Is Transreligious Theology Possible? **Open Access**

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A 'No' at the Core of Life

Doing Transreligious Theology with William James

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to unpack the relevance of William James for the project of a transreligious theology. While the resources of reason and spiritual experience have long been employed to arbitrate both within and between different spiritual traditions, I argue that James offers a third principle: the encouragement of the morally active life, along with a corresponding depiction of the universe in which our efforts may contribute to the nature of things.

Keywords: theology; philosophy of religion, transreligious theology; William James; ethics

Differences Within and Between

Hopping from one temple to another during my sabbatical in China, one image seemed to stand out more prominently and vividly than the rest. This is the powerful and graceful form of Guan Yin, the *bodhisattva* of mercy and compassion. A thousand arms stretched out in all directions, an eye on the palm of each hand, this all-seeing and angelic being is depicted as radiating love and salvific power throughout every corner of the cosmos.[1]

I sometimes wonder what would enter the minds of my Buddhist students from Sri Lanka when gazing upon one of these representations. I visited one enormous statue of Guan Yin in a temple some four hours north of Beijing. Here the *bodhisattva's* head towered above the throngs of worshippers as if touching the ceiling of the building's massive interior. From a Theravada Buddhist culture in which one's primary mission is to rely upon our own efforts to realize the blissful freedom from desire known as *nirvana*, these *bodhisattva*-centered expressions in Mahayana Buddhism must bear more of a resemblance, at first blush, to Christianity or one of the *Bhakti* forms of devotional Hinduism than the principles espoused by Siddartha Gautama.

I am told that the spiritual goal of Pure Land, a *bodhisattva* cult centered around the figure of Amida Buddha (but in which Guan Yin also plays a role), is more complimentary than contrasting with experiential and meditation-focused sects like Zen. I do not aim to disagree. I have an appreciation, however, for those divisions and distinctions that go all the way down. Every semester I treat my students, a great bulk of whom are Christians and Muslims, to the NeoPlatonist-inspired thought of the medieval contemplatives and Sufi mystics. Here I watch individuals reared upon belief in a personal and volitional deity encounter a different sort of Absolute: namely the idea of a non-personal and unitary ground of all existence, a One

1 Otherwise known as Avalokitasvara or Chenrezig, Guan Yin is gendered as either male or female, depending upon the culture. A highly readable introduction to these varying attributes of China's most beloved *bodhisattva* is found in Truman, *Searching for Guan Yin*.

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which emanates the cosmos from out of its own being rather than actively creates it. Whether my students come to appreciate what they learn or react with offense, the encounter must be as novel for them as it is for a Sri Lankan Buddhist to peer at the serene face and myriad arms of Guan Yin.

Unless we are willing to take for granted the unlikely possibility that our own inherited tradition is the only correct one, the philosophically and theologically inquisitive is left to assess whatever spiritual truths may be found within different faith communities. Moreover, and as I have attempted to illustrate above, the differences *within* a religion are occasionally as sharp and and relevant as those found *between* them.

But what are the means of assessing different theological and spiritual perspectives? Beyond the authority of scripture, two resources immediately come to mind: radical and profound experiences—whether that of our own, or of mystics and holy persons of the past—and the rigors of rational thinking. Both of these have been put to use for millennia, and yet a diversity of mutually exclusive theological worldviews remain, in Asia as well as the West.

Both personal intuition and abstract reasoning will undoubtedly continue to be useful in theology no less than any other intellectual endeavor. I therefore do not advocate their replacement, but their supplementation. I have in mind a third resource which has been of increasing importance in my own assessment of different theologies and spiritualities. I will not pretend to re-invent the wheel here. In his first Gifford lecture, now found in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James offers standards to distinguish between religious experiences which may possess a truth-bearing significance and those which do not. The first two of these correspond directly with what we have outlined above: "immediate luminousness," or the compelling character of spiritual experience, and "philosophical reasonableness." But James introduces a third standard: "moral helpfulness."[2]

To inculcate a life of personal and collective push toward the good, what he calls "the strenuous mood," is one of the prime motivations animating James's entire thought.[3] It is matched only by the concern of the great American philosopher and psychologist to do justice to the full range and texture of human experience. It is no conventional philosophical ethics, a mere attempt to figure out the nature of right and wrong—although James does take up such a task in one of his finest essays.[4] Taking its origin from his own personal struggles and inner demons, and explored with particular intensity throughout his philosophical writings, the drive to grapple with the problems of existence is portrayed by James as among the most intense and implacable of human needs. And more: it is shown to possess metaphysical significance, one of profound use in choosing among rival theological and ontological frameworks.

The primary mission of this essay is to take up a cardinal theme informing James's thought—the importance of encouraging the ethical life along with an ontology in which our efforts can make a difference—and to show its relevance for transreligious theology. My strategy is a simple one: after outlining a few general and salient features of James's perspective, I unpack James's philosophical theism in order to demonstrate how a concern for intensifying the strenuous life may be used to assess different theological and religious sensibilities. Since I am seeking a principle by which to sift through and discriminate among spiritual worldviews, to favor some over others, even *against* others, my use of James expresses an occasional polemical tone. "Is all 'yes, yes' in the universe?" asks James in *Pragmatism*. "Doesn't the fact of a 'no' stand at the very core of life?"[5] That such a critical attitude has a compelling spiritual force of its own—the reception of a resounding *no* lying at the heart of things—is yet another insight of James I seek to make clear over the pages which follow.

A Melioristic Universe

In a piece published the last year of his life, James promotes the creation of a kind of civic organization in which young men and women can devote a period of time working on a variety of pressing domestic tasks—

2 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 32.

