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Not Radical Enough: William Dean's Pragmatic Problems in Dealing with God and History

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In working towards a contemporary understanding of God and history, the understanding of history needs to be taken extremely seriously—it is, after all, at least half of the discussion. The theological discussion of history has been rich and varied in the 20th century, with Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, both Neibuhrs, Gilkey, Ogden, Pannenberg, Mark C. Taylor, and others weighing in with major contributions. While this study cannot hope to make a full inquiry into each of their views, an examination of at least one major thinker who has taken the impact of historical consciousness on theology seriously is necessary in order to see what impact a modern historical view has for a contemporary doctrine of the understanding of God and history. I will therefore examine William Dean's historicism that looks back to the radical empiricism of James and Dewey, the early Chicago School and the empirical theology that followed it for inspiration in elucidating the relationship between God and history. Dean's efforts can serve as a cautionary example: exemplary in his willingness to take the question of historical reductionism seriously and wrestle with the neopragmatists and deconstructionists espousing it; and cautionary in that he illustrates the difficulties of attending too closely to the strictly historical without taking into account moral, aesthetic, and religious experience.

There are many aspects of Dean's historicism that are attractive and helpful in thinking of the question of God and history. Not the least of these is his insistence that any statements about God and religion be grounded in their historical contexts. Thus for Dean, his own statements will take into account American history, philosophy, and theology, and will attempt to answer the question, "To what extent will an American historicist concept of God make a practical difference in the lives of those who accept it?"¹ Dean's penetrating analysis of historical occurrences, his willingness to wrestle with the "methodology" of the postmodern relativists from the standpoint of radical empiricism, and his localism and specificity are all helpful emphases in working towards a contemporary understanding of God and history.

In the final analysis, however, Dean's historicism falls short of being much

1. William Dean, *History Making History: The New Historicism in American Religious Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 144.

help in the quest to construct a doctrine of God and history. This is primarily because his understanding of God as a “sacred convention” or “the spirit of history” or “mystery” is too weak and morally ambiguous to provide a religiously satisfying doctrine. Too much emphasis by Dean on the historical *characterization* of God leads to a loss of belief in God as such, and thus the ability to think seriously about any sort of relationship between God and history. Dean’s attempt at “radical empiricism” is not radical enough—he does not take enough into account the moral, aesthetic, and religious intuitions that are at the heart of the Jewish and Christian religious traditions he wishes to historicize. God is swallowed up in history, and his attempt at an historicized theology becomes instead a history of theology.

I. The Unreality of God: Conventions, Historicisms, etc.

Dean’s initial work on the subject of an historicized theology is at first glance promising. In *History Making History: The New Historicism in American Religious Thought*, Dean takes deconstructionists and neopragmatists to task for their lackluster doctrine of God—they can “see no more in the concept of God than a heritage of lucky and unlucky guesses—lucky when they turn out to have some utility, unlucky when they did not. They offer no explanation for how those guesses were reached. Nor do they account for the religious person’s crucial claim that, when they know God, they know something. . . . Today’s new historicist would claim that theological research would have nothing to do with religious experience and everything to do with pragmatic tests of what must be subjective fantasies.”² For Dean, this is clearly not adequate. He would like to hold that there is something beyond pragmatically effective subjective fantasies in the idea of God.

Yet while condemning their efforts, he offers not much more himself. Instead of their distrust of the notion of God in totality, Dean’s historicism would not move towards any “. . . effort to state the *a priori*, metaphysical or context-independent truths about God, [recognizing] the extent to which American thought about God is really the thought of a national community and that it can attain little more than a ‘correspondence between theoretical statements and the facts as they are described’ from an American context.”³ What would the practical difference between the two views be? On the one hand, Dean’s view has content—the historical writing that people say is about God. However, this writing is about a social construction, not an actual divine reality. What

2. *Ibid.*, 142–43.

3. *Ibid.*, 144.

is the difference between a more generalized notion of God as “writing,” the position of Mark C. Taylor that Dean critiques, and the specific writing done in an American context about God? Dean’s viewpoint does not take into account his own criticism leveled at the deconstructionists and neopragmatists, that people who believe in God believe in something, except in this very minor way—if someone followed Dean’s viewpoint instead of Mark C. Taylor’s, they would attend to the pragmatic efficacy of an American construct of God rather than a European-influenced deconstructed one. However, the primary objection towards such a characterization of God is not the continental origin and specific characteristics of the subjective (even if socially constructed) fantasy—it is the difference between fantasy and reality, between God as a human construct (no matter how pragmatically efficacious) and God as a living reality. This is not to say, of course, that our concepts of God are not constructed. Of course they are. But Dean’s version of historicism gives no reason to believe that there is anything to which the construction refers any more than the other “new historicists” he critiques.

In fairness to Dean, his book *History Making History* is his self-described methodological statement,⁴ in which he offers suggestions for a direction to move, rather than much specific constructive work of his own. That constructive work comes in his next book, *The Religious Critic in American Culture*,⁵ which is a theoretical statement of why he thinks religious criticism is important, why it is not practiced by many religious intellectuals in America, how it could be practiced more effectively in the present situation, and the case study/inspirational story of William James, whom Dean sees as the “last great religious critic” of American culture. The inadequacy of Dean’s doctrine of God, however, continues from his methodological statement to his constructive one. His idea of God as a “religious convention” and his insistence upon the moral ambiguity of the sacred convention are especially inadequate for a contemporary understanding of God and history. In addition, Dean’s analysis of the role of the religious critic and his suggestions that she or he could best flourish in the nonuniversity third sector undermine his ambiguous sacred convention and point towards a different notion of God than the one he espouses.

