



“Damned for God’s Glory”

William James and the Scientific Vindication
of Protestant Culture

DAVID A. HOLLINGER

When William James died in 1910, his lifelong friend, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., remarked that when James dealt with religion, he had tried “to turn the lights down low so as to give miracle a chance.”¹ Many items in the James canon feed this suspicion. Yet *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James’s most sustained treatment of religion, constitutes a proposal that even the most private, mystical experiences offered as evidence for religious belief be brought out into the open, be made, indeed, the primary subject matter for “a science of religions,” an empirically oriented, publicly warranted inquiry that James envisaged as a successor discipline to “philosophy of religion.”²

These two potentially contradictory starting points—James’s self-presentation in his greatest contribution to religious studies and Holmes’s skepticism toward that self-presentation—can remind us of an enduring tension at the center of James’s intellectual life. The tension is between the demands of the inherited culture of Protestant Christianity,

with its belief in a supernatural God potentially responsive to human striving, and the demands of modern science, with its emphasis on the intersubjective testing of claims based on the data of the senses. That James was much troubled by the apparent conflict between these demands is not a matter of dispute. It is rightly taken for granted by virtually all James scholars, even by those who find this bit of history to be a philosophically irrelevant distraction. What is not taken for granted, even by those who find James's religious preoccupations pertinent today, is any particular understanding of the life project that this science-religion tension generated in James. Nor do James scholars agree upon just what relation *Varieties* has to James's other work. Claims about the continuity between "The Will to Believe" and *Varieties*, for example, are rarely engaged critically because many of the philosophers who address "The Will to Believe" are not much interested in *Varieties*, and many of the religious studies scholars for whom *Varieties* is a vital text have relatively little invested in the agendas that drive philosophers' interpretation of "The Will to Believe."

I want to begin by calling attention to just how the science-religion issue is displayed in *Varieties*. I will then locate *Varieties* chronologically and logically in what I believe it is fair to describe as James's career-long defense of certain central aspects of the culture of liberal Protestantism as understood and cherished by many educated Americans of his generation. This is the life project from which we today are tempted to detach James's ideas. Specifically, I will interpret *Varieties* as a product of the particular phase in James's career when he was shifting from one strategy to another in that defense. Before I proceed to the text, let me indicate telegraphically what those two strategies were, and allude to a third strategy popular in his milieu that James was concerned to discredit.

The first strategy was a highly sophisticated version of the classic "separate spheres" doctrine, an effort to protect Protestantism from science by marking off a distinct category of beliefs that science could not be expected to touch. The second strategy was to embrace in a Peircean mode the epistemic unity of all experience and belief, and to vindicate the generic human ideals for which Protestantism was a historic vehicle within rather than outside the discursive constraints of modern science, once those constraints were properly understood. When he wrote *Varieties* in 1902, James had recently drawn away from the first of these strategies, which he had

developed most fully in "The Will to Believe" in 1897, but he was not yet confident about the second, Peircean strategy, which he later employed in 1907 in the book entitled *Pragmatism*. In *Varieties* James was still trying to figure out how best to carry out the second strategy, and he was also trying to decide just what it was that he wanted to vindicate scientifically under the sign of "religion." And while he was working out this transition from one strategy to another, he remained preoccupied with the enormous appeal to his audience of a third strategy, that of absolute idealism. It is too easy today to underestimate that appeal. The absolute idealist Josiah Royce, James's Harvard colleague, was a dialectician so formidable that he was then known, after the reigning heavyweight champion, as the John L. Sullivan of philosophy. By contrast, James was a psychologist trying to do philosophy and, in the view of many philosophers, failing.

But I will return to all of that. Now to *Varieties* itself, and the specific form that the science-religion tension takes within that text.

James's ostensibly specieswide account of religious experience is deeply Protestant in structure, tone, and implicit theology. Even the categories of religious experience around which *Varieties* is organized, and the order in which James describes them, have this quality. As theologian Richard R. Niebuhr and others have pointed out, James, by moving from "healthy-mindedness" to the "sick soul" to the "divided self" to "conversion" and then to "saintliness," follows the prescribed sequence of the evangelical Protestant conversion narrative.³ Although James presents his subject matter as generically human, and says explicitly several times that Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism as well as Christianity have been settings for religious experiences the essence of which he seeks to confront, the frequency and character of his use of Protestant examples tells us much about what was at stake for himself.

James takes the first of his many extended quotations from the writings of the seventeenth-century English Quaker, George Fox. This is an interesting choice to represent the radical alterity of religious experience, as the realm James suggests is so foreign to his enlightened, modern listeners at Edinburgh and to his similarly enlightened and modern readers generally. Fox's state of mind, which James denotes as "pathological," was indeed bizarre in contrast with that expressed by the average Anglican, Presbyterian, or Unitarian of 1902. But Fox's piety was that of highly familiar dissenting English Protestantism. Fox was marginal, all right, but

what he was marginal to was mainstream: the Anglo-American Protestant tradition as comprehended by James's audience. And the sensibility of which Fox was an extreme case was the widely approved sensibility of Puritan-Quaker humility. In introducing Fox's testimony, moreover, James observes that he brought to England a Christianity closer to that of the original gospel than England had ever seen. James describes it as "a religion of veracity," an interesting construction in a science-and-religion milieu in which the agnostic T. H. Huxley was often quoted for praising science as "fanaticism for veracity."⁴ James keeps going back to Fox, and cites him another nine times at various points in the book.

