

International conference

## Pragmatism and the theory of religion

Research Group

„Religious individualization in historical perspective“  
Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies  
Erfurt

in cooperation with

Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft –  
Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research  
Heidelberg

Location and date:

Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies  
Am Hügel 1  
Erfurt, Germany  
February 16th – 18th

Most of the leading European thinkers in the second half of the 19th and in the 20th century were areligious or at least they believed that the process of modernisation would lead to secularization with an inner necessity. This was not the case in American intellectual history. Particularly the philosophy of pragmatism, dating back to the 1870's, is neither based on convictions about the inevitability of secularization nor does it seek to justify and accelerate the supposed process. In light of the labefaction of traditional certainties, American pragmatists sought a new foundation not only for science and democracy, but also for religious belief that was compatible with modernity. This foundation, the pragmatists believed, would have to comport with the general acceptance of Darwinism and the expanding knowledge in experimental psychology as well as the historical and comparative studies of religion and culture. The pragmatists saw the crisis in modernity as radically as Nietzsche, but drew other conclusions from it. The conference will focus on the way in which the pragmatist theory of religion has reflected the religious *condition humaine* in modernity.

The theme of the conference is positioned in the research context of the contributing institutions. The research group 'Religious individualization in historical perspective' at the Max Weber Centre investigates cases of individualization within the medium of religion and their consequences for religious change. It scrutinizes the presence and extent of individual scope of religious action, the resulting forms of religious traditions and religious reflections on individuality, both prior or external to occidental modernity and during the period of modern theory formation. The FEST – Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research, on the other hand, complements this perspective in its division 'Theology and Science' with historical and systematic research on the cliff-hanging relation between science-based and religion-based world views and its contribution to processes of individualization. The subject of the conference links these strands of research.

The pragmatist conceptualization of religiousness is based on the conviction that the understanding of 'God' is not derived top down from theoretical speculation (be it of theological or philosophical kind), but bottom up from deeply value-laden existential experiences (individual and communal) that arise in the exchange between man and his environment through experience and action. Religions, in this sense, are means of appropriate expression of these experiences and actions. In this respect pragmatist reflection on religion and religiousness is strongly related to the innovation it has offered in the fields of action and value theory. The common point among all pragmatists is that the structures of meaning, which make sense of the world, are constituted in man's socially divided and interactively organized adaptation of outer reality. This conviction implies the rejection of the fact-value-dichotomy. The triangulation of ego, alter ego and world generates the manifold relations of factual and ideational kind between all there is and opens the horizon to the range of future possibilities not yet achieved. From Peirce over James and Royce to Dewey and Mead, pragmatism has developed challenging concepts of individual growth, self-development and self-realization that have in common a keen sense for the multitude of moral-aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of reality.

Therefore pragmatist theory of religion not only reflects on the process of modernization, but participates in it by individualizing the concept of religion and

religiousness, of spirituality, religious expression and participation. Pragmatist thinkers did not measure religiousness against the institutions or traditions by which religious convictions have always been shaped; nor did they find it within the context of metaphysical speculation about the existence of God. It is rather judged by the role it plays in establishing a coherent and solution-oriented way of life. This would be a way whose direction is a resultant of personal experience and its articulation in the horizon of optional symbolic interpretations and individual decisions. This horizon constitutes the ‚pluralistic universe‘ of multiple cultural perspectives on reality and multiple ways of successfully leading one’s life. Accordingly pragmatists conceptualize religiousness on the one hand as centered in experience and action, and on the other as a state of being that is not identical with mere obedience regarding collective institutions. Nevertheless pragmatists – or at least most of them – also remind us of the basic social situatedness of the individual, which implies that religious individualization has to be understood in the sense of individualized forms of community rather than forms of separation.

The program of the conference is defined by the following four points: *First*, it broaches the issue of pragmatism and the theory of religion on the whole, including all main representatives of pragmatist theory of religion from Peirce over James and Royce to Dewey, focussing their common ground as well as their significant differences that range from phenomenological to semiotic, naturalist to supranaturalist, strictly individualist to community-orientated approaches. *Second*, it investigates pragmatist thinking according to its concept of religious individualization as a theoretical alternative to the theory of secularization. *Third*, it highlights the various ways in which pragmatists recognize experiences of contingency as part of the modern *condition humaine* by founding religion in value-laden existential experiences and the freedom of individuals to make sense of these experiences without absolute guarantees of truth – but in a way that proves its value in life. *Fourth*, it focusses on pragmatist efforts to integrate religious individualization and community-linked religious praxis that disprove the common cliché of pragmatism as being generally affirmative of anti-social individualism.