Let us first turn to Dean’s notion of God as the “sacred convention” of American culture. Dean holds that conventions are the best way to understand the persistence of talk about rights and morals in an age of relativism,⁶ and

4. Ibid., xi.

5. William Dean, *The Religious Critic in American Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

6. Ibid., 102–4.

also offer an example of the best way to speak about God. "Conventionalism explains the coherence of what happens in most Western societies today, where normative worldviews are affirmed even though universal grounds for those worldviews are not."⁷ Conventions are thought of as "real," in the pragmatic sense that they have effects. It is also a "reality apart from its effects, so that it is not simply what it is interpreted to be, even though what it is interpreted to be can alter its identity." It is a "mystery" in itself, although it is "not a person or a subject of any sort, nor is it an object. Rather, it is a social, or relational, reality that exists not only in time but through time."⁸ Thus, according to Dean, "conventionalism explains how religious critics can be relativistic, pluralistic, and historicist and yet be realists and work publicly," helping to "criticize and reconstruct the spiritual culture of a nation."⁹ His example of a convention that operates in society is the American Constitution, that is real, has effects, has a sort of "life of its own," is interpreted, yet is not the sum of its interpretations and sometimes "takes initiatives" that are surprising.¹⁰

There is much of this analysis that is helpful to an understanding of God and history. Dean's insistence upon the constructed character of any conception of God (or as he prefers, "the sacred"), and his close analysis of its functions in society are points well taken. Surely it is true that concepts of God are historically conditioned by their philosophical, social, historical, and even personal contexts. The notion of social conventions as a way to look at certain aspects of traditions and examine the way they work is helpful in leading to greater understanding of the traditions in question. The question, though, of whether or not the convention is the best way to understand God is not answered by pointing to the existence of conventions in religious thought and practice. The real question is: are there conventions about God, or is God a convention? Dean would collapse the distinction between the two questions, insisting that we only have conventions. I would disagree, pointing to the reality of God beyond, behind, and in the transcendence of, the conventions about the Divine Reality.

That there is a reality behind the convention can be illustrated by the fact that religious experience does not always conform to the conventions of the society from which it comes. This is the point of novelty and advance in religious life and thought. From what does the inspiration for a new direction in the religious life of a society come? Why does a Hosea, for example, write

7. *Ibid.*, 105.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 136.

about the insistence upon morality rather than certain cultic observations? “I desired mercy, and not sacrifice,”¹¹ is a radical change in a sacrifice-oriented society. It could be that this novelty is based upon the genius and sensitivity of the individual, and the adequacy of their ideas to the situation the community finds itself in. But is that all there is in the religious life of an individual or a community? One *empirical* point is that many (not all) times, the person credits God (the reality) as being an inspiration for their ideas and actions. It could be that they are responding to the initiatives of their convention, and certainly they are to the degree that they are in conversation with their tradition. But in the cases in which those conventions are radically transcended, at pivotal points in the life of a tradition, it seems at least as rational to posit a reality behind the convention calling those participants to transcend certain aspects of it as to posit the convention as the only reality.

In addition to the question of the reality of something behind the convention, there is the question as to why Dean’s historicism cannot abide any talk of a provisional theology beyond or behind the historical convention of the sacred. Certainly such discussions are part of the historical reality that Dean appeals to. Can one reduce a speculative theology to history? To do so would seem to so radically reinterpret the past statements that constitute the tradition Dean wishes to be in conversation with: that he would make himself part of another tradition—that of Western atheism—rather than any kind of religious discourse. It would seem that he would need to take his own past more seriously.

Also, the idea of a convention fails Dean’s own pragmatic test.¹² An imaginary God is not efficacious, even if one talks about it as if it were real, if one really feels it to be imaginary. Dean, of course, would take issue with the label “imaginary,” pointing to the Constitution as being very real. However, if God has only the same level of reality as the American Constitution, I do not think I err in calling such a God “imaginary,” given the expectations people have of the word “God.” Dean himself seems to recognize this lack of efficacy, as we shall see when we examine his latest essay at the end of this chapter, which tries to correct the tendency towards a “pallid piety” in pragmatism and historicism. His own emphasis on historicism cannot provide for such a correction, however, because a sacred convention does not inspire worship or love, and certainly does not provide any basis for working towards a greater good, when

11. Hosea 6:6.

12. This is Dean’s idea, elucidated on p. 2 of *Critic*, that “God” is real in so far as the convention makes a practical difference. In a sense, it can be thought of as similar to Whitehead’s dictum “To be real is to have an effect.”

it is understood as *nothing more* than a sacred convention.¹³ The history of practice and doctrine is not a reason to change the world.¹⁴

II. Ambiguity All the Way Down

Perhaps the greatest challenge to Dean's usefulness for a contemporary discussion of God and history comes out of his insistence upon the ambiguous nature of the sacred. Dean makes a powerful case for the consideration of the "moral ambiguity of God."¹⁵ He criticizes John Dewey for not following through on his own radical empiricism and therefore for "[converting] dissonances that threaten the meaning of the whole into harmonies that preserve the meaning of the whole."¹⁶ Dean maintains that there is no reason for this insistence in Dewey's own philosophy, and that it is an unneeded ad hoc argument that is the result of his liberal and positive approach to the subject, rather than an application of philosophical rigor.