One of the places in which James reverts to Fox is in his pivotal discussion of saintliness, which, as John E. Smith reminds us in his introduction to the now-standard Harvard edition of *Varieties*, is the critical core of James's effort to justify religion on the basis of its results.⁵ But the Protestant orientation of James's discussion of saintliness is much more pronounced than many commentators have noted. To a very large extent, these chapters on saintliness amount to a celebration of the strict observance of exactly the personal morality prescribed historically by dissenting Protestants in Britain and America. When James comes to talk about the behavioral manifestations of successful conversion, he moves quickly into a discussion of "reformed drunkards" and of males cured of "sexual temptation." This then leads to a footnote about a woman who, under the inspiration of religious experience, was able finally to quit smoking.⁶ In James's two chapters on saintliness, we find ourselves right in the middle of the culture explored by James's contemporary Harold Frederic in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, and affectionately chuckled at in our own time by Garrison Keillor.

Asceticism and charity are the two virtues on which James spends the most time in his account of saintliness, but a striking theme in his examples of charity is that of self-humbling on the part of the giver, as though the point was not so much to enhance the circumstances of the beneficiary as to diminish pride of self in the benefactor. Among James's examples are Francis of Assisi and Ignatius Loyola, both of whom he mentions for having "exchanged their garments with those of filthy beggars."⁷

Here the distinction between James's Catholic and Protestant examples becomes revealing. James refers repeatedly to the ways in which the Roman church has more or less specialized in ascetic piety. But as he al-

ternates between Catholic and Protestant cases, a pattern emerges. After two quite benign testimonies from a Unitarian and a Methodist telling of the taking up of humble clothing and the refusing of rich food, James cites a French country priest who would never drink when thirsty and never take cover against the cold. Then James gives us Cotton Mather of Massachusetts, displaying virtuous asceticism by merely refusing to touch his beloved wife's body in her last moments of life in order that he might humbly accept her passage into God's hands. This is one of James's most gentle, attractive examples of self-abnegation, the release of a loved one. But suddenly James presents St. John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic who advocated the despising of oneself, the yearning that others will despise you, and the turning of one's soul toward whatever is disgusting and contemptible. This case then slides into another Catholic example, the fourteenth-century German mystic Suso, whose account of his own physical self-mortification—sleeping on a bed of nails and the like—is one of the longest single quotations in the whole of *Varieties*. James breaks off this flagrantly masochistic and some would say mildly pornographic quotation by saying that he will "spare" us the further "recital of poor Suso's self-inflicted tortures."⁸

Several pages later James asks his readers if he might have left an impression "of extravagance." And sure enough, he then allows that while there is much to admire in these saintly lives, he is not urging that they be "imitated." Then he launches into a vigorous critique of what he calls "excess" in "saintly virtue." The freethinkers, James admits, are on to something when they complain of certain unhealthy tendencies among the more fanatical of religious believers. Their mentality is "too one-sided to be admirable," he declares, and then provides a long quotation from a Catholic saint who James says has renounced all human uses for her asceticism. James then turns to St. Teresa, for whom he says he can feel only "pity that so much vitality of soul should have found such poor employment." This is then followed by a whole string of Catholic testimonies, including one from St. Louis of Gonzaga, whom James actually calls "repulsive." Such cases "in the annals of Catholic saintship," he says explicitly, "make us rub our Protestant eyes."⁹ There is no question who the "we" or the "us" is whenever James invokes these portentous pronouns.

What casts James's treatment of Fox and other canonical Protestants into bold relief, then, is not so much his fleeting use of Muslim and Jewish

cases but the sustained treatment he gives to Catholics. One can easily get the impression that *Varieties* is a noninvidious harvest of the most intense spiritual moments of all the major religions, especially of Christianity, embracing Catholic as well as Protestant variations. But no. *Varieties* is constructed to foreground certain religious sensibilities and not others, and to present the core of religion in general as having been most attractively manifest in exactly the cultural tradition to which James's listeners and readers were directly heir. Too often, the so-called descriptive chapters of *Varieties* are read as a rather indiscriminate reportage of random and widely dispersed "raw materials" punctuated by James's respectful commentary. But if instead we read these chapters as literary texts, with attention to his selection of quotations and their dynamic relation to one another, we gain greater access to James's center of religious gravity.

