

William James, Ecumenical Protestantism, and the Dynamics of Secularization

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The sermon at William James's funeral on 30 August 1910 was preached by the Reverend George A. Gordon, a name recognized today only by religious history specialists, but in 1910 a pulpiteer so prominent that he was sometimes described as "the Matterhorn of the Protestant Alps". Author of the then popular treatise, *A New Epoch for Faith*, Gordon is a central figure in the histories of Protestant liberal thought written by Frank Hugh Foster in 1940 and William Hutchison in 1976, but rarely consulted today. Gordon, a close friend of James, was the minister of Boston's Old South Congregational Church. When the great philosopher died on 26 August, his widow immediately selected Gordon to perform the service. Mrs James made clear to Gordon why she wanted him. You are "a man of faith", which "is what [William] was". About this she was firm, apprising Gordon that she wanted at this funeral service "no hesitation or diluted utterance" in speaking about faith.¹

Mrs James had good reason to say these things. Her late husband had been candid about his feelings of spiritual solidarity with Gordon. "You and I seem to be working... towards the same end (the Kingdom of Heaven, namely)", James had written to his clergyman friend not long before, although you do this "more openly and immediately" than I do.²

Fast forward exactly one full century. In the July/August 2010 issue of *The Humanist*, a magazine devoted to the advancement of free-thinking and to the

¹ George A. Gordon, *My Education and Religion: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 198. George A. Gordon, *The New Epoch for Faith by George A. Gordon, Minister of the Old South Church, Boston* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901). For discussion of Gordon see William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 134–44, and Frank Hugh Foster, *The Modern Movement in American Theology: Sketches in the History of American Protestant Thought from the Civil War to the World War* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1939), 105–35.

² William James to George A. Gordon, 24 Jan. 1907, in Gordon, *Autobiography*, 199.

exposing of the deficiencies of traditional religious faith, the British philosopher Jonathan Rée claimed James for the tradition of that magazine. James sometimes showed sympathy for religious believers and occasionally even referred to himself as a Christian, Rée acknowledged, but he went on to insist that when James said things like that he meant them only in “a thoroughly secular and untheological sense”. Similarly, one of Rée’s colleagues, John Shook, a stalwart of the Buffalo fortress of American Humanist Association, has proclaimed James as one of free-thinking humanism’s greatest prophets. James’s emphasis was always upon the moral effects of belief, Shook explains. James “never” affirmed “the existence of any spiritually or supernatural god that a traditional religion may purport to describe”.³

Now, it is clear that James was a sufficiently protean thinker to inspire a variety of trajectories, and that promoters of a grand dispersion of doctrinal persuasions have claimed him as their own. This was true even within James’s own lifetime, and it is true today, as we can see in the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor’s recent efforts to enlist James as an ally in his own contemporary disputations with other philosophers.⁴ But nowhere has the legacy of James been more extensively and vigorously discussed than in relation to ideas about science and religion. James’s entire body of writings from the early 1870s right through to his death in 1910 is dominated by the cluster of science–religion issues that were debated during his lifetime. “The Will to Believe” of 1896 and his 1902 effort to establish what he called “a science of religions”, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, are only the most explicit of the most famous examples of this career-long preoccupation. Even his *Pragmatism* of 1907, we should remind ourselves, was organized around religious issues, and offered as its chief justification the expanding of the “search for God”. And the recent uses of James by Charles Taylor on the one side and by the free-thinking secular humanists on the other can remind us that, if there is a single person who can be called the central thinker in the American conversation about science and religion between the time of the Darwinian revolution and the present day, it is William James.⁵

In this chapter I will discuss the challenges faced by the most conspicuous and persistent of the thinkers—American and European—who tried to defend and advance Protestant Christianity under the inspiration of James and with the tools he bequeathed to them. These people were the leaders of mainstream, ecumenical Protestantism, people like George A. Gordon, especially as found

³ Jonathan Rée, “Variety”, *The New Humanist*, 125/4 (July/Aug. 2010); John Shook, “A Great Humanist: William James”, *Free Inquiry*, 29/1 (Dec. 2008–Jan. 2009), 52.

⁴ See Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁵ For the polemical character of Charles Taylor’s use of James, see David A. Hollinger’s review of Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 72/1 (2004), 81–3.

in seminaries and philosophy departments and on church boards and in the missionary movement during the two generations after James's death. From their struggles we learn about the historic processes sometimes called secularization or, as I would prefer to say, de-Christianization in the United States, the most religiously affirming society in the industrialized North Atlantic West. I will take up James and his relevant followers in specific relation to both of the two chief engines of de-Christianization in America: cognitive demystification and demographic diversification.