In addition to the philosophical reasons for maintaining the ambiguity of the sacred convention he calls God, Dean also calls attention to evidences from the tradition that include evil in, or attribute evil to, God. He cites James Crenshaw's study *A Whirlpool of Torment*¹⁷ which gives examples from the Hebrew Bible where God acts capriciously or unjustly. He approvingly cites Judith Plaskow's contention that "the denial of divine ambiguity is a denial of the real ambiguity of human experience or promotes a God unconnected with that experience" and her appreciation of her own tradition's "'refusal to disconnect God from the contradictory whole of reality,'"¹⁸ He mentions Jesus' saying in the Christian New Testament: "I come not to bring peace, but a sword," and lauds Luther's and Calvin's recognition of "God's power and how this gave God a leading role in the dark side of history," calling their

13. The question, of course, is whether or not Dean believes that God is nothing more than a convention. He is coy about that, but I believe that he ultimately comes down on the unbelieving side. See his response to criticisms of his book in "Sheltering Skies: A Response," *The American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 16.1 (1995): 98.

14. Both John Hick and John Cobb make this point in different ways. See Cobb, "In Defense of Realism," in *Theology at the End of Modernity*, ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney, (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1991), 196, and Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989), 208.

15. This is his term, not mine. Dean, *Critic*, 140.

16. *Ibid.*, 142.

17. James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).

18. Plaskow, "Facing the Ambiguity of God," *Tikkun: A Bi-monthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture, and Society* 6 (September-October 1991): 70, cited in Dean, *Critic*, 144-45.

understanding mature and bold in its “willingness to find God, or whatever is ultimately important, not only in a sanitized portion of the whole of history, but in the whole of that history.”¹⁹ He points out that religious believers have given religious reasons for evil acts, such as slavery and the subjugation of women. Dean himself recognizes that such a characterization of God is a departure from even his own tradition of radical empiricism. Dewey, James, Bergson, Whitehead, Weiman—all these thinkers identified God with some form of good, in addition to or over against some notion of the whole. Dean calls attention to the elements in the tradition and experience that speak otherwise, and decries any attempt to explain away the presence of evil in the sacred as not part of the “real” unity of ideals (Dewey) as “theological second-guessing.” He holds that this doctrine of the ambiguity of God is “conventionalism’s strength, not its weakness, for, in the last analysis, it lends historical realism to religious thought and encourages people not to rely entirely on the sacred and to be more responsible for religious developments.”²⁰

Dean has constructed a powerful challenge to the idea of the unmixed goodness of God. On the face of it, it appears that he has pointed out a major weakness in the tradition’s characterization of the divine, and has a fuller, “rounder,” picture of God and therefore God’s relation to the world. However, on closer examination this proves not to be the case. Dean has not adequately addressed the philosophical and religious traditions from which he speaks, and cannot consistently hold positions inspired by his morally ambiguous God.

In arguing against Dean’s morally ambiguous vision of God, we turn first to his examples from philosophy. Dean cites Dewey as a particular example of someone who got it *almost* right in his characterization of God. For Dewey, God is the “unity of ideal ends arousing us to desire and action,”²¹ giving us a sense of the mysterious whole and of our place within it. However, Dewey’s God is also an “unambiguous force for goodness,” rather than a force that promotes a sense of the whole as such. “For it [God] involves no miscellaneous worship of everything in general. It selects those factors in existence that generate and support our idea of good as an end to be striven for.”²² Dean finds no reason in Dewey’s radical empiricism for such a separation between the good and bad in the divine convention, holding out the fact the historical traditions are morally ambiguous, and that the convention of the sacred must

19. Dean, *Critic*, 145.

20. *Ibid.*, 143.

21. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934), 42, cited in Dean, *Critic*, 141.

22. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 53, cited in Dean, *Critic*, 142.

therefore be morally ambiguous as well. Dewey himself recognized much that was ambiguous in organized religion, and Dean points out that he should have attended to his own experience more closely.

Because he will only accept as evidence that which is historically based and conditioned, there is no possibility that Dean could recognize as “real” an orientation that inspires towards the good as such. His examination of the historical evidence would point out that it did not completely and at all times aim at the good, but at things which are considered evil. He thus considers any attempt to correct or criticize the mistakes of the past as “theological second-guessing.”²³ This neglects a factor in experience that almost all of Dean’s philosophical and theological forebears attended to as an important factor in their analysis of experience—the experience of *value* as a given in all experience.