That James was being judgmental when he talked about saintliness cannot be emphasized enough, given the tendency of some readers to take the bulk of *Varieties* as merely descriptive. "We must judge," James says, and we must do so "not sentimentally," but "by our own intellectual standards." He then quotes Nietzsche's attack on saintliness as being overdrawn, but properly skeptical. Right in the middle of this discussion, James says that a goal of the science of religions is "to test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity." These standards, he is quick to explain, are historically specific and are grounded in a process of cultural "evolution." "What with science, idealism, and democracy, our own imagination has grown to need a God of an entirely different temperament" from that of the Catholic saints.¹⁰

James's frank acceptance of the idea that our gods are constructed socially on the basis of our historical experience shows just how liberal was the Protestantism with which he was comfortable. "The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on our ourselves, and on one another." It is for us, then, said James about himself and his contemporaries, to apply to "religious beliefs" a kind of critical selection analogous to natural selection; we are engaged in "the survival of the humanly fittest" and the "elimination of the humanly unfit" religious beliefs.¹¹ No wonder James's funeral sermon was preached by George A. Gordon, the Congregationalist minister then known as "the Matterhorn of the Protestant Alps," who

understood that religious evolution from antiquity onward had been leading up to his church in the heart of Boston.¹²

James's evolutionary language concerning the survival of the fittest religions under modern scrutiny can turn us from the aspects of *Varieties* that reveal its firm foundation in liberal Protestantism to those aspects that indicate more fully the shape and scope of the "science of religions" that James sought to establish. These elements of *Varieties* display his sense of the scientific side of the tension that drives the work.

James defines his science of religions the most sharply against what he calls "dogmatic theology" and more generally against "philosophy of religion," the alleged character of which he conveys with quotations from such idealist metaphysicians as Josiah Royce and James Caird, and various scholastic thinkers, including Cardinal Newman. Against the propensity of this class of thinkers for "metaphysics and deduction," James calls for "criticism and induction," and for the testing of religious ideas in their capacity as hypotheses, a favorite word that he italicizes in his most rigorously formulated account of what makes his science of religions different from what philosophers and theologians have done with religion in the past.¹³

Central to James's science of religion are the ideals of intersubjective testability and consensus. The severity of his presentation of these ideals is one of the least appreciated themes of *Varieties*. Although the experiences he wants scrutinized are private in origin, the idea is now to consider them in a public frame, to bring them within the scope of disciplined, empirical inquiry. The result will be a scientific distillation and evaluation of religious experience. James stresses that any philosophical-sound view of life needs to take into account the totality of human experience. It was science's breadth of scope, science's ability to confront the particulars of individual experience with that of thousands and millions of other human individuals, that gave it the opportunity to build such a philosophically sound view of life. Religious claims to truth need to be integrated with our body of truths. "By confronting spontaneous religious constructions with the results of natural science," insists James, we can "eliminate doctrines that are now known to be scientifically absurd or incongruous." Our science "can offer mediation between different believers, and help bring about consensus of opinion."¹⁴

James is so attracted to the ideal of scholarly consensus that he uses the failure of the idealists to achieve it as a sign of the obvious inadequacy of

their ideas. This is a stunning move on the part of James, who had been for so long a polemical defender of idiosyncratic minorities against the apparent tyrannies of learned majorities. And he seems to sense how remarkable a move it is, because he accompanies it with a long and defensive footnote apologizing for not even trying to meet with arguments the claims of Royce and the other metaphysical idealists.¹⁵ He knows how odd it is of him to dismiss someone on the grounds that his or her claims have failed to win over the leaders of a professional community.

I have been quoting from the chapter entitled "Philosophy," but James picks up the same themes in his final chapter, "Conclusions." There he hits hard his determination that the results of religious experience be squared with the results of the rest of experience: it is among "the duties of the science of religions," he declares, "to keep religion in connexion with the rest of Science," with the word "science" capitalized, and not ironically as James had been inclined to do in earlier years. Even in the "Postscript," that enigmatic and disjointed indicator of the depth and texture of James's nervousness about the signals sent in the Gifford Lectures, James returns to "legitimate requirements" that must be met by any hypothesis.¹⁶

And it is those requirements that James believes are not met by the people he calls "medical materialists" in the first chapter of *Varieties*, entitled "Religion and Neurology." There, he goes after the reductionists who dismiss Saul's transformation into Paul on the road to Damascus as an epileptic seizure, and who treat "George Fox's discontents with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity" as symptoms of "a disordered colon." But he most adamantly condemns these cultured despisers of religion on the basis of strictly uniformitarian, scientific principles. It is the failure of the reductionists to be consistent materialists that most gives the lie to their efforts to undermine religious belief by explaining it physiologically. It never occurs to these folks, complains James, to trace to an author's "neurotic constitution" any ideas they find attractive. Why not explain through neurology the triumphs of industry and the arts and science itself? "Let us play fair in this whole matter," he remonstrates; "physiological theory" can do just as well at explaining nonreligious states of mind as religious states of mind, and in neither case would such a theory tell us all we need to know about its object.¹⁷

Right from the start, then, in that opening chapter, James invokes what he eventually calls his "objective conscience." This is the voice he associates

with the demands of science, rightly understood: the uniformitarianism, the fair play, the public knowledge, the intersubjective testing of truth claims against the totality of human experience. In the final paragraph of his concluding chapter, James also invokes what he calls his "subjective conscience," the voice he associates with the demands of his religious heritage, with what attracts him to George Fox, with all that is implied when he speaks finally at the end of the book of himself as a "Christian."¹⁸ Indeed, the last few sentences of "Conclusions," when James's scientific conscience and his religious conscience are brought together, constitute one of his most compact and agonistic expressions of the tension by which so much of his life was defined.

