

“That Shape Am I”: Pragmatism, Religion, and the Politics of Life

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“And could politics ever be an expression of love?”

Ralph Ellison

“In matters of vital importance it is very easy to exaggerate the importance of ratiocination.”

Charles Sanders Peirce

Life has the (un)familiar character of just happening. With(out) our intent, the order of things can change dramatically and drastically. The current economic crisis serves as a poignant reminder of these all too apparent truisms. While there were some economists and critical observers of global capitalism who warned of the unsustainability of the financial arrangements that led to explosive growth in certain sectors, many individuals and experts alike were taken aback by the swift pace and seemingly bottomless depth of the economic collapse. However, despite the immense havoc visited upon the cultural, economic, social, and political structures of the world by a vicious speculative finance capitalism, not even New York University economist Nouriel “Dr. Doom” Roubini is willing to admit that the world is heading into an abyss. Instead, Roubini, whose optimism is not known to be in endless supply, recognized the tremendous economic upheaval generated by this latest round of excesses of an over-exuberant capitalism and placed these actions within a broader context of the ever evolving transformations of an economic system that is all so very human when he plainly declared, “I am not in the Armageddon camp.”¹ What Roubini gestures towards is the recognition that while the current

¹ “‘Massive Destruction of Capital’: Roubini Sees \$3T in Bank Losses, More Bailouts,” *Tech Ticker*, December 5, 2008.

economic crisis might have been mitigated by more prudent adherence to economic fundamentals – not to mention critical attention to and coordinated action to alleviate the wide disparities between the rich and the poor – this crisis does not signal the end of things. Rather, life happens whether we like it or not, whether we intend it or not, and whether we deserve it or not. And it is the dire contexts, disastrous contingencies, and dangerous contradictions of life that should preoccupy our thinking.

Andre C. Willis uses the occasion of the current economic crisis to refocus our attention to what can be termed the politics of life in developing critical theoretical resources for dealing with the contingencies, contradictions, and catastrophes that are all too much a hallmark of human existence. Moving beyond purely formal epistemological considerations that often evade an explicit engagement with life itself, Willis calls for a philosophical practice that not only wrestles with the existential concerns we all face, including the fundamental fact of what he calls “radical impermanence,” but also explicitly recognizes and thematizes this condition as a fundamental aspect of the very form and substance of political community. But Willis goes further in seeking to open a theoretical space hospitable to the rich resources of religion in generating a “radical social-spirituality” that is open and deepens “social practices and political engagement.” While recognizing the theoretical opportunity of process thought for such an effort, this philosophical alternative is blunted due to its limited appeal and purchase in American public life. Ultimately Willis opts to ground his project within the protean mix of American pragmatism.

In some very interesting ways, Willis’s existentialist rendering of pragmatism and his thematization of radical impermanence echoes some of the salient themes pursued by Victor Anderson in *Pragmatic Theology: Negotiating the Intersections of an American Philosophy of*

Religion and Public Theology and Sheila Greeve Davaney in *Pragmatic Historicism: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*.² However, Willis's project is not a simple rehearsal and extension of these earlier works; rather his attempt represents a passionate pragmatism inspired by but not reducible to the recent efforts of Jeffery Strout, Roberto Unger, and Cornel West shot through with healthy doses of the engaged critical efforts of Emerson, James, and Dewey and leavened by the aesthetic sensibility of Alain Locke and the "engaged spirituality" of Howard Thurman. The result is a pragmatism courageous enough to admit the *necessary* incompleteness of democracy as a political form and practice, critical in temper so as to cultivate the capacity to develop and promote the virtues necessary to deal with the existential dilemmas of life, and humble in welcoming the rich preserves of religion not simply as a "social practice," but as a partner in creating a public philosophy suffused with promise and possibility in the face of uncertainty. Indeed, Willis's project is an audacious undertaking not only for its recovery of pragmatism in an existentialist mode, but also in its explicit connect with and valuing of religion as a critical preserve of possibility for cultivating the requisite disposition that compassionately informs the drive for human fulfillment in light of the fact of "radical impermanence."