Dean himself, in arguing against an epistemology of sense-data alone, cites Dewey, James, and Whitehead as favoring a radically empirical theory of knowledge that relies on “the full breadth of experience rather than on the five senses alone—on non-sensuous perceptions (the indirect, vague, and highly fallible experience of relations, values, affections) as well as on sense experience.”²⁴ From Whitehead’s perspective, there is no experience without its affective tone—we do not simply feel things as neutral, we feel them as good or bad, contributing to greater intensity or lesser, enlivening or deadening. “In its essence, mentality is the urge towards some vacuous definiteness, to include it in matter-of-fact which is non-vacuous enjoyment. This urge is appetite. It is emotional purpose: it is agency.”²⁵ There are both loss and achievement, waste and satisfaction. Dewey, too, called attention to harmonizing rather than destructive attributes in his understanding of what God is.

This urge towards appetite, harmonization, with its concomitant assumption of value as an integral part of experience, argues against Dean’s characterization of God as morally ambiguous. The reality of value within experience carries within it the assumption that there are states and things that contribute to value, and can affect it positively or negatively. Indeed, the experience of value as such orients the one who experiences that value towards preserving and increasing it. The idea of a good implies a morality that seeks that good. The urge to increase this value-in-experience is what the various thinkers Dean cites have identified with God, rather than the entire range of experience in all its ambiguous variety. Thus Whitehead separates the two ultimates of Creativ-

23. Dean, *Critic*, 143.

24. *Ibid.*, 94.

25. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959), 32.

ity and God, Dewey separates the “sense of the whole” from the “harmonious union of ideal ends,” and James appeals to “the More” over against the mere addition of reality.²⁶ None of these thinkers confuse the whole of reality with the activity of God within that reality. An historicism such as Dean’s, attending to the whole of the past tradition with uncritically equal weight, negates the experience of value in the present and the urge towards increasing that value in the future that are a great part of that tradition’s ongoing life.

The next aspect of Dean’s argument for the ambiguity of God is his citation of aspects of the tradition, both of Scripture and theological reflection, that have attributed evil to the divine. Again, upon a preliminary inspection, this interpretation appears to have some value—certain aspects of the tradition do in fact attribute evil to God. From an historicist and conventionalist view, this is the end of the matter. However, aside from the difficulties with the conventionalist view mentioned above, there are other considerations that oppose accepting the ambiguity of God within the tradition.

The first, and most obvious, of these considerations is that everything within the tradition does not count equally in formulating religious concepts. Even if one has Dean’s methodology of attempting to accept the whole uncritically (and I have argued in the above section that this is untrue to his own radically empirical roots), there are elements in the tradition that call such formulations into question. The statement in the first Epistle of John stating that there is no darkness in God, and the elements in the Fourth Gospel about the identity of God and Love argue against an ambiguous God.²⁷ That the tradition includes elements that emphasize the goodness of God along with elements that attribute evil to God is not in doubt—their substantive relation to one another is. It is too simple to say that because both elements exist in one’s tradition God’s nature is ambiguous.

Luther’s concept of the “canon within a canon” offers an example within the tradition of downplaying certain elements to make a point. Luther wished to point out that aspects of the tradition that matched most closely with a certain theological orientation (namely, those that emphasized the sovereignty and grace of God) had priority over those that seemed to imply that humans were partners with God in some way, or could contribute to their own salvation. In developing such a doctrine, Luther illustrates clearly how and why certain

26. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1961), 393–94, for a discussion of the “MORE.” James’s notion of the essence of religion is that there is an uneasiness in life, and religion is its solution, by virtue of the religious person’s participation in the larger goodness, the “More.”

27. I John 1:5, 4:8; John 3:16, 15:9–10.

theological emphases have more weight than others—because they conform with certain forms of religious experience. However, because Luther wants to claim that humanity is saved by the grace of God alone does not mean that the relation of God to humanity is just as he says, or more precisely that it is just as he says *and* as his opponents say. The theological endeavor has not been, and is not, a practice of the addition of experiences and concepts. It has been, and is, a vast debate regarding the nature of God and humanity, and everything related to them. Dean's refusal to attend critically to an apparent disjunction in the tradition after identifying it is not a new theological methodology; it is simply his refusal to participate in the ongoing debate.

In a similar vein, his citation of people's use of religious reasons for acts that are later judged to be evil as evidence of the ambiguous nature of God is blind to what it means to be a religious participant in a tradition. Because one sees something that was done in response to a religious motivation as perverse or evil, it does not follow that God is evil or ambiguous. Dean's analysis of such an occurrence does not take into account the phenomena of mistakes and human fallibility. Dean, of course, calls this "reducing theology to second-guessing."²⁸ But I would maintain that it is precisely such "second-guessing" that constitutes one important strand of theological activity. In any theological endeavor that purports to be reformative of the tradition or oriented towards justice in society, the presence of which in the Jewish and Christian traditions cannot be doubted, the condemnation of the past activity in the name of God is the nature of the activity. Dean himself notes that "often historical societies prompted by a theological unity of ideals recognize—sometimes almost immediately—their impropriety," citing as examples the change in stance of some Israelis towards the Palestinians, some Christians towards other religions, and some Western religious traditions vis-à-vis women and blacks.²⁹ The recognition of and repentance from sinful mistakes does not signify divine moral ambiguity. Rather, it condemns the idolatry of placing human selfishness in the place of God's insistence upon justice and love. Certainly such an explanation would be in greater keeping with the understandings of the members of the traditions themselves.