James comes to this climactic moment, among the most moving discursive episodes in the more than forty years of Jamesean prose about this problem, when he is trying to explain what he has just declared to be his "over-belief" that God exists and that as human beings open themselves to God their "deepest destiny is fulfilled." "My objective and my subjective conscience both hold me" to that over-belief, he says. Thus fortified by this dual assertion—the two consciences finally driving him the same way, a consummation so long elusive—James then brings his Gifford Lectures to their final sentence, striking for its candid, if tentative affirmation, in the form of a question, of liberal Protestantism's trust in the response of a benevolent God to the righteous strivings of his creatures: "Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?"¹⁹

But while the Gifford Lectures end with that captivating sentence, *Varieties*, the published book, does not. The religious conscience and the scientific conscience, pasted together in act of assertion, continued to pull James in different directions. So he added the tortured, six-page "Postscript," which displays his uncertainty about the issues on which he had pronounced in his concluding chapter. He expresses concern he had not been clear about his "philosophical position." Then we learn that when James had called himself a Christian at Edinburgh he did not mean "to accept either popular Christianity or scholastic theism." We learn, further, that James is a very special kind of supernaturalist, a "piecemeal" supernaturalist to be distinguished from the sort who assigns the whole world to God's providence. James imagines a patchwork cosmos, with supernatural power

here or there, one is not sure just where. At pains to remind his readers that he is not a theologian, yet having raised issues of an indisputably theological character, James quickly exits, saying, "I hope to return to the same questions in another book."²⁰ That is the way *Varieties* actually ends.

At the end of *Varieties*, then, we see James in a decidedly stuttering mode, having allowed himself to pile up example after example of religious experience while putting off the philosophical harvest. His need for a commodious science and a flexible religion was manifest, and *Varieties* had been, among other things, a search for both. But the search was not over. James managed in *Varieties* to articulate more vividly than ever before his loyalty to modern science's principles of intersubjective testability and professional consensus, and his loyalty to a worldview in which supernatural power of the sort posited by his own cultural tradition was an authentic presence and agent of undetermined scope. Neither loyalty was new to James in 1902, but now he was really out there on both.

How did he get there, and where did he go next?

At the risk of making James's life seem more of an integrated whole than it was, I want to quote a few passages from a letter he wrote to Holmes in 1868, when he was twenty-six years old. This letter was written from Germany, where James was studying the new empirical psychology in the wake of a personally distressing time in Brazil on the Agassiz expedition, and before his celebrated mental collapse of 1870 back in Massachusetts. James is telling Holmes how things are coming together for him in Dresden, how he is adopting "an empiricist view of life."

I don't know how far it will carry me, or what rocks insoluble by it will block my future path. Already I see an ontological cloud of absolute idealism waiting for me far off on the horizon. . . . I shall continue to apply empirical principles to my experiences as I go and see how much they fit.

Here the enduring rivalry between empiricism and Hegelian metaphysics is emplotted, and the work-it-out-as-you-go style of coping with experience is essayed. Then James expresses his uncertainty about how candidly people like himself and the similarly advanced Holmes should share with the less enlightened populace their understanding that the old faiths have been discredited by Darwin and his kind.

If . . . we must take our sensations as simply given or as preserved by natural selection for us, and interpret this rich and delicate overgrowth of ideas, moral, artistic, religious and social, as a mere mask, a tissue spun in happy hours by creative individuals and adopted by other men in the interests of their sensations. . . . How long can we indulge the "people" in their theological and other vagaries so long as such vagaries seem to us more beneficial on the whole than otherwise? How long are we to wear that uncomfortable "air of suppression" which has been complained of [by] Mill?

James continues by pondering if there might be a way to salvage something from the old religion. Perhaps we can advance "happiness among the multitudes," he suggests to Holmes, if we appropriate from "the old moralities and theologies" a piece of lumber for "our own purposes." What might that old lumber look like, once appropriated and reworked? Perhaps, James continues, we can preach "the doctrine that Man is his own Providence, and every individual a real God to his race, greater or less in proportion to his gifts and the way he uses them?" Then James, invoking the capacity of modern human beings for solidarity with one another in worldly ventures, speculates that "philanthropy" might take the place of religion "as an ultimate motive for human action."²¹

Now, James certainly did take a piece of lumber from the old religion, and he did try to build upon it a more frankly humanistic worldview that would be capable of inspiring the multitudes. The notion of human beings exercising their own "Providence," individually and collectively, was a grand leitmotif of James's creative work all the way to the time of his death. Here in 1868 we do find several of the major components of James's life project. The old religion has something we probably still need, but it has to be radically humanized, and integrated somehow into an empiricist understanding of inquiry and of the objects of inquiry. The most formidable intellectual obstacle to such a program is absolute idealism. The great empiricist John Stuart Mill is someone whose instructions are worth following. And we should respect the public and try to speak honestly to it.