## Conference program

### Thursday

- 01:00 p.m. Welcome and introduction
- 01:30 p.m. Opening lecture  
Robert Cummings Neville:  
„Theory of religion in a pragmatic philosophical theology“
- 02:45 p.m. Coffee break
- 03:00 p.m. Pragmatism and the American tradition  
  
Michal Raposa:  
“A brief history of Theosemiotic: from Scotus through Peirce and beyond”  
  
Marie-Luise Raters:  
„Don’t worry – be happy!  
The intrinsic connection between religious faith and worldly happiness in William James’ theory of religion and its sources in Emerson’s Transcendentalism“
- 04:00 p.m. Discussion; commentary and moderation: Julien Winandy
- 05:00 p.m. Coffee break
- 05:30 p.m. On the relationship between philosophical anthropology and ethics in William James’ philosophy of religion  
  
Eilert Herms:  
„Anthropological prerequisites in William James’ concept of religion“  
  
Sami Pihlström:  
„The problem of evil in pragmatist philosophy of religion“
- 06:30 p.m. Discussion; commentary and moderation: Michaela Rehm
- 08:00 p.m. Dinner

## Friday

- 09:00 a.m. The semiotic and pragmaticist turn of the philosophy of religion in the work of Charles S. Peirce
- Hermann Deuser:  
„Pragmatic or pragmatist philosophy of religion?“
- Gesche Linde:  
„Man’s highest developments are social’:  
A semiotic approach to religion in the wake of Peirce“
- 10:00 a.m. Discussion; commentary and moderation: Markus Kleinert
- 11:00 a.m. A brief tour of medieval Erfurt
- 1:00 p.m. Lunch
- 2:00 p.m. Josiah Royce’s philosophy of religion in the context of Pragmatism
- Frank Oppenheim:  
„A contextualized approach to Josiah Royce’s *The Problem of Christianity* for the new Critical Edition“
- Vincent Colapietro:  
„The dissenting voices of Charles Peirce and Josiah Royce“
- 3:00 p.m. Discussion; commentary and moderation: Claudio Viale
- 4:00 p.m. Coffee break
- 4:30 p.m. Continuation:  
Josiah Royce’s philosophy of religion in the context of Pragmatism
- Ludwig Nagl:  
„Avoiding the dichotomy of ‘either the individual or the collectivity’:  
Josiah Royce on community and on James’ concept of religion“
- Hans Joas:  
„Religious experience and its interpretation. Reflections on James and Royce“
- 5:30 p.m. Discussion; commentary and moderation: Stephan Steiner
- 7:00 p.m. Evening lecture  
Wayne Proudfoot:  
Pragmatism and Naturalism in the study of religion
- 9:00 p.m. Dinner

## Saturday

9:00 a.m. Naturalism, qualitative experience and the realm of faith in John Dewey's religious thought

Victor Kestenbaum:  
„Ontological faith in Dewey's religious idealism“

Matthias Jung:  
„Qualitative Experience and naturalized religion:  
An inner tension in Dewey's thought?“

10:00 a.m. Discussion; commentary and moderation: Kevin Zdiara

11:00 a.m. Coffee break

11:30 a.m. Explorations against the backdrop of classical Pragmatism

Magnus Schlette:  
“... how you understand ... can only be shown by how you live’.  
Putnam's Philosophy of Religion”

Christoph Seibert:  
„Towards a pragmatic methodology in philosophy of religion.  
Perspectives of classical American pragmatism“

Christian Polke:  
„Personalism and Pragmatism.  
The innovative competence of American Philosophy for  
contemporary theories of religion“

01:00 p.m. Discussion; commentary and moderation: Cornelia Mügge

02:00 p.m. End of conference

02:00 p.m. Snack

## Participants

Vincent Colapietro (Penn State Univ., USA)

Eilert Herms (Tübingen Univ., Germany)

Victor Kestenbaum (Boston Univ., USA)

Gesche Linde (Frankfurt Univ., Germany)

Ludwig Nagl (Vienna Univ., Austria)

Robert C. Neville (Boston Univ., USA)

Frank Oppenheim (Xavier Univ., USA)

Sami Pihlström (Helsinki Univ., Finland)

Christian Polke (Hamburg Univ., Germany)

Wayne Proudfoot (Columbia Univ., USA)

Michael Raposa (Lehigh Univ., USA)

Marie-Luise Raters (Potsdam Univ., Germany)

Christoph Seibert (Tübingen Univ., Germany)

## Commentators (Max-Weber-Centre, Germany)

Julien Winandy, Michaela Rehm, Markus Kleinert, Claudio Viale, Stephan Steiner,  
Kevin Zdiara, Cornelia Mügge

## Organizers

Hermann Deuser (Max-Weber-Centre, Germany)

Hans Joas (Max-Weber-Centre / Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, Germany)

Matthias Jung (Koblenz Univ., Germany)

Magnus Schlette (FEST, Germany)