After discussing the philosophical and traditional arguments for maintaining the moral ambiguity of God, Dean turns to cultural analysis to reinforce the notion. In one of the most interesting aspects of his argument, Dean cites the world of American sports, wanting to point out the utterly ambiguous character of everyday existence. He does so in order to show that not only is

28. Dean, *Critic*, 142.

29. *Ibid.*, 143.

there evil in the religious and historical realms, but that good and evil are so intertwined in commonplace events that there is no way to separate them and still have reality as it comes to us. He thus cites Joyce Carol Oates's analysis of boxing as highly metaphorical and morally ambiguous: "a powerful analogue of human struggle in the rawest of life and death terms"³⁰ "... in the brightly lit ring, man is *in extremis*, performing an atavistic rite or *agon* for the mysterious solace of those who can participate only vicariously in such drama; the drama of life in the flesh."³¹ He also cites his own experiences at motor racing events and the brutality of professional football as other examples of ambiguous lived experience that are ignored by religious thinkers. "Too often American theology and public philosophy do what they can to isolate ultimate values from such evil and thus, to isolate religion and public philosophy from history."³²

While Dean makes a good case for the ambiguous nature of historical existence, he makes the same mistake that he does in dealing with the ambiguity in religious traditions. To point out that everyday reality is ambiguous and has evil aspects does not mean that God is ambiguous or evil. Certainly to "isolate religion and public philosophy from history" is one possible and historical response to the ambiguity of the world coupled with the doctrine of a good God.³³ Examples from the history of religion in America abound—the Shakers, the Oneida community, Seventh-day Adventism,³⁴ to name only a few. But Dean, with his insistence on historicism, should know that it is not the only one. There are also the Catholic modernists, the civil rights movement in the 1960s, even the religious right of the 1980s and 1990s, all of whom have a sense of evil in history, believe in a good God, and have chosen the route of historical engagement rather than isolation.

Those thinkers and activists who chose a life of engagement in history with an attempt to change or transform it illustrate their belief in a good God that attempts to do likewise. Those who believe in a good God do not therefore deny the evil in the world—they affirm their belief in a God that is in constant com-

30. Joyce Carol Oates, "The Cruellest Sport," *The New York Review of Books* 34 (Feb. 3, 1992): 3, cited in Dean, *Critic*, 147.

31. Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Garden City, NY: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987), 116, cited in Dean, *Critic*, 148.

32. Dean, *Critic*, 148.

33. There is, of course, the question about whether these are the only reasons for such religious withdrawal from public life. I think that they are an important part of, but of course not the whole, story.

34. For a discussion of Seventh-day Adventism as an alternative to mainstream American life, see Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), especially part 2.

munion with the world—not in the sense of *being* evil, but in *fighting against* it. Dean criticizes the empirical theologians for “making God’s character independent of, and thus not truly interactive with, the dark or ambiguous side of history.”³⁵ The religious believers who take their faith as a reason, even an imperative, to engage in history live out another option—that God does interact with the “dark side” by condemning it and working against it. They hold that God responds to the waste and evil in history by trying to ameliorate its effects and ultimately overcome it, not by “interacting” with it. God is *advocate*, not passive “interactor.” This is perhaps the difference between the social function of “God” the convention, rather than God the Reality at the heart of every vision of goodness, truth, beauty, love, and justice that *is* religion.

To return to Dean’s contention, then, that everyday reality is so thoroughly ambiguous that any theology or religious reflection that does not make its characterization of God also morally ambiguous is isolationist or not serious-minded, I have shown that his is not the only interpretation of the data of history, nor is it the response that best characterizes the responses of religious believers. His example of sports seems to be that we have boxing; it is morally ambiguous, and we shouldn’t try to pretend that it’s not. I maintain that his response is incomplete—taking something as it comes does not prevent someone from attempting to make a moral response to it and working for change in the future. Even Dean’s example of boxing proves this point. People use gloves, limit their bouts to fifteen two-minute rounds, and no longer fight to the death in professional prizefighting in today’s world. In the Olympics, they use headgear and fight three rounds. There is a movement to ban boxing. Accepting reality as morally ambiguous does not mean that one should not strive to engage in moral action, and Dean’s morally ambiguous convention-God provides no reason to do so.

III. The Religious Critic as Ultimately Good

This question of the morally ambiguous God failing the “pragmatic test” has two sides—on the one hand, there is the assertion that I have been making that a morally ambiguous God provides no reason for acting morally, and that such a view of God is untrue to human experiences of value and engagement in religious traditions. On the other hand, there is the question of what an historically engaged project inspired by such a view of the divine would look like, and whether it would be consistent with its God. If Dean had a doctrine

35. Dean, *Critic*, 77.

of providence it would be located here, at the level of human interaction with, and the making of, a history specifically informed by the ideas of God that the particular culture has and shares. In this case, his understanding of the role of the religious critic and her/his influence on history, by virtue of influencing others to appreciate the morally ambiguous “sense of the whole” that is the only God Dean recognizes, can be thought of as paradigmatic of the influence of God on history generally. Such a concept, we shall see, is self-contradictory, as it does not do justice to the lived life of the traditions. Dean has provided us with suggestions towards such a project in his making the case that the home of the religious critic is in the “third sector” of American society, the nonprofit sector, rather than in government or the university. His attempts at neutral language notwithstanding, the constructive portion of his project has at its heart the sort of moral vision he denies at the heart of everything. Thus either Dean doesn’t really believe in the morally ambiguous God, or chooses to ignore his characterization of the divine reality in his actual work that might impact history.