These components of James's life project were visible all through the 1870s, 1880s, and early 1890s, even when he saw himself chiefly as a psychologist. They are most prominently displayed in some of the most

widely quoted and reprinted of James's essays during that period, including "The Sentiment of Rationality," "Reflex Arc and Theism," and "Is Life Worth Living." These can be seen as warm-ups for "The Will to Believe," alongside which James reprinted them in 1897 in the book of that title. These essays sympathize with the religious believer against those hyper-scientific thinkers who make what James thought was the serious mistake of assuming that science had ruled out the taking of God seriously. Yet the essays, at the same time, reflect on the value of science and condemn the perpetuation of truly anachronistic religious beliefs in a scientific age.

In these essays James invokes the strategy of separate spheres for keeping alive something of the old faith. In "Sentiment of Rationality," first published in its complete form in 1882, James draws an important distinction. He refers to "a certain class of truths" in regard to which "faith" is appropriate, and that are not supported by "scientific evidence." His favorite examples tend toward the power of positive thinking, such as believing on faith that it is really true that you have the ability to leap across an abyss in order to avoid death. But such examples are embedded in James's standard screed against W. K. Clifford and the agnostics, and his frequent empathic references to holders of religious faith. James's readers are thus invited to think of their decisions about religious belief as analogous to deciding whether "to bail out a boat because I am in doubt whether my efforts will keep her afloat." So, some truths are real for us on faith, James says, and others are real for us because of scientific evidence. He concludes "The Sentiment of Rationality" by celebrating "faith's sphere," which he describes as "another realm into which the stifled soul may escape from pedantic scruples." There are risks to this, but many people will find them worthwhile. Let people do all they can, urges James, "to mark out distinctively the questions which fall within faith's sphere."²²

James's language does little to disguise the protective character of the separate spheres doctrine. But by the time of "The Will to Believe" he had become more cautious. The salient distinction is not as prominent as it had been before, because it is now surrounded by distinctions between hypotheses that are living and dead, forced or avoidable, and momentous or trivial. "The Will to Believe" also contains a much more extensive and distracting polemic against Clifford for his absurd claim that one can never do anything except on the basis of sufficient evidence. That was a canard, as I have shown elsewhere,²³ but here I will ignore James's blatant

misrepresentations of the conveniently deceased Clifford to move quickly on to the highly developed language of tolerance that most distinguishes "The Will to Believe" from the other essays in the series that employ the separate spheres strategy.

In that legendary essay, the most widely disseminated and quoted item ever to flow from James's pen, James rests the case for religious belief heavily upon a general appeal to the principle of "live and let live." He calls upon everyone to respect one another's beliefs except when those beliefs have been uncontrovertibly disproved. "We ought . . . delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom . . . then and only then we shall have that spirit" of tolerance that is "empiricism's glory." Thus James subtly relocates the question of true belief out of the jurisdiction of the laboratory and the seminar and places it instead under the jurisdiction of the polite drawing room. This sphere of tolerance applies on one side of the distinction upon which James's argument most turns: the distinction between questions that can be decided "on intellectual grounds" and those that "by nature" cannot. Clifford was right about how science worked, said James, and certainly about the need to believe "ethically." But Clifford was just plain wrong about the specific cognitive terrain in which the scientific conscience was to operate. In "The Will to Believe" James draws the line between scientifically warranted beliefs and the rest of our opinions more sharply than the positivist Clifford ever did, and James pushes that line back selectively until it no longer threatens the varieties of supernaturalism favored by the most theologically liberal of Protestant believers.²⁴

But no sooner did James provide the separate spheres doctrine with one of the most successful formulations in that doctrine's long history than he began to back away from it. In the very preface to *The Will to Believe*, the 1897 book the title essay of which James had written the year before and delivered as lectures to student groups at Yale and Brown universities, James calls for the verification of "religious hypotheses" along with "scientific hypotheses" by "experimental tests." The emphasis in this preface, which asks religious believers to come out of "hiding" and actually celebrates the rough-and-tumble, "survival of the fittest" competition of religious as well as scientific ideas in the public "market-place," is strikingly different from the protective emphasis found in "The Will to Believe" itself, and in the other essays collected with it.²⁵ I am not sure why

James began, even in 1897, to pull away from what he had just articulated so vividly. Perhaps its metaphysical character bothered him once he confronted in print what he had said. The notion that certain questions have a nature that prevents them from being decided on the basis of evidence and reasoning is, after all, in some respects very non-Jamesian. It sounds like a metaphysical principle, rather out of keeping with James's empiricist determination to take things as they come. In any event, he took a very different approach to religious belief immediately after the publication of "The Will to Believe."

The following year, 1898, James delivered at Berkeley "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," the lecture that became famous for James's declaring himself a "pragmatist," for bringing the ideas of Charles Peirce out of obscurity, and for beginning the discussion of pragmatism that would animate philosophers for the next fifteen years. James quickly published this lecture in the *Journal of Philosophy* under the title, "The Pragmatic Method."²⁶ Now, a remarkable feature of this text that is almost never discussed is the fact that it is almost entirely about God. Yet, unlike "The Will to Believe," where God talk is carefully circumscribed, the Berkeley lecture is almost never anthologized or even cited in discussions of science and religion. It is true that James says he is only using the God question as an example of the power of Peirce's principle of pragmatism. And it is true that James does not explicitly defend the claim that God exists. No doubt there are other reasons for this lecture's having found its way into the history of philosophy canon but not into the religious studies canon. But the simple point I want to make is that in it James experiments with an epistemically monolithic context for deciding religious issues.

