Dewey, leaned in this unfortunate direction, giving rise to vulgar interpretations of his pragmatism and risking the conflation of pragmatism with existentialism. The problem is that any beliefs whatsoever make a pragmatic difference to some degree in the lives of the individuals holding them, but this is a difference that is compatible, for all we know, with their being illusory or even false. What we want to show by way of the “pragmatic difference” of a belief system or a theology is what difference its truth would make in a public way. The recommendation that we test them “in light of the forms of life they make possible” (187) does not seem to provide a very workable norm either at the existential or the communal level.

Nevertheless, Pragmatic Historicism concludes with an eloquent meditation on “tragedy and hope” in the spirit of Sidney Hook. Tragic historicism knows that history is not only open and malleable, but also stingy and cruel (190). More than a new methodology, Sheila Davaney gives us an account of a new form of life that has emerged (primarily) among western intellectuals, one that is content to live without essences, absolutes, foundations, or skyhooks of any kind. Guided by Sheila Davaney’s methodological proposals, what will historicist theology look like in the twenty-first century? One imagines that the honorific term “theology” will fall away, to be replaced by a more generic form of “writing” or “poetry.” Historicist theologians will need to become strong poets, inventing new vocabularies as they take upon themselves the mystery of things, as well as skilled culture critics as they address the inclusive agenda Davaney has set. The value of this theological work, I suggest, may be measured as much aesthetically as pragmatically, in terms of a new kind of art and rhetoric in which “as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name” (Shakespeare).

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Scandinavian philosophers have over the past few years become increasingly interested in American pragmatism. This is hardly surprising: the analytic tradition dominated Scandinavian philosophy for decades, and continues to do
so, but today its goals and methods are found problematic even by many analytic philosophers themselves. Following leading American thinkers like Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty, some North-European philosophers have turned to pragmatism in order to find ways out of the deadlocks of the analytic paradigm. This is not to say that European philosophers are unindependent followers of American neopragmatists. On the contrary, it seems to me that some very interesting contributions to pragmatism, and to pragmatism scholarship, have been made by Europeans.

Ulf Zackariasson’s dissertation, defended in April 2002 at the Department of Theology of Uppsala University, Sweden, is one of the latest examples of this new pragmatic turn in European philosophy. Drawing mainly on pragmatism, the book challenges the basic conceptions of religion at work in Anglo-American analytic philosophy of religion. Zackariasson’s work poses nothing less than a reorientation in how we should think philosophically about religion. His reorientation is largely based on a “philosophical anthropology” adopted from the pragmatist tradition.

The author’s “main purpose” is characterized pragmatically: he wants to answer the question of whether we can “develop a conception of religion that will enable us to deal more fruitfully with the problems of religion” (28, emphasis omitted) — more fruitfully, that is, than analytic philosophy of religion has been able to. The problems of religion he is interested in are numerous, and they come in three groups: first, there are problems that individuals face when they find themselves surrounded by several incompatible religious traditions (and secular alternatives); secondly, on an interreligious level, it can be asked whether another religious tradition can be criticized and on what kind of criteria; and thirdly, one may examine the status of values and beliefs that can be derived from religious and other views of life (12-13). Insofar as pragmatism can help us in dealing with these and other problems of religion, it undoubtedly turns out to possess significant pragmatic value. Accordingly, Zackariasson subjects pragmatism itself to a pragmatic scrutiny, seeking to show that it is a pragmatically significant approach to religious issues, leading up to a philosophy of religion that is superior to the more mainstream alternatives.

For some reason, Zackariasson uses “pragmatism” to refer to classical pragmatism only, particularly to the philosophies of Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead (28). He thus overlooks the ways in which pragmatism figures in, for example, Putnam’s philosophy of religion. Following Joseph Margolis and Richard Bernstein, he admits that pragmatists are united not by a common essence but (only) by family resemblances in a Wittgensteinian sense (30). Even so, he characterizes pragmatism in terms of “a shared philosophical method” (30) and a shared philosophical anthropology, i.e., a “similar orientation in the way they [pragmatists]