By cognitive demystification I mean simply the critical assessment of truth claims in the light of scientific knowledge. This is the classic dynamic of the "science and religion" discourse, according to which the specific content of religious belief is reformulated to take account of what geologists, biologists, physicists, astronomers, historians, and other naturalistically grounded communities persuade religious leaders is true about the world. Normally, the religious doctrines rejected in this process are said to have been inessential to begin with, merely the projections of the historically particular aspects of past cultures, which can now be replaced by formulations that reflect the true essentials of the faith and vindicate yet again the compatibility of faith with knowledge. Sometimes, however, cognitive demystification pushes people toward non-belief.

The second engine is demographic diversification, by which I mean intimate contact with people of different backgrounds, displaying contrasting opinions and assumptions, and stimulating doubt that the ways of one's own tribe are indeed authorized by divine authority and are viable, if not imperative, for other tribes, too. The dynamic here is also classical, that of provincial faiths being challenged by cosmopolitanism, which was another great Enlightenment ideal. Wider experiences—either through international travel or more often through contact with immigrants—changes the context for deciding what is good and true. Living in proximity with people who do not take Protestant Christianity for granted could be unsettling. Here again, the standard response is to liberalize, to treat inherited doctrines as sufficiently flexible to enable one to abide by them while coexisting "pluralistically" or even cooperating with people who do not accept those doctrines. Sometimes, however, awareness of the range of human possibilities results in abandoning the faith of the natal community altogether.⁶

James's friend Charles Peirce, to whom the book titled *The Will to Believe* was dedicated, was unusually eloquent in describing how easily the two processes can be linked. In "The Fixation of Belief", Peirce argued that all efforts to stabilize belief will ultimately fail unless you adopt beliefs that can withstand exposure to the world at large. When you encounter other people who hold

⁶ For a general account of these processes, see David A. Hollinger, "The Accommodation of Protestantism with the Enlightenment", *Daedalus*, 141/1 (2012), 76–88.

very different opinions than your own, and can present striking evidence to support their opinions, it is harder to be sure that you are right. Your own experience and that of those around you may yield a particular set of certainties, but if another group of people move into the neighbourhood and oblige you to confront their foreign experience and the truth claims apparently vindicated by that experience, your old certainties become less certain. Can you keep the rest of the world away from your own tribe? Perhaps, but it is not easy. Peirce made this argument in 1877, while defending the superiority of science in the specific context of the Darwinian controversy. He understood science to entail the taking of all relevant evidence into account, wherever it came from, and he understood truth to be what all of the world's inquirers could agree upon if all of their testimonies could be assimilated. And he understood modernity to be an experience of difference in which hiding out with one's own kind was not likely to work. In this way, he integrated the Enlightenment's cosmopolitanism with its critical spirit.⁷

Both cognitive demystification and demographic diversification are vividly in play in the story of William James and his manifold legacy because the Protestant leaders discussed here shared with James not only an interest in the science-religion relationship, but in the closely related question of what to make of the religious and cultural diversity that was increasingly hard to ignore. One feature of *Varieties* that received enormous attention and that greatly enhanced its credibility as a contribution to the "science of religions" was the range of examples of religious experience James cited. To be sure, we nowadays are struck by the overwhelmingly Protestant character of the book, but to James's contemporaries the glimpses of Islamic and other religions made James's scope seem not just transatlantic, but species-wide. Those who believed that James had somehow neutralized the science-religion question were also inclined to believe that he did it by taking the whole world into account; that is, James dealt simultaneously with the demographic challenges to the old faith—look at the varieties of human beings and their religious experience—as well as the cognitive challenges to the old faith, the challenges derived directly from natural science.⁸

Since James's engagement with the science and religion relationship has too often been studied in isolation from his engagement with human diversity, I want to emphasize that the educated Protestant elite of James's milieu was really excited by the diversity of the world as registered at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions held in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair. The sympathetic study of the varieties of religious experience was expanding rapidly in the seminaries. Missionaries were sending back more and more reports

⁷ Charles S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," *Popular Science Monthly*, 12 (Nov. 1877), 1–15.