James does not flag this move. But he makes it. First he applies to the idea of God Peirce's principle that to get a clear idea of something, "we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare." It is in pursuit of this epistemically universal method that James then analyzes how different are the effects of theism and materialism. But James reinforces the move again at the end of the lecture when he interprets Peirce as having simply sharpened the empiricist tradition of Locke, Hume, and Mill. James concludes with a ringing affirmation of the philosophical tradition of English empiricism,²⁷ with-

in which the God talk of the lecture is thus quietly embraced. When James wrote *Pragmatism* in 1907 he dedicated it, after all, to the free-thinking empiricist Mill, even while offering that book as a way of widening the search for God.

Before turning to that book, however, I want to note that James invokes something he calls "pragmatism" three times in *Varieties*, which, please recall, James wrote after he gave the Berkeley lecture but before he wrote *Pragmatism*. In the first use of the word "pragmatism" in *Varieties*, James uses it against the metaphysicians who prattle on about various attributes of God; what difference could it possibly make, he asks as a self-styled pragmatist, if God has the attribute of "simplicity" or "necessariness"? Here, James is simply tracking passages from his 1898 lecture, and providing a more cogent and compelling summary of Peirce than he had managed to do previously. A few pages later, he alludes to the same pragmatic denial that metaphysical argumentation about God's attributes matters one whit. James's third and most interesting reference is on the final page of his concluding chapter, where he describes as a "thoroughly 'pragmatic' view of religion" the view that higher powers actually affect the course of the world, and are not simply in charge of it in some general, detached way. This view, he says, has generally been accepted by "common men," who have believed in "miracles" and have "built a heaven out beyond the grave."²⁸ Here James associates the name of pragmatism with some very strong claims about divine agency, and it is presumably just these passages that he was most worried about when he appended his postscript, cautioning that he is not a Christian in the common man's sense after all, nor a theist in the scholastic's sense.

In that postscript James does something else that marks the transitional character of *Varieties*. He renounces for the first time, as Wayne Proudfoot has observed in a recent article in the *Harvard Theological Review*, the notion that God's guarantee of a permanent moral order is central to theism.²⁹ James had still asserted this in his Berkeley lecture, and he repeated it again in the conclusion to *Varieties*. Yet in the postscript James structures theism as accommodating the taking of a risk rather than the acceptance of a guarantee. "A final philosophy of religion," he speculates, will have to accept a "pluralistic" hypothesis according to which only part of the world will be saved and part will be lost, and the outcome will depend to a degree on what human beings

do.³⁰ And here at last we are at the cusp of what James delivered a few years later in *Pragmatism*.

In that book, where he speaks repeatedly of the world's salvation, as he does in his related correspondence, James invites religious believers to risk their beliefs in inquiry, to renounce the safe harbors of the metaphysicians and to confront the materialists on their own ground, which was experience in the world.³¹ Here the episteme is monolithic, the fate of religion feels less secure, but the chances of vindication ostensibly much greater than in the cloistered cognitive world of the metaphysicians and other world-eschewing believers. This is, James implies but never says explicitly, because outside is where you find the field of struggle on which the future of culture will be decided. That field is the field of intersubjective empirical inquiry. But to see how James carries this off in *Pragmatism*, we need to focus on three sequential elements of that text: its opening frame, what it declares the doctrine of "pragmatism" to be, and the final chapter, entitled "Pragmatism and Religion," which unfortunately is one of the least carefully studied of all the things James wrote under the sign of pragmatism.

James's opening leaves not the slightest doubt that he wrote *Pragmatism* for people worried about the fate of religion in the face of the advance of science. The book begins by confronting the concerned soul with an obviously unacceptable choice between "tough-minded" empiricist-skeptics and "tender-minded" religious idealists. James then offers a solution: he lays out pragmatism as a middle way, suitable for those too tender to give up on God but too tough to give up on science.³²

But when James tells us "What Pragmatism Means"—the second element in the text to which I call attention—he offers what turns out to be a natural history of belief. He describes how human beings, as a behavioral fact, form their ideas and change them in the course of experience, both individually and collectively. Especially, he points to how scientific ideas change, how ideas we take to be true in one generation are so often replaced by other ideas later. We hold to our old ideas as much as we can, but new experience puts them under strain, so we graft some new idea "upon the ancient stock" while dropping some of the old opinions. The body of truth, then, "grows much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium."³³ Although this natural history of belief echoed points James had made here and there in his previous writings, never before had

he developed so sustained an account of the dependence of scientific truth upon the cognitive activities of historically situated human communities. When he used to talk about the role of preconceptions in the creation of knowledge, he would usually do so with reference to an individual mind, and while separating out from this process the religious beliefs that science—contrary to the pretensions of freethinkers like Clifford—could not touch. Now, in 1907, he nested the problem of religious belief firmly in the same matrix of inquiry with the problem of scientific belief, which is precisely where Peirce had located it way back in 1877 in "Fixation of Belief."³⁴