Such a consideration of the religious critic is necessary in order to see in the clearest possible fashion what Dean holds as the impact of God on history. He holds that the religious critic will, by virtue of her or his training and orientation, have the clearest view of what the “sacred reality,” historically ensconced in the tradition, looks like in the historical sweep of things. Thus, the religious critic, by virtue of pointing out such activity (if it can be named as such in Dean’s viewpoint), has the clearest vision and indeed can contribute to the activity of God in history. We will see that Dean’s vision of God’s activity and the religious critic’s role in pointing it out and thus contributing to it is not in keeping with his own characterization and would indeed demand a different doctrine of God.

First, let us look more closely at Dean’s suggestion that the “true home” of the religious critic is outside government and the private sector or the university, in the nonprofit “third sector” of American society. This proposal takes into account his previous analysis of the separation and alienation of the university from the greater public life, due mainly to the professionalization and departmentalization of the university and its concern with “technical competence and status.”³⁶ Dean links this professionalization with a loss of belief in American exceptionalism: “When American intellectuals lost their sense of participating in an American promise, they retreated into the university, became academic intellectuals, and largely abandoned public responsibility. They thought of

36. *Ibid.*, 168; See also 20–21.

themselves, not as those who might enlighten the citizenry of a unique democracy, but as physicists, philosophers, religious studies scholars, literary critics. Their talk was not now public talk but talk within an academic discipline and among academic intellectuals.”³⁷ Given these developments, Dean holds that the university is no longer a congenial place for those rare types who wish to speak to public life as a whole. Their duties are not oriented towards such endeavors, and they are not rewarded for it in an environment that is directed towards the goals of the profession. Neither will their natural home be in government or the private sector, with those organizations’ emphases on votes or economic transactions, respectively. Instead, it will be in the “third sector” of nonprofit organizations, such as churches and charities, that the religious critic, who wishes to speak to something wider than the narrow specialization of a discipline, or the maximization of profit, or the maintenance of public order, will find her or his “psychological home.” These organizations, while sometimes corrupt and/or wasteful, and not immune to the vagaries of poststructuralism, are still “by virtue of their organizational activities, inevitably more involved in public circumstances than universities are.”³⁸ Dean cites a theoretical study of the third sector which maintains that its stock in trade, the way in which it interacts with the public, is best understood as “appeals to values,” thus making it a natural fit for the religious critic, who wishes to appeal to a “sense of the whole” and further such a sense in public life. And, finally, being the good historicist that he is, Dean draws attention to a historical study that makes the case that “voluntary associations of the third sector have provided the historic wellspring of American social initiative.”³⁹

Dean’s case for the natural home of the religious critic in the third sector is well-argued and historically sound, if not totally convincing. I am not as convinced as he is that the institution of government is only about the maintenance of civil order and is not also in some sense about the public good as well, and thus would also be a useful realm of activity for the religious critic. Nor does Dean’s argument for locating the religious critic in the third sector support his stated intent of promoting a morally ambiguous God. His proposal for the new endeavor of the religious critic in the public sphere is filled with moral language. The main reason that he gives for a better fit between the religious critic and the nonuniversity third sector is that “in the third sector, some vision of a common good is the highest order,” whereas the university is “increasingly

37. *Ibid.*, 20.

38. *Ibid.*, 167.

39. *Ibid.*, 168.

40. *Ibid.*, 161.

dedicated to professional activities that have little to do with the common good.”⁴⁰ He posits that such third sector organizations will tend, because of their attempts to retain tax-exempt status, “to be conscious of their connection with a common good, even of their relation to the whole of society.”⁴¹ He cites the “third sector’s imaginative appeals to value” that will “enable it to be the prime innovator, proving ground, and advocate for a society’s evolving moral, aesthetic and spiritual life.”⁴²

In all these statements, and in his citation of the third sector as “the well-spring of American social initiative,” there is a distinct orientation towards some idea of good, rather than evil. Of course, Dean could say that the “common good” is to be served not because it is moral, but because it is a term which does more justice to a sense of the whole. No one can argue that the concept of “common good” encompasses a wider range of vision and sense of the whole than academic arguments about an abstruse point regarding the theological orientation of 13th-century Christian mystics in Barcelona. However, such an appeal to the wideness of the term begs the question on two counts. The first is that such language is on its face the language of moral improvement. The second is that the use of aesthetic categories does not move one outside the language of morals.

Morality may in fact be subsumed in aesthetics—but perhaps a form of aesthetics that can best be spoken of in moral terms. Something like an appreciative awareness would be called for in order to examine in what direction the particular discussion should move, but this does not call morality, as binding and the best way to talk about experience, into doubt. Dean’s commitment, in a context of moral ambiguity, is to strive towards the good, even while recognizing the conditional nature of “the good.” He is not arguing for amorality, or even (really) for moral ambiguity.