⁸ See David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

from abroad, and with diminishing deposits of traditional prejudice. Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims were still esoteric, but less and less so for the most highly educated people in the United States and Great Britain. Grant Wacker and others have documented how extensive and intense was the interest in "world religions" in James's milieu.⁹

The ecumenical movement itself, moreover, was largely generated from a sense of the varieties of religious experience as found in and beyond Europe. Our historians of ecumenism are unanimous in their conclusion that ecumenicity in the North Atlantic West was generated by the needs of the mission field, where the distinctions between denominations meant little and the incentives to develop a simple and unified sense of Christianity were overwhelming. The Protestantism of James's milieu looks outrageously complacent from today's perspective, and dreadfully patronizing in its view of foreign peoples. Yet for 1910, these ecumenists were among the most responsive of Westerners to the indigenous peoples of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific. James's *Varieties* and *A Pluralistic Universe* were received in a setting of extraordinary spiritual and cultural confidence. Gordon and his colleagues and his successors were ready to take on the diversity of the world, as they understood it, partly because they were so sure their own practice was the culmination of human progress. All those other religions, some said explicitly, would eventually fold themselves into Christianity, the most mature and complete of all spiritual orientations. Mrs James and the Reverend Gordon understood that William James had helped to save religion from science, and many of their contemporaries understood that James had also saved religion from diversity by incorporating it.

A PORTENTOUS GAP

Yet there was a problem. What most defined the challenges faced by James's ecumenical Protestant admirers was the gap between what James offered them and what they, the ecumenical Protestants, were trying to do. The gap was between the extremely generic and putatively universal conception of religion that James advanced and the highly specific institutional and intellectual shape of the ecumenical Protestant endeavour as it was developed in the first half of the twentieth century. The ecumenical Protestants were liberalizers, to be sure, and this is what made their engagement with James possible. Their capacious view of Christianity enabled them to treat as an ally a thinker whose lack of

⁹ Grant Wacker, "A Plural World: The Protestant Awakening to World Religions", in William R. Hutchison (ed.), *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 253-77.

orthodoxy created barriers for more conservative contemporaries and successors within the Protestant community of faith.

The ecumenical Protestants were committed to a programme for which James constituted a smaller and more slippery predicate than some of them had hoped. Especially in *Varieties* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, but also in "The Will to Believe" and elsewhere in his earlier work, James explored sympathetically the experiences of a great range of human souls with an "unseen" divinity. "Religious life", as he put it unambiguously in *Varieties*, "consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."¹⁰ Whether he was urging the empirical study of the experience of the divine or advocating the use of the pragmatic method to widen the search for God or simply vindicating the right of people to believe things that science had ostensibly disproved but had not, the religion that James addressed was decidedly lacking in doctrinal specificity.

In many of his lectures, essays, and books, James hovered around theistic commitment but could not quite get even to that general destination, to say nothing of being able to find warrant for even the most abstract formulations of Christianity considered as a particular faith. The stutter-stepping of the final chapter and postscript in *Varieties* is wonderfully illustrative, with James saying agonistically in Scotland that he was Christian but, when back in Massachusetts preparing the Gifford Lectures for publication, retreated and said even more agonistically he had not really meant it. James never tired of condemning excessive abstraction, but among his favourite avenues into religion was to hold forth, as he did at Oxford in the 1908 Hibbert Lectures that became *A Pluralistic Universe*, on the difference between two crashingly abstract rivals: monism and pluralism.¹¹

Yet James delivered to the Anglo-Protestants in his milieu a steady stream of signals that led them to count him as essentially one of them, after all. When he sent his colleague Francis Peabody a copy of *Varieties* he allowed that Peabody would conclude that James was "a Methodist, *minus* a savior". James here displayed appropriate self-awareness about a book whose deeply Protestant texture is remarked upon by David Lamberth in Chapter 8 of this volume. In conversation with another Methodist friend, Borden Parker Bowne, the accomplished personalist at Boston University, James used to joke that he was actually a better Methodist than Bowne. In *Pluralistic Universe*, James attacked the Absolute as an "enemy" of "our popular Christianity" and "the finite God" of "David, Isaiah or Jesus". These references to the biblical God are rare in that text, but his readers could easily project this God into the rest

¹⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902], ed. Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 51.

¹¹ See William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* [1909], ed. Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 25–42.

of the book. It was the Judaeo-Christian God that James was most eager, as Richard Bernstein has written, to separate from the Absolute. So liberated, this particular God—the God of Gordon and Peabody and Bowne and Mrs James, the God of the Methodists and the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians—could flourish in a pluralistic universe.¹²

What most mattered about that particular God for James was registered in the lives of those rare individuals who experienced the “unseen divine” full-bore, as we might say in the idiom of the internal combustion engine, which is to say the sort of person described by Max Weber as a “religious virtuoso”. In *Varieties*, especially, James patronizes humdrum religious experiences and valorizes the most intense of these. A famous passage bears quoting here:

