task for further analysis is to determine whether there is a unique perspective that womanist thought brings to the pragmatic tradition. In this constructive phase, we should seek answers to various questions. Given the unique intellectual point of departure of African-American women—that of race, gender, class, and sexuality—what are the benefits and limitations of utilizing a pragmatic approach to perform cultural analysis from a womanist perspective? In the pragmatic tradition, what makes womanist thought distinct and what difference would it make? Furthermore, what would constitute a womanist pragmatic perspective and how is that determined? Who will serve as philosophical and theological mentors and guides for the emerging African-American female pragmatists?

In addition to the discussion regarding the commonality as it relates to womanist and pragmatism’s mediatorial role and guiding principles, there are a few other potential entry points, beginning with the pragmatic treatment of inquiry and of truth claims. Pragmatism and womanist
scholarship treat inquiry as a process of critical analysis and of asking probing questions and are concerned with the definite difference a truth would have. In womanist thought, for example, truth claims would include an examination of past truth claims and how they play out (as habits or consciously) in the present, such as through stereotypes and hegemony, and in future conditions such as in public policy decisions or cultural transformations. Both pursue inquiry in order to determine meaning and value, and each promotes the work of going deep to uncover new realities and to examine the underside of truth claims. In womanist thought, this level of inquiry includes examining historical issues of suffering, struggles, and the tragic. Though womanist scholarship includes uncovering historical struggles and examining painful experiences, the womanist process of inquiry includes the hope and expectation of liberation, salvation, and uplift for the African-American community, for women and for the larger society.

Finally, one other potential entry point worth noting has to do with the treatment of various academic disciplines. Womanist methodology is an interdisciplinary approach to critical analysis and discovery. In this research, Townes, Belinda Robnett, and Rosetta Ross provide examples of this approach to social and ethical analysis. Their work demonstrates that multidisciplinary approaches are valuable and possible, and they provide support to African-American female scholars and womanist scholars who are forging a path in pragmatic philosophy and theology and the relevance of their work to womanist thought and to pragmatism.


———. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church, Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.