Dean’s final definition of a sacred convention or God is one that “operates as an inspiration that prompts action”⁴³ towards a greater apprehension of “the whole.” But it is not irrelevant to ask if that action is good or evil, even considering our discussion of morality and aesthetics above. Dean wishes to contribute to public life in America as a religious critic (or wishes to inspire others to do so), but he himself seems to think that both professionalism and deconstruction have hampered university people’s ability to do so because of their amorality and limited vision. He advises these same university people to look to the nonuniversity third sector precisely because of its emphasis on “the

41. *Ibid.*, 163.

42. *Ibid.*, 170.

43. *Ibid.*, 149.

common good.” If “the whole” is understood as Dean wishes it to be understood, than the action prompted by the inspiration of the sacred convention could be for the common evil. It seems difficult to believe that the religious critic would want to promote both the common good and the common evil at the same time, yet if one takes Dean’s insistence on the ambiguity of God seriously, this is precisely what would happen. If ultimate reality is ambiguous, then action that wishes to orient people towards it will be ambiguous as well. Such a religious critic would probably not gain much more of a hearing in American public life than her or his deconstructionist colleagues.

All of this is not to take away from Dean’s laudable intention to involve religious critics outside the narrow bounds of the university. Religious critics could be a tremendous public resource and could be of real benefit in realizing genuine good in the world. It is primarily his doctrine of God as a convention which is itself morally ambiguous that has been the target here. Neither the radical empiricism that is Dean’s intellectual heritage, nor the Christian tradition that is important to his project is favorably inclined towards the morally ambiguous convention—God. Neither does his insistence upon the ambiguity of everyday life exemplified in American sport necessitate the acceptance of evil at the heart of things—a justice-seeking view is at least as “historically realist” and also provides closer continuity with the tradition and is clear about the reasons for improvement. Dean’s understanding of the divine reality is neither efficacious nor provides any reason for embarking on the very worthwhile project that Dean lays out, and a close analysis of Dean’s own rhetoric shows that even he, although protesting otherwise, cannot escape the good God.

IV. The “Pallid Piety” of the “Spirit of History”

Dean himself seems to recognize at least the pragmatic difficulties of his understanding of God. In a presentation to the American Academy of Religion in November 1999, Dean recognizes “pragmatism’s pallid piety” and casts about for a “more effective God.”⁴⁴ Responding to a challenge from Richard Rorty that “religious thinkers are nostalgic and antiquated, that they refer to God only ‘to link their days each to each’ and that they fail to recognize that God is ‘a perhaps obsolete name for a possible human future or ‘an external guarantor of some such future,’”⁴⁵ Dean tries to show that his historicist/pragmatist view of God does not fall under those criticisms. He first attempts to show that

44. William Dean, “Pragmatism’s Pallid Piety: For a More Effective God,” presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Boston, MA., November 21, 1999.

45. *Ibid.*, 1.

many historical understandings of God have placed God inside history, rather than outside of it. He recaps his understanding of God as a social convention, rebaptizing that convention as “the spirit of history” that is responded to by religious people. Strictly from the historical manifestations of this God in history, it must be morally ambiguous, limited in power, transcendent (although Dean’s use of “transcendence” is not always clear), living, and not an idol.⁴⁶ Thus far, Dean has not radically departed from his earlier work. However, he makes a surprising about-face when he concedes that “if these theoretical definitions tried to pass as accounts of what God actually is, they would never be capable of ‘arousing us to desire and action’ (Dewey’s definition of God). In short, pragmatic theology’s—and any theology’s—theoretical God is pragmatically and religiously of very little use.”⁴⁷

Dean tries to get out of this dilemma by making the distinction between theology and religion, positing theology as theory and religion as the empirical study of actual religious belief and practice, in the manner of James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. He proposes that one way to account for religion would be “to look for it at the bottom of historical reductionism” in the mystery that remains after the historical facts have been accounted for by historical analysis.⁴⁸ While he is deeply ambivalent about the process of historical reductionism that so much of his own theology depends upon, calling it “either trivial or absurd,” he maintains that it goes on “making religions into social convention—mere products of a meaningless sequence of historical causes and effects, and depriving all religions of their claims to independent truth.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Dean still contends that there is some sort of mystery in religious stories that cannot be accounted for in their historical antecedents. Quoting Flannery O’Conner, he says that there will appear “a depth where these things have been exhausted.”⁵⁰ He appeals to the stories of Jesus and the community of Israel, pointing out that it is in their defeat by history that they transcend history: “It was the stories of Jesus, of Israel and of other people sacrificed to history that transcended history and that suggested the spirit of history. It was stories that renounced hope of living beyond history, and that accepted history, that transcended themselves. . . . It is when God was reduced to becoming a product of history, a mere social convention of history, that God, in the language of the New Testament, became

46. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

47. *Ibid.*, 12.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

50. Flannery O’Conner, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 153, cited in Dean, *Piety*, 14.

incarnate in history.”⁵¹ God, according to Dean, is a mystery precisely because it is “reducible to and completely immanent in history . . . needed to make history meaningful in a way that history is not meaningful to itself.” The history that “reduces God to itself is the history that acquires religious meaning.”⁵²

At first glance, this appears to be a major shift in Dean’s thinking. After all, he does call his own historicist notion of God “pragmatically and religiously of very little use.” I suppose that time will tell if this is a minor hiccup or the beginnings of a new direction in his work. As it stands, however, the appearance of “the spirit of history” and “mystery” in Dean’s theological reflection are of very little significance in terms of a substantive revision of his theological program. “The spirit of history,” Dean’s new term for God, does not escape the problems of moral ambiguity and the lack of pragmatic effect of the “sacred convention” discussed above. It is merely a restatement of his old themes. There is no reason to act for the common good on the basis of the “spirit of history” when that spirit is so obviously ambiguous and lacking in actuality.