It would profit us little to study . . . second-hand religious life. We must make the search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct. These experiences we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever . . . such individuals are “geniuses” in the religious life.¹³

But let me turn from these examples of a widely understood set of emphases in James to underscore certain vital features of the ecumenical Protestant endeavour. This endeavour may not have been a “dull habit”, but it was heavily communal and institutional. James’s friends George A. Gordon and Francis Peabody and Borden Parker Bowne, the later theologians Gerald Birney Smith and Henry Nelson Wieman, the leaders of the Federal Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, and H. Richard Niebuhr and Reinhold Niebuhr, and a vast panorama of ecumenical Protestants were not remotely like George Fox and the various other religious virtuosi celebrated in *Varieties*. The great Riverside Church preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote reams of notes on James’s religious ideas, but the closest proximity to “acute fever” America’s greatest ecumenical Protestant preacher ever achieved was when Fosdick was attacking fundamentalists.¹⁴

Ecumenical Protestantism had a number of variations, and I do not want to describe it in excessively monolithic terms. But I believe it is fair to say that its leaders in the United States and Britain from James’s time through the 1960s were distinguished builders and sustainers of institutions and communities. They were churchmen and seminarians and missionaries and members of boards. They held conferences and workshops and they published newsletters and magazines. They networked. If they were not “organization men and women”—in the 1950s cliché—many of them were great organizers and

¹² James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 54. James’s inscription to Francis G. Peabody is cited by Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), ii. 331.

¹³ James, *Varieties*, 15.

¹⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Must the Fundamentalists Win?,” *Christian Work*, 102 (10 June 1922), 716–22.

associators. They carried off the epochal Missionary Conference at Edinburgh the same year James died, and they followed it with one huge conclave after another, culminating in the World Council of Churches, created in 1948.

These ecumenical Protestants tried to cooperate with other communities of faith, not through idiosyncratic seers and prophets but through leaders who had institutionalized responsibility. Mohandas Gandhi was their kind of public figure, someone with the patina of Jesus-like prophecy but one of the most worldly and organizationally sophisticated men on the planet and someone who was most definitely in charge of something. We do not know what Gandhi thought of James, but his diary records that he read *Varieties* in 1923 while in a British imperial prison.¹⁵ The British and American ecumenists who loved Gandhi and founded the World Council of Churches acted, one might say, more like Durkheimians than like Jamesians. They understood the importance of the social foundations of religious practice. They did not deny the value of mystical experiences, but most of them in their pulpits and seminaries and missions and beyond engaged religious diversity in its social and cultural embodiments.

James said precious little about those embodiments. "What keeps religion going," James had said in *Varieties*, had nothing to do with "faculties of theology" and all other institutional "after effects" of primal "conversations with the unseen divine." The eminent mid-century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, displayed some understanding of the problem, especially during his later years. In 1961, when he wrote an introduction to an edition of the *Varieties*, Niebuhr warned that James did not care enough about "the collective experiences of men." The author of *Varieties* does not come to grips, Niebuhr complained near the end of his own career, with a "defect in the mystical tradition: its tendency to flee the responsibilities of history."¹⁶

The ecumenical Protestant project was also specifically grounded in a particular set of scriptures and attendant commentary. James himself did not find biblical warrant a sound basis for evaluating a truth claim, but the Protestants around him, even extreme liberals like Gordon and Bowne, were by no means ready to give up on the Bible. Capable of considerable empathic identification with adherents of other classical "world religions," the leaders of the Congregationalists and the like remained committed to a Christianity that was clearly marked off even from Catholicism, to say nothing of non-Christian faiths. Some of the most radical of James's followers among seminarians were willing to characterize the Bible as an unfortunately "over-rated book," as Wieman did at Chicago in the 1920s, but even the equally radical Edward

¹⁵ Mohandas Gandhi, diary entry of 26 Aug. 1923, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 6th rev. edn (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1967), xxiii. 183.

¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr's introduction to William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 5-8.

Scribner Ames held fast to the New Testament as the true framework for religious life and endorsed the ethical teachings of Jesus. The ecumenical Protestant commitment to foreign missions, a huge component of their endeavour from the 1890s through the 1930s and highly significant even in the 1960s, derived its original justification from a sense of Christian uniqueness.¹⁷

So, the ecumenical Protestants were devoted to a family of social solidarity-advancing initiatives located in space and time and authorized by the teachings of Jesus, yet they found themselves with an apparent champion—a product of their own community, their own flesh and blood—whose sense of religion was radically individualistic, extravagantly mystical, incorrigibly aloof from churches, and altogether devoid of doctrinal content. Broadly ecumenical as these Protestants were, they tried to defend and advance a religion with at least some particularity while James persistently refused to budge from the topic of religion in general. Could James help them advance their particular religion?