3 James, *The Will to Believe*, 214.

4 This is "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," found in James, *The Will to Believe*.

5 James, *Pragmatism*, 141.

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from the repairing of infrastructure to the assisting of communities battered by hardship and inequality. Titled "The Moral Equivalent of War," the essay essentially defends the character-building facet of the military life (with its values of team-work, personal sacrifice... etc.), yet minus the training and support for the blood-letting of violence and armed-conflict.[6]

There is one expression James employs in this piece which some would find problematic, particularly those with ears sensitive to environmentally-based perspectives. This is the necessity, advocated by James, for a "warfare on nature."[7] For one who perceives the natural world as good *simply as it is*, a fundamental spiritual goal of human life as either a kind of return to a pre-existing perfection or a compensation for the excesses of an industrial and technological civilization, the phrase may come across as slightly antiquated at best. At worst, it smacks of an arrogant humanism in which nature exists for our shaping and manipulation.

But the idea of a war on nature would undoubtedly be less offensive to one informed of James' perspective as a whole, including his later work. A mere year earlier than "The Moral Equivalent of War," James's Hibbert lectures were published as *A Pluralistic Universe*. The first chapter of what is arguably his most complete theological and philosophical statement assesses different ontological frameworks around the standard of *intimacy*: our living connection with the cosmos as opposed to our alienation from it.[8] James here champions an organic metaphysics in which God, nature and humankind are taken as interconnected rather than in isolation from each other, a form of pantheism (albeit a pluralistic as opposed to a monistic form of pantheism, a distinction I explain below). In the background of this ontology is the core of all of James's mature thinking: the program of radical empiricism with its associated concept of "pure experience." While radical empiricism is the method of taking into account everything that appears within our experience, while neglecting all that doesn't, pure experience takes experience itself as the basic material of the cosmos—a field of relations more basic than the artificial distinctions between mind and world, subject and object.[9] Placed against this context, a call for a "warfare on nature" can be appreciated as less a domination over things—since we do not stand *over* things at all—as our *participation* in nature, and our *partnership* in its improvement.

Much of this is a continuation of James's metaphysical suggestions in *Pragmatism*. If a "pessimistic" universe is one in which the world is taken as a harsh and pitiless place with no hope of spiritual and moral vindication, the opposite and "optimistic" cosmos is that of a mystical monism in which there is nothing truly to worry about—since everything is already undergirded by the ineffable One. Situated in-between these two extremes is a "melioristic" universe in which there exists only the *possibility* for its moral and spiritual perfection, a possibility beckoning our best efforts toward its realization.[10]

The daring notion that even one's affirmations may contribute to reality appears repeatedly throughout James's speculative writings. At the end of his 1896 essay "The Will to Believe," essentially an argument for the right to believe in something ahead of the evidence (given the right conditions), he suggests that our very beliefs may assist in bringing that something into actuality.[11] In the conclusion of *A Pluralistic Universe*, James grants that a fluid and pluralistic cosmos possesses no more certainty than the monistic and "block universe" of the Absolute idealists. But in an instance of "life exceeding logic," he suggests that our loyalty to one ontology over the other, both in our behaviors as well as our beliefs, just might tip the scale of reality in its direction.[12]

Much of the above may sound quite extravagant—as if existence itself can or should change in accordance with our deepest needs. But here is good place to examine a few early and crucial insights of James on the connection between our fundamental make-up as human beings and the quest for metaphysical and theological truth.

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6 Found in Richardson, *The Heart of William James*, 301-313.

7 Ibid., 311.

8 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 31.

9 See "Does Consciousness Exist?" and "A World of Pure Experience" from James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

10 *Pragmatism*, lecture VIII, "Pragmatism and Religion."

11 James, *The Will to Believe*, 25-31.

12 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 328-329.

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In one key essay, James states that a common feature of every successful and influential intellectual movement is the notion that the universe, in one way or another, is responsive to some characteristic or capacity within the human being.[13] Taken out of context from the rest of the essay, and merely substituting *identity* or *kinship* for responsiveness, this would appear to support those unitary forms of mysticism in which the godhead or ultimate reality is found within the ground of the soul. But the philosophical anthropology presented by James is far from that of the contemplative traditions, and it upholds the intellect as neither our highest and most defining aspect, nor as some faculty tragically imprisoned within our finite and bodily form. Rather our intellectual capacities for James are but one station in our entire perceptive and active life, and our deepest intuitions are more closely associated with our willful and volitional relations to things than our strictly cognitive ones.[14] The three standards for accepting the accuracy of religious experiences outlined in the first chapter of the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (and summarized in the above introduction) have their roots in a few of his earlier writings wherein our intellect is sandwiched between two other departments of our existence: namely our direct experience of the environment and our outward behavior. "The current of life which runs in at our eyes or ears," James states, "is meant to run out at our hands, feet, or lips."[15]

We may quarrel with James on the sheer extent to which he places the intellect at the service of action or may question the details of his psychology—brilliant and pioneering as his contributions are in this field. But we can still appreciate his placing of our cognitive life back within a sensing and mobile body, and the latter within a world replete with its attractions and its hazards.[16] A most essential and vital element of our existence for James is precisely our urge for a full engagement with things—both a release of, and direction for, our practical and moral efforts. In "The Sentiment of Rationality" he states that no philosophical vision will ever last that overrides the testimony of our actual experience and offers our will "no object whatsoever to press against."[17]

It is the insertion of the mind squarely within the entire human being, one *fitted* to a life of activity, which assists James in proposing an unfinished and potentially dangerous cosmos: "For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted."[18]

God and Moral Holidays

A major difficulty in expositing the thought of James