A particularly attractive feature of Willis's pragmatic effort is his return to religion in thinking the public presence, political power, and personal purchase religion offers for dealing with the theoretical, existential, and political ramifications of what Dewey called the "problems of men." Willis's pragmatically inspired reading of religion moves beyond a static engagement with Rorty's secularist neopragmatism or an instrumentalist rendering of religion as a social practice or rhetorical trope in engaging American public life. Religion is a structure of *and* for thinking and elaborating the conditions of possibility for individual, social, and political

² Victor Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology: Negotiating the Intersections of an American Philosophy of Religion and Public Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) and Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Pragmatic Historicism: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

regeneration in, through, and beyond the horizon of the given. In his slim but substantive volume of 1949 *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman posed this most arresting thought:

I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall. It is urgent that my meaning be crystal clear. The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs. The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life.³

Thurman draws our attention to the “radical impermanence” that is the very condition of possibility for those who exist on the margins and on the underside of the modern world. Ironically, their situation in life raises the question of the adequacy or sufficiency of religion to respond to their plight in a manner that is not a pure perfunctory rehearsal of the counsel of religion. Thurman invites us to confront “the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed” not as objects for our compassion or sympathy, but rather in a reflexive manner that forces us to rethink the possibility of the meaning of religion in the modern world. Thus, the existential conditions of “the masses of men [who] live with their backs constantly against the wall” serves as an invitation *think* not only the meaning of religion, but also think anew the preserve of possibility for a knowledge of religion that extends the prospects for a more humane society. Willis’s project reinscribes Thurman’s sentiment and takes up the invitation to not only think the meaning of religion, but also the possibilities of an *uncommon* pragmatism that confronts the all too common and much too structurally contingent conditions of life.

³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949; Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

In reading Willis's cautious and critical deployment of pragmatism in the effort to engage his more primary commitment to thinking through vital existential issues and the condition of "radical impermanence," I sense a bit of hesitation. His hesitation at simply deploying an unaided and unreconstructed pragmatism hints of a recognition of the very limits of pragmatism in dealing with the depth – historical, material, and theoretical – of the issues at hand. Perhaps, in closing, we can glean an insight from Charles Long's William James Lecture of 1975 that will press Willis's hesitation in opening up new possibilities for thinking the social, political, and theoretical implications of certain existential concerns and "radical impermanence." In engaging "the two Western pseudo-protagonists of religious experience – James and Troeltsch," Long critically examines how each of these two thinkers (un)consciously *evade* the very depth of religious experience in positing their theoretical treatises on the subject. In so doing, each cannot develop the requisite structures of thought necessary to confront the existential *and* theoretical demands of life itself.⁴ However, within those individuals and communities whose authentic existence is animated and activated in and through the languages, practices, and experiences of religion that give rise to an (in)finite otherness, we may enter a critical space that holds out the possibility for elaborating a type of thinking that may host these tremendous demands. "Their religious experience," Long states, "and the forms of its expression reveal a critique of community and a fascination with the possibility and hope of intimacy. The veil, the double consciousness, is a critical stance, and they speak of primordial experiences and histories as the locus of new resources not yet categorized and rationalized by the communities under criticism."⁵ Long recasts the meanings and experiences of religion in challenging scholars of religion to refocus their theoretical gaze, not on past or present theories and philosophies of the

⁴ Charles H. Long, "The Oppressive Elements in Religion and the Religions of the Oppressed" in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986; Aurora: The Davies Group, 1995), 173.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 179,

phenomenon of religion and religious experience, but rather to *think with* those whose life experiences of “radical impermanence” may serve as a “locus of new resources not yet categorized and rationalized.” It is the lives of such individuals – “the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed” – which can and should in/form our theoretical frameworks as we enter again the project of thinking. And, in so doing, it may be possible to critically develop the requisite theoretical resources to confront the horror and hope that is life itself.