Most definitely yes, some answered. Among those who so answered were a cohort of energetic philosophers, theologians, and psychologists based in universities. Douglas Clyde MacIntosh, Edward Scribner Ames, Henry Nelson Wieman, and their colleagues at Chicago and Yale claimed to advance a Jamesian project of the empirical, scientific study of religious experience. Ames's *Psychology of Religious Experience*, published in 1910, the year of James's death, exemplified this group's belief that critical reflection on the reports of mystical experiences could serve as an objective foundation for a scientific theology. MacIntosh's *Theology as an Empirical Science* (1919) purported to make theology akin to chemistry in its degree of disciplined observation and theoretical generalization. MacIntosh explained that religious experience, not only of the religious virtuosi James had studied in *Varieties*, but of other, more average Christian believers, could tell us about the nature of God. Wieman's *Religious Experience and Scientific Method*, which appeared in 1926, found the empirical evidence for God so compelling that to deny God was like denying the reality of a toothache. Yet all of these thinkers described God in exceedingly abstract terms while assuring the men and women with whom they went to church every Sunday and before whom they regularly preached that the whole enterprise of scientific theology confirmed their own particular faith. The opening sentence of Wieman's book is typical:

Whatever else the word God may mean, it is a term used to designate that Something upon which human life is most dependent for its security, welfare, and increasing abundance. There is such a Something cannot be doubted. The mere

¹⁷ Henry Nelson Wieman, "The Confessions of a Religious Seeker," quoted by Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 267.

fact that human life happens, and continues to happen, proves that this something, however unknown, does certainly exist.¹⁸

Gary Dorrien, the most authoritative of the scholars who have studied the cohort of academics who tried to develop an explicitly Jamesian science of religions, has pointed to a relentless provincialism that I think anyone today who reads their works will find readily apparent. They did not take into account religious experience beyond Protestantism. They were actually much narrower than James in their scope of inquiry, and this, of course, reflects their commitment to the Protestant project. In Dorrien's words, "for all their universal claims and world-embracing" science, these scholars "were fixated on Western liberal Protestantism" and their notion of an authentic religious testimony was decidedly that of "the religion they knew".¹⁹ Yet their defence of the religion they knew was persistently indirect, as indeed James's had been. When assaulted in the late 1920s and after by the followers of Karl Barth, who insisted on a much more biblical defence of Christianity and a highly particular sense of Christianity's character, the gap between the James-inspired science of religions, on the one hand, and the business of keeping a church going on the other, became all the more obvious.

These themes in liberal thinking were among those that H. Richard Niebuhr had in mind in 1937 when he offered the most widely quoted parody of liberal Protestantism ever penned: they have given us, said Niebuhr about the liberals, "A God [who] without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."²⁰ William Clebsch explicitly attributes to James's influence the tendencies that gave Niebuhr's parody credibility. Clebsch, a leading historian of American religious thought who treats James as the central character in the entire saga and even divides the relevant history into pre-James and post-James epochs, went a step beyond Niebuhr, allowing that James and his liberal Protestant followers believed that the only god that might actually exist would be a god who would not insist upon it. I do not mean to endorse these libels against the liberals, which both Richard Niebuhr and his even more polemical brother Reinhold Niebuhr were often obliged to admit under close interrogation were grossly unfair. But I invoke them because, in Dorrien's words about Richard Niebuhr's comment, it "would not have immortalized by frequent quotation if it had not struck at least part of its target".²¹

¹⁸ Henry Nelson Wieman, *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 5.

¹⁹ Dorrien, *Liberal Theology*, 249.

²⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* [1937] (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 193.

²¹ See William A. Clebsch, *American Religious Thought: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

I have been primarily discussing the more psychologically focused of efforts to work in a Jamesian mode. I would say more about this Jamesian movement had Dorrien not covered it so convincingly in the second volume of his *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (2003), a work of prodigious research and mature critical reflection that I fear is undervalued by historians. I want to move quickly to a rather different and, in the long run, considerably important domain: the efforts of the ecumenical Protestants to confront the varieties of religious experience not psychologically, but culturally and socially. There, in the foreign mission fields, their episteme was really stretched, and their sense of what was plausible was deeply challenged. Peirce was correct, and understood the cultural foundations of the knowing process even more profoundly than James did.