The contrast between Roycean metaphysical idealism and pragmatism dominates the concluding chapter, "Pragmatism and Religion." There, James compares the idealists to the prodigal son, who doesn't really risk anything because he knows he can count on his father to make everything all right in the end. "We want a universe," he mocks the absolutists, "where we can just give up, fall on our father's neck, and be absorbed into the absolute life as a drop of water melts into the river or sea." This is not a realistic view of our human situation, says James. Life as actually lived, as available to an empiricist, suggests that we reside in an uncertain universe with real conflicts and real victories and real defeats. In such a world we cannot take anything for granted, including the salvation of those who are justified by faith. James is saying to members of his own religious tribe that in order to vindicate even the most rudimentary aspects of the old faith, they have got to come to grips with the radical contingency of the human process by which culture is created, reproduced, and critically revised. Once you clue into this, he implies, then you have to try to get your ideas accepted within this process, not by ignoring it. James calls his tribe to "a social scheme of co-operative work," a project that requires its participants to "trust" each other as they work together.³⁵ There is no guarantee that your culture will survive without your own hard work, no guarantee that the sensibilities you hold dear will continue to find social support in the decades and centuries to come; but at least you can try to make it so. Don't let Royce tell you, James implicitly scolds, that he has proved logically that we are all embraced within the Absolute.

"Must *all* be saved?" James begins a series of increasingly jagged rhetorical questions designed to undermine the ultimate cheerfulness and complacency of the idealists.

Is *no* price to be paid for the work of salvation? Is the last word sweet? Is all “yes, yes” in the universe? Doesn’t the fact of “no” stand at the very core of life? Doesn’t the very “seriousness” that we attribute to life mean that ineluctable noes and losses form a part of it, that . . . at the bottom of the cup something “permanently drastic and bitter always remains”?³⁶

In these final pages of *Pragmatism*, James simultaneously attacks the idealists and reassures his audience that he has not become an atheist. “I have written a book on men’s religious experience,” James says proudly of *Varieties*, “which on whole has been regarded as making for the reality of God.” And in these final pages James reverts again and again to the problem of the world’s salvation, and to the role that human beings might play in it by working in harmony with God, whom James describes as “but one helper” amid “all the shapers of the great world’s fate.” If we do our part right, there is at least a possibility that “when the cup” of life is “finally poured off,” what we drink will be “sweet enough” even if “the dregs are left behind forever.”³⁷ How do we humans do our part to maximize our chances of gaining this sweetness?

Well, one thing we can do is to “bring the evidence in,” James says, to support our “over-beliefs,” including the over-belief that God exists and is responsive to our strivings. James ends *Pragmatism* with an evangelical call to religious believers to come out of idealist shelters and set sail on the risky seas of experience, bringing in evidence of the sort that might actually stand up in the structure of plausibility that counted in the modern, North Atlantic West. The risk, of course, was that the religious hypothesis might not stand up: perhaps experience might not confirm what one hoped it would. We need to take the “hypothesis of God,” James says, inserting religion directly into the discourse of empirical inquiry, and “build it out,” so that the evidence it generates can “combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths” we possess.³⁸ James thus places the God question directly in the natural history of belief that he has presented as the core of pragmatism. This is a long way from “The Will to Believe.” The distinction between questions that can be resolved by evidence and those that cannot has—quietly!—all but disappeared.

If there is any doubt about what is going on in these last few intense pages of *Pragmatism*, which rival the conclusions to *Varieties* for their com-

bination of anxiety and conviction, James conflates his own call to believers to throw themselves into empirical inquiry with the call of a shipwrecked sailor who died in a storm yet through his epitaph bids others “to set sail,” because “many a gallant bark, when we were lost, Weathered the gale.” Moreover, as soon as James quotes the epitaph, he links this bold sailing into the storm with the willingness of the old Puritans to accept an uncertain world and take chances in the hope that their risk-taking acts would be instruments for God’s purposes. “Are you willing,” he asks his contemporary American Protestants in the voice of the old Puritans—calling upon his friends to risk their beliefs in inquiry on the hope that they will be more commandingly vindicated—“to be damned for God’s glory?”³⁹

James follows this question with an uncharacteristically perfectionist passage about the future of the globe, suggesting the possibility of saving the world by actually eliminating evil, and he does so while contrasting his mode of worldly struggle with Royce’s mode of “aufgehoben”:

[My] way of escape from evil . . . is not by getting it “aufgehoben,” or preserved in the whole as an element essential but “overcome.” It is by dropping [evil] out altogether, throwing it overboard and getting beyond it, helping to make a universe that shall forget [evil’s] very place and name.⁴⁰

Now, the extremity of this last passage, nearly all of which James renders in italics, is remarkable enough. And here is another of James’s maritime figures of speech, with the hardy protagonists of his cosmic narrative in a boat struggling to throw evil “overboard.” But the passage that follows this anomalous effusion of religious perfectionism, revealing a yearning for spiritual consummation that James normally kept in the shadows, is even more interesting for anyone trying to assess what James meant by “pragmatism” and how his development of it relates to the preoccupations of *Varieties*. Whoever is “willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if need be for the realization of the ideals which he frames”—and this is a secular translation of whoever is willing to be “damned for God’s glory”—is a “genuine pragmatist.”⁴¹ This sense of pragmatism has much in common with that displayed on the last page of *Varieties*, where, as I noted earlier, “pragmatism” is associated with the doctrine that the world is the site of a struggle of

uncertain outcome, in which there is at least a chance that supernatural agencies and virtuous human strivings might work together for good.