The question of his introduction of “mystery” is somewhat more complicated. While at first appearing to be something like the glimmerings of a genuine religious faith in a real God, “mystery” for Dean is not something like James’s “More,” a basic faith that there is meaning even if we cannot find it with our sense organs. It is what is left over when any story is seen as the inexorable process of its historical antecedents, and still manages to move us. It is something like a wonder that these stories didn’t get crushed into oblivion, or that we still remember them at all, or that they have the power to move us, even though we know that they are “only stories.”

This seems to be a pretty paltry account of the heart of the vast diversity of life that is the religious endeavor. At the end of the day, Dean’s project of religious studies would reduce every act committed in a religious framework down to its historical antecedents, occasionally find “mystery” in the elements that somehow transcend themselves, and call it a day. One wants to say, “That’s it?” Is there no other point? What about joy, or love, or beauty, or goodness? The Psalms, the Song of Songs, Julian of Norwich, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, John Wesley, Gerard Manley Hopkins? An elusive speck of mystery smeared across the face of the jagged boulder of historical circumstance does not sound like any religion I know.

51. Dean, *Piety*, 15. Quite similar to Hodgson’s notion of incarnation in terms of the effect, but different in its insistence upon ambiguity. See Peter Hodgson, *God in History: Shapes of Freedom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989): chap. 5.

52. Dean, *Piety*, 16.

In the end, Dean's historicism with mystery is not substantively different from his historicism without it. His introduction of a very tiny elusive something at the heart of an historically reduced religious tradition has the same problems with the lack of any convincing reason for being a part of it—an actual God that is morally good. He may have convinced Richard Rorty that there is a possible characterization of religion that has “God” inside history. But even if he has, he will not have convinced many, even with the introduction of mystery, that this is a God that anyone will care to be connected to religiously.

V. Directions for Further Reflection

What then, can we take away from this extended discussion of historicism exemplified by William Dean's work? In the final analysis, in spite of Dean's laudable emphasis on actual history and his close attention to the function of the conventions about God in history, his historicism and its ilk will have to be rejected in trying to formulate a contemporary understanding of God and history. His notion of God as a convention of social groups and nothing more ignores the experience of value and the reality of religious experience and new directions in religious thought. His insistence upon the moral ambiguity of God is untrue to the ongoing nature of the tradition he invokes, and cannot be maintained in a context of commitment to reform or justice. Of all the people that he cites, perhaps only Dewey would substantially share Dean's views, and even Dewey thought “God” was good. In his own constructive work, Dean violates his own principles of ambiguity and shows himself to be on the side of the good. Even his understanding of the mystery that remains after everything has been deconstructed out, although a hopeful sign, is still too morally ambiguous to be of use to the thinker who wishes to understand and participate in the action of God in history. At the end of the day, Dean's historicism is something like the history of theology, rather than a theological endeavor in its own right.

Dean's work, however ultimately inadequate in its final statement, points out several directions that any discussion of God and history must take if it is to pick a safe path in the jungle of theological and historical reflection on the subject. First, any discussion of God and history must be adequate to the actual historical occurrences. Dean does a brilliant job in attending to actual history, whether pointing out the ambiguity of the divine in the past tradition, or the role of the religious critic in American history. The social, cultural, and historical evidence needs to be attended to in all its multiplicity. The question of God and history can only be addressed by looking at *both* topics. The richly illustrated examples of Dean's theoretical conclusions are the best parts of

his books, and also the hardest to argue against, convincing by the weight of evidence rather than layers of rhetoric or deduction. Much work will have to be done to bring God back into the realm of the debate.

Second, any adequate discussion of God and history will need to attend to the ambiguity of all experience, including religious experience. Tremendous evil and waste are a part of every person's experience, as are goodness and beauty. No argument about the nature of God can ignore the tradition's oppressive elements, as well as the reasons for their inclusion within that tradition. Even though one might not finally agree with Dean's conclusions, they must be addressed in such a way that their seriousness is taken into account.

Third, I am convinced that some form of a radical empiricism is necessary to move beyond Dean's historical reductionism. This will include the value-laden character of experience and the importance of such experience for positing the goodness of God, the theological critique of the past, and the call to a new future. It will also argue for a God deeply involved in the ambiguity of the world.

Finally, an analysis of historicism points us towards an insistence on participation in, rather than solely an understanding of, history. Historical reductionism is backward looking, finding ultimately explanatory causes for historical concepts and conventions that continue to have effects in the present. But history is not only analyzed backward, it is also lived forward, with an appreciation of what has gone before, a feeling for the present choices, and an expectation of and hope for the future. Any analysis of history must take this dual character into account to be the basis of a satisfactory doctrine of God and history.