James's vaunted pluralism, his expansive range in *Varieties*, and his warnings against parochialism in the great essay, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (1899), prompted his admirers to look beyond their own tribe, to engage sympathetically with a wider world. In these engagements, the heavily communal and institutional dimensions of ecumenical Protestantism to which I referred earlier defined the action. While MacIntosh and his seminary colleagues explored the varieties of religious experience in the lives of individual souls, a very different segment of ecumenical Protestantism encountered and explored the varieties of religious experience as visible in the social practices and daily lives of Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists and a range of other religions in Asia and Africa, especially, but also throughout the world.

MISSIONARIES ABROAD

Before attending to the portentous dynamics of that classically Peircian encounter with non-Christian religions, I want to pause to remind us that the foreign missionary project of the mainline Protestant churches was an enterprise of much greater proportions than is commonly recognized today. In the 1920s, up to 90 per cent of the annual budget of some denominations was devoted to foreign missions. What makes the magnitude of missions easy to forget is that the ecumenical Protestants later repudiated traditional missions—and since the 1960s have not been prone to talk much about this part of their own history—while the evangelical Protestants have taken over the project and dominate public awareness of it. When Billy Graham's son said in 2003 in response to the Iraq War that it was all to the good because it presented an opportunity to convert the Iraqi Muslims to the Christian faith, ecumenical Protestants were appalled.²²

²² Stephen R. Rock, *Faith and Foreign Policy: The Views and Influence of U.S. Christians and Christian Organizations* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 63–7. Deborah Caldwell, "Should

Now, the actual numbers of Congregationalists and Presbyterians and the like who went abroad was not so massive, but their degree of involvement was massive. Missionaries, after all, are the bullfighters of Protestant culture. The attention given to them by leaders as well as rank-and-file churchgoers was enormous. At national, regional, and local meetings, furloughed missionaries were repeatedly the main attraction. Local churches often financed particular missionary families, and personally corresponded with them regularly over the course of many years. The exploration of the varieties of religious experience through foreign cultures by missionaries touched the lives of millions of churchgoers who never heard of the scholars and scientists at Chicago, Yale, and Union Theological Seminary. Missionary periodicals kept foreign scenes in front of their readers constantly. And in a period when so many educated Americans were affiliated with mainline churches, the missionary projects of these churches put the rural as well as the urban faithful in at least some kind of contact with the Chinese, Bengalese, Japanese, Persians, and so on, and in their capacity not only as foreign peoples but as practitioners of what were traditionally called heathen faiths. The varieties of religious experience became the varieties of human experience that resonated far beyond the transatlantic conversation. The template for later multiculturalism was the appreciation of religious diversity. The language of secular multiculturalism of the 1990s and 2000s has direct antecedents in the writings of Harvard University's Wilfred Cantwell Smith and other students of comparative religion and opponents of Christian imperialism.²³

The gradual, episodic growth of an appreciation for the varieties of religious experience as embodied in these heathen faiths is a major theme in ecumenical Protestant history. This growth is registered in the countless missionary magazines, the development of missiology as a field in seminaries, and in the expansion of comparative religion as an academic field beyond the seminaries. The writings and public conduct of the Methodist E. Stanley Jones provide convenient access to this sensibility. Author eventually of twenty-eight books, and in the 1920s and 1930s perhaps the most respected missionary in the world with the exception of the German theologian Albert Schweitzer, Jones was most famous for the Indian ashram he built and then publicized back in North America. The ashram was designed to emphasize the easy continuity

Christian Missionaries Heed the Call in Iraq?", *The New York Times* (6 Apr. 2003): <www.nytimes.com/2003/04/06/weekinreview/the-nation-should-christian-missionaries-heed-the-call-in-iraq.html>.

²³ For the connection between multiculturalism and the liberal Protestant discourse about the diversity of religious experience, see David A. Hollinger, "After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity", *Journal of American History*, 98/1 (2011), 21–48. See also Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

between Hindu and Christian principles. Jones's 1925 book, *The Christ of the Indian Road*, sold more copies than Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*.²⁴

What Jones meant by the Indian road was of course cultural diversity. There are many roads to God, and even Christ takes a variety of forms when we come to grips with the varieties of religious experience. An unrecognized precursor of the multiculturalism of many decades later, Jones illustrates the intensity with which some of the most respected of the ecumenical missionaries identified with non-Christian peoples and tried to adapt Christianity to the needs of such peoples. Hard as it may be for us to believe today, Jones was a sufficient world presence that in the summer of 1941 he had the brass—in all sincerity—to offer his services as mediator in the Pacific conflict to President Roosevelt and Emperor Hirohito.²⁵