Reading the *Pragmatism* of 1907, then, helps us see what James was working toward when he wrote *Varieties* in 1902. And if we have *Varieties* in mind when we read *Pragmatism*, we are better able to grasp the depth and character of the religious concerns that produced the often enigmatic formulations James offered under the sign of “pragmatism.” Shortly after 1897 James seems to have come to the conclusion that the strategy of keeping the essence of religion safely protected from the structures of plausibility being inculcated in modern societies by science was a dead end. His sponsorship of the epistemically monolithic Peirce and his adoption of what was, for James, a new label, “pragmatism,” mark the start of his own risky voyage, the first substantial vessel for which was *Varieties*. He later built and sailed on other ships, most of which we continue to study, as we study *Varieties*, without attending to the course James himself had charted for them. We are not obliged to accept his priorities in order to learn from what he wrote, but we are less likely to project our own ideas onto his if we know what he was trying to do and recognize the lights and shadows that affected his vision.

Did James “turn the lights down low so as to give miracle a chance”? No doubt he did, but at the same time he replaced the fierce concept of “miracle” with the bland-sounding “the religious hypothesis.” James rendered religion so general that it had a much better chance of being accepted in the modern structure of plausibility than did any particular religious doctrine. He worked from both ends simultaneously, making science more commodious and religion less confined by anything that might conflict with any specific finding of science.

Two years after James was born, a close friend of his parents wrote:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne. . . .

James Russell Lowell, in “The Present Crisis,” continued,⁴²

Yet that scaffold sways the future, and
Behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above his own.

I believe that William James always hoped, in part of his soul, that God would come out of the New England shadow invoked by Lowell, that Yahweh would speak to him from the whirlwind, show him the burning bush, let him see Ezekiel’s wheel in the middle of the sky. But nothing like that ever happened. It was James’s destiny rather to become his generation’s most creative and conspicuous case simultaneously of the radical liberalization of Protestantism and of the radical historicization of scientific inquiry. In achieving this place in a history that we can recognize a century after the fact, I suppose James himself may have been damned, and perhaps even for God’s glory, but that uncertainty in James studies is one that I leave well enough alone.

NOTES

For helpful comments on a draft of this paper, I wish to thank Wayne Proudfoot, Richard Rorty, Mark Schwehn, and Ann Taves.

1. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., to Frederick Pollock, September 1, 1910, in *Holmes-Pollock Letters, The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Sir Frederick Pollock, 1874–1932*, 2 vols., ed. Mark DeWolfe Howe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), 1:67.

2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 359–360.

3. Richard R. Niebuhr, “William James on Religious Experience,” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 225.

4. James, *Varieties*, 15–16. For an example of the use in James’s milieu of this famous phrase of Huxley’s, see David Starr Jordan, “Comrades in Zeal,” *Popular Science Monthly* 64 (1904): 304.

5. John E. Smith, “Introduction” to James, *Varieties*, xxxvi.

6. James, *Varieties*, 217–218.

7. *Ibid.* 229.

8. *Ibid.* 241–249.

9. *Ibid.* 272–283, 265.

10. *Ibid.* 266, 277, 295, 297.

11. *Ibid.* 266.

12. For Gordon, see William Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 234–244. It should be acknowledged that James’s sympathies for idiosyncratic and extreme religious persuasions set him somewhat apart from the high decorum style of the liberal Protestant establishment.

13. James, *Varieties*, 342, 359.

14. Ibid. 359.
15. Ibid. 358.
16. Ibid. 402, 411.
17. Ibid. 20–22.
18. Ibid. 406, 408.
19. Ibid. 408.
20. Ibid. 409–414.
21. William James to Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., May 18, 1868, in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), I:516–517.
22. William James, *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 80, 88–89.
23. David A. Hollinger, “James, Clifford, and the Scientific Conscience,” in *Companion*, ed. Putnam, 69–83.
24. James, *The Will to Believe*, 20, 33.
25. Ibid. 8–9.
26. The text of “The Pragmatic Method” is reprinted in William James, *Essays in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 123–139.
27. Ibid. 124.
28. James, *Varieties*, 351, 361, 408.
29. Wayne Proudfoot, “William James on an Unseen Order,” *Harvard Theological Review* 93, 1 (2000): 51–66.
30. James, *Varieties*, 414.
31. The analysis of *Pragmatism* developed here expands upon points made in David A. Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 4–22.
32. William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 13.
33. Ibid. 34–36.
34. Charles Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (1877): 1–15.
35. James, *Pragmatism*, 139–140.
36. Ibid. 141.
37. Ibid. 142–143.
38. Ibid. 143–144.
39. Ibid. 142.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. James Russell Lowell, “The Present Crisis,” in *The Complete Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell*, ed. Horace E. Scudder (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 67.