

NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGY SEMINAR

The North American Theology Seminar met for one session this convention. The topic of the seminar's discussion was Cornell West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). West gives a comprehensive interpretation of the "pragmatic tradition." He reads this tradition as running from Emerson through the classic pragmatists Peirce, James, and Dewey in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, through figures such as Sidney Hook, C. Wright Mills, and Lionel Trilling in the nineteen fifties and sixties, and today continuing in such figures as Richard Rorty and Roberto Unger. West himself argues for a "prophetic pragmatism" that works for an authentic democracy that will include those currently excluded: African Americans, Latinos, women, gays/lesbians. Hence for West a key North American figure not usually included in the pragmatic tradition is the African American intellectual W. E. B. Dubois.

The seminar's discussion of West was focused by Donald Gelpi's paper, "Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis: A Pragmatic Interpretation." Gelpi's paper notes a number of problems in Latin American liberation theologians' efforts to think the connection between practice and theory. He claims that dependence on Kantian epistemological assumptions is at the root of their conflicting and confused efforts to think about the connection between theological reflection and concrete action to transform social conditions. Gelpi's paper convincingly shows that while the classic pragmatists, especially Peirce and Dewey, "evaded" a Cartesian (and Kantian), subjectivist, and individualist epistemology, they did develop an account of "inquiry" as social, linguistically mediated, and historically cumulative, while always fallible at any point. Moreover, Peirce and Dewey made action and practice central to the meaning and validity of general ideas. For Dewey's instrumentalist view of inquiry, thought emerges because of problems in a community's life, and the test of theory is how well it helps resolve such conflicts. Peirce's account of the normative sciences of aesthetics, ethics, and logic is a brilliant and intriguing theory that shows how practice and thought are intimately related and both guided by values and ideals. Gelpi suggests that the pragmatic account of the relation of thought and practice helps deepen Lonergan's accounts of affective, moral, and intellectual conversion. He suggests that the test of doctrines should be their contributions to this integral and threefold conversion process.

A discussant suggested that West had overlooked Josiah Royce, who explicitly identified himself in his later work as a pragmatist, and wrongly

included Richard Rorty since his ironic, normless postmodernist approach hardly supports the struggle of the dispossessed for democracy and justice.

In the group discussion participants tried to test Gelpi's claim that contribution to conversion and ongoing community life were the relevant norms for determining doctrines.

The issue of the ordination of women emerged as a test case of Gelpi's account of the relation of Church practice and Church doctrine. Various hypotheses were suggested as to the source of the controversy. Possible courses of action were explored and their consequences examined.

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