

G. Scott Davis

Believing and Acting: The Pragmatic Turn in Comparative Religion and Ethics.

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In *Believing and Acting*, G. Scott Davis introduces readers to a pragmatic approach to studying comparative religion and ethics after the pragmatic turn in religious studies. Davis thinks that this pragmatic turn has made it possible for students of comparative religion and ethics to study these subjects without appealing to any grand theory. Rather, ‘understanding religion requires nothing more than the sensitive and imaginative reading of human phenomena informed by the best available ethnography set in the best available historical narrative’ (3).

In this spirit, he constructs a method of pragmatic comparativism using C. S. Peirce’s pragmatism, Donald Davidson’s anomalous monism, and Michael Baxandall’s method of studying art history. Chapters 2–6 outline Davis’s pragmatic comparativism. The last two chapters of *Believing and Acting* are applications of Davis’s pragmatic comparativism—first, comparing the adequacy of a few contemporary interpretations of Thomas Aquinas’s just war theory (chapter 7) and, second, interpreting the abortion debate in the United States since the *Roe v. Wade* decision (chapter 8). Here is a brief summary of these chapters.

In chapter 2 Davis explains which parts of Peirce’s pragmatism he appropriates to formulate his pragmatic comparativism. Davis explains how his method is informed by Peirce’s critique of Cartesianism in his 1868-69 *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* series of article (24). He then explains how his method is similar to Peirce’s method of inquiry, as outlined ‘in a series of six papers for *Popular Science Monthly*, collectively known as *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*’ (32). In the following chapter, Davis contends that Peirce’s legacy in comparative religion and ethics remained negligible in Anglo-American philosophy of religion and ethics during the twentieth century. Yet, there were some Anglo-American philosophers who kept a Peircean spirit of inquiry alive in these two areas. Herbert Fingarette was one of those philosophers. He kept Peirce’s influence alive in the study of religion through his comparative studies of Confucius. Davis ends the third chapter with an important insight arising from reading Fingarette’s comparative approach alongside Mary Douglas’s analyses of pollution and taboo in *Purity and Danger* and of social institutions in *How Institutions Think*—namely, that many of the practices and beliefs constituting religious traditions originated in social conventions that have outlived their original function, yet can still maintain social order quite well.

In chapter 4 Davis contends that students of comparative religion and ethics should bracket the metaphilosophical debate ignited by Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and appreciate how Rorty’s early common-sense realism and his later pragmatism paved the way for the pragmatic turn in religious studies. More specifically, Rorty’s realism and later pragmatism prepared the way for Wayne Proudfoot’s groundbreaking pragmatist study of religious experience in *Religious Experience* (1985). Proudfoot’s approach to studying religion seems to be dependent on two Rortyan ideas. First, humans are social creatures who use language and conceptual categories to achieve their goals and maintain the integrity of their social orders. This is a lesson Rorty learned from studying Peirce, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, and later from Wilfred Sellars, W. V. O. Quine, and Davidson (86). Second, when older ways of talking and conceptual categories no

longer help people make sense of their world or their actions, they can revise those ways of talking and categories so that they can once again make sense of their world with some degree of confidence (87). Proudfoot seems to have taken these Rortyan ideas for granted and almost willfully denied his intellectual debt to Rorty in *Religious Experience* (90).

Chapter 5 is where Davis contrasts his pragmatic comparativism with cognitive science of religion, as represented by Ann Taves and the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion. He finds cognitive science of religion to be an inadequate approach to studying religion because its practitioners mistakenly presume that human intentions and actions can be studied in a manner analogous to how natural scientists study natural phenomenon. Unlike the motions of lithospheric plates or electromagnetic force, human intentions, beliefs, and actions cannot be explained adequately using law-like generalizations. In the case of religions, people's religious beliefs and institutions cannot be studied as though they have the same regularities and predictability of phenomena studied by the natural sciences.

Chapter 6 is where Davis rejects postmodern theories for being inadequate approaches to studying religion and ethics. He contends these theories require scholars to presume a pernicious relativism that makes it impossible for people from different groups to understand one another. Such a position is a non-starter for scholars studying religions and ethics comparatively (141). Besides, the disagreements between groups that supposedly results from them having radically incommensurable conceptual schemes can be accounted for 'by reference to disagreements about particular beliefs and practices' (141). Davis then explores the implications of no longer taking relativism seriously for ethnographic fieldwork. These implications can be summarized into two statements. First, ethnographers need to translate the beliefs and practices of the peoples they study so that these beliefs and practices are, for the most part, reasonable ones. Second, ethnographers need to be self-critical as they translate traditions different than their own and subject their translations to ongoing public scrutiny (145–46).

In chapter 7 Davis compares his own interpretation of Aquinas's just war theory with James Childress's and Richard Miller's interpretations of that theory. He notes that, contrary to Childress and Miller, Aquinas's just war theory is not compatible with modern moral theories that highlight prima facie duties and the principle of non-maleficence (162–66). Aquinas's just war theory was part of his moral theology, which was written in terms of *quaestio*, *dubitation*, and Christian virtues. Davis ends this chapter with a brief sketch of his interpretation of Aquinas's just war theory, which he considers to be a better interpretation of it than the ones offered by Childress and Miller (166–72). I leave it to readers of *Believing and Acting* to judge whether Davis's self-assessment is correct.

In chapter 8 Davis provides a brief account of the moral disagreements arising from the contemporary abortion debate in the United States since *Roe v. Wade*. He builds his account by comparing how several religious traditions view abortion, including Orthodox Judaism, Japanese Buddhism, conservative Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity. This comparison is part of Davis's pragmatic strategy of exploring the spectrum of reasonable positions on abortion (195). This strategy demonstrates that not all people who consider fetuses to be full persons consistently regard fetuses' lives as having equal value to the lives of their mothers. This is so because many people who profess to believe that fetuses are full persons still permit abortions under certain circumstances (for example, rape, incest, and to save the life of the mother). Davis thinks that someone who studies the contemporary abortion debate would likely become an advocate for a particular position (197). This is fine for pragmatist scholars as long as they remember not to let

their advocacy block the road of inquiry with respect to studying controversial political or social issues (197).

I think that Davis has succeeded in writing an informative introduction to pragmatic comparativism in religious studies. Yet, there are a couple of weaknesses in *Believing and Acting*. The most notable weakness of Davis's book is his dismissal of two potentially fruitful approaches to studying religion and ethics. As a pragmatist scholar, Davis should leave open the possibility that advances in cognitive science and postmodern theories help scholars better understand human institutions and practices, including religious ones. Thankfully, he acknowledges that certain poststructuralist and post-colonial analyses of human institutions, practices, and beliefs—for example, Edward Said's critique of orientalism—have already helped scholars understand those institutions, practices, and beliefs better (173). Surely, poststructuralist and post-colonial theories can help scholars of comparative religion and ethics understand religious institutions, practices, and beliefs better now and in the future.

I also think that Davis's criticism of using theory in religious studies is based on a too narrow definition of theory. Not every theory of religion needs to resemble theories in the natural sciences. In the case of comparative religion and religious ethics, theories might be better thought of as ethnographically sensitive and historically accurate approaches to interpreting religions and ethics. In this sense of theory, Davis has provided readers with a comparative *theory* of religions and religious ethics.

Despite the above mentioned reservations, Davis has written a masterful introduction to pragmatic comparativism after the pragmatist turn in religious studies. I recommend that advanced undergraduate students and graduate students studying religion and religious ethics read this book. I also recommend that scholars in the fields of comparative religion, religious ethics, and pragmatist philosophy of religion read this book.

Dwayne A. Tunstall
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