Mission spokespersons often cemented their understanding of the alliance between true Hinduism and true Christianity by quoting Gandhi's praise of Christians for having helped to intensify his own personal hatred of child marriage, and by acknowledging that Gandhi as a Hindu could do much more to defeat that nefarious practice than Christians of any nationality could possibly do. The pivotal work of missionary theory of the 1930s proposed that when missionaries argue against child abuse by Hindus, the missionaries are actually "joining Hindus in rectifying abuses which have invaded the structure of their religion". Now, this is a very interesting formulation. It says that what needs to be reformed in Indian society is not the essence of the local religion—which is described idealistically as just fine—but rather elements of that religion resulting from the "invasion" of unspecified alien forces.²⁶

Gandhi was so useful to the missionaries that they made him an honorary Christian while trumpeting his authenticity as a Hindu. In his biography of Gandhi, Jones extracted from Gandhi's personal letters to Jones a series of quotations that Jones then presented as, in effect, the programme Western Christian missionaries were bringing to India. Jones described Gandhi as "one of the most Christlike men in history", and credited Gandhi's opposition to certain features of Western Christianity as an ironic form of support for "the real thing", true Christianity.²⁷

The cultural relativist style of many of the leading missionaries can also be illustrated with the case of Donald Johnson Fleming, whose 1923 *Christian Century* article, "If Buddhists Came to Your Town", implored the average American churchgoer to identify with villagers in India and China who might

²⁴ See E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925).

²⁵ Jones's interaction with President Franklin D. Roosevelt is widely noted in the histories of American-Japanese diplomacy of the period. See e.g. John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire 1936–1945* [1970] (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 235.

²⁶ William Ernest Hocking, et al. *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper, 1932), 40.

²⁷ E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (New York: Abington, 1948), 77.

take offence at the Baptists and Lutherans who came from Tennessee and Iowa and told them to give up their religion and to accept another. How would you like it if Buddhists came to your town, told you that Christianity was a false religion, and asked you to join up with them? Fleming asked. Not everyone approved of the ideas of Fleming and Jones, to be sure, but these ways of appreciating the varieties of religious experience became very popular among denominational leaders and the members of missionary boards.²⁸

More and more books and articles and lectures celebrated the virtues of the Hindus and the Muslims and Buddhists. However, the empathic identification exemplified and advocated by these missionary voices was directed repeatedly not at the religious virtuosi of James's engagements, but at the religious quotidian in the villages of India and Japan and Nigeria. Jones's ashram was not a place for extreme behaviour, for radical and scary acts of self-flagellating piety, for spectacles of Jamesian saintliness, but rather a calm space where the average Baptist from Kansas or Indiana was expected to see the commonalities between the great faiths of the world.

Just as conversion became a lower priority, so service became central. The vast missionary apparatus gradually diminished its evangelism and placed more emphasis on schools, agricultural assistance, medical services, and other forms of social service. Former missionaries and the children of missionaries, like the legendary Pearl S. Buck, became articulate champions of foreign peoples and defenders of their ancestral religious practices. Buck warned sharply that Christians would rue the day that they tried to disrupt the traditional religious life of Asian societies. International missionary conferences consolidated ecumenical Protestantism at Edinburgh in 1910 and Jerusalem in 1928 and especially at Madras in 1938. At the Madras Conference, the American and British missionaries agreed to drop the very concept of foreign missions and to speak of "world mission", an enterprise in which indigenous peoples as well as Westerners were supposed to become equal partners. Although the evangelical Protestants resisted this trend, and held firm to the ideal of converting the world to Christianity, the ecumenical Protestants of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s turned more and more adamantly against conversion as a goal, and were increasingly inclined to see all religions as allied against secularism. The meetings of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 and Evanston in 1954 were especially decisive moments in the diminution of the particularity of Christianity.²⁹

So, the ecumenical Protestants developed a more and more inclusive vision of religious solidarity. Just as the distinction between denominations and

²⁸ Daniel Johnson Fleming, "If Buddhists Came to Your Town", *Christian Century* (28 Feb. 1929), 293-4.

²⁹ For these developments see William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

between the foreign and the domestic within Protestant Christianity became less important, so, too, did the distinction between Protestants and Catholics eventually diminish as well as the distinction between Christianity and other religions. In this commodiousness, they became more like James, but in the process they found it increasingly difficult to articulate, as James did, just what it was about Christianity that was so distinctive and so demanding of loyalty. The varieties of religious experience as visible in everyday life in India and Africa and China and the South Pacific turned out to have a similar effect on the ecumenical Protestant followers of James as the effect on James of confronting the varieties of mystical testimony; the greater the capacity for emphatic identification with alterity, the more the challenge of defining one's own gospel and defending its superiority to others.

Alterity had in the meantime been creeping up on the ecumenical Protestants at home. The demographic diversification of the United States, registered especially in the small but conspicuous non-Christian Jewish population, but also in the larger Catholic population, undermined the somewhat complacent confidence of the old Protestant leadership. Hence, by the time that leadership faced its great crisis of the 1960s—in which the vaunted Protestant establishment was drastically diminished and largely replaced in public affairs by the rival, evangelical part of Protestantism—both demographic diversification and cognitive demystification had produced such landmarks of de-Christianization as Harvey Cox's 1965 bestseller *The Secular City*.³⁰

Catholics and Jews increased not only in numbers, but in their active participation in politics and public discourse generally. American Catholics were long marginalized by a combination of Protestant prejudice, Catholic self-isolation, and weak class position. But as Catholics became more visible in the middle decades of the twentieth century, they functioned to destabilize Protestant cultural confidence and to render rationalist perspectives more attractive in contrast to what many Protestants saw as the "medieval" mentality of Catholics. Jews were fewer in number, but having much stronger class position and a greater tradition of literacy, proved to be powerful vehicles for Enlightenment universalism. Jewish intellectuals challenged the cultural hegemony of Protestantism and accelerated the process of cognitive demystification associated with scientific advances. By the middle decades of the twentieth century the secularization of the intellectual life of the United States—the particular nation in the North Atlantic West with the highest degree of religious affiliation by far—was being promoted quietly and steadily by an intelligentsia of heavily Jewish origin.³¹

³⁰ See Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

³¹ For a more extensive account of these developments, see Hollinger, "After Cloven Tongues", 21–48.

In the sixth edition of *American Intellectual Tradition*, edited by David Hollinger and Charles Capper, fourteen of the twenty-six documents written during the quarter-century stretching from 1939 to 1964 are by authors of Jewish origin, many of whom fit T. S. Eliot's legendary complaint that "free-thinking Jews" were a threat to the preservation of a Christian society. This demographic over-representation—more than half of the documents for that period, produced by a demographic group consisting of about 3 per cent of the national population—is not the result of our looking for non-Christians, but follows from the simple fact that so many of the American intellectuals whom the field's scholars now agree "made history" with their writings about any and all topics during that period were Jewish. No national culture in the Europe-centred West experienced—simultaneously in the twentieth century—remotely the same measure of inherited Protestant cultural hegemony and remotely the same degree of Jewish in-migration.³²

In this atmosphere, an ecumenical Protestantism that urged sympathetic engagement with diverse peoples and faiths had a harder time than anticipated in explaining to its young just why it was so important to stand by the faith of their fathers. Christianity became one of a number of potential vehicles for advancing the values taught by Methodist and Congregationalist tutors. Other affiliations could do the job just as well, perhaps better. Just as a substantial portion of the missionaries found that the Hindus and Buddhists they encountered abroad were not quite so much in need of Christian conversion as once assumed, thousands of children of the old Protestant establishment found that Christianity was not an indispensable tool for the advancing of the causes in which they most believed. From the mid-1960s onward, the old "mainline" churches lost more and more of their youth, while the more conservative, predominantly southern, heavily rural evangelical segment of Protestantism that cautioned their youth against the secular world grew rapidly.

Yet the ecumenical Protestants, even while yielding much of the symbolic capital of Christianity to their evangelical rivals, exercised great influence over the culture of educated Americans. N. J. Demerath is no doubt hyperbolic in his claim that the ecumenicals won the United States while losing Protestantism, but there is something to it. The ecumenicals campaigned for "individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry", observes Demerath, exactly the liberal values that gained rather than lost ground among educated Americans in the second half of the twentieth century.³³

³² David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (eds), *The American Intellectual Tradition: A Sourcebook*, 6th edn (New York: OUP, 2011).

³³ N. J. Demerath III, "Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34/4 (1995), 458–69.

These were also prominent among the values of William James, and were carried energetically by his countless and diverse followers among ecumenical Protestants. If this is a story of secularization, as I believe it is, the story is problematic only if one looks at it as a Christian survivalist would. From the perspective of someone for whom the cultural hegemony of Christianity is highly desirable, the decline of that hegemony can be disquieting. But if we emancipate ourselves from a Christian survivalist bias and look at the saga of ecumenical Protestantism from a broader global perspective, a great social contribution of ecumenical Protestants has been to create and maintain a vast and functional halfway house to post-Protestant secularism. Would William James have approved of this outcome? I am not sure, but it is hard to deny that he helped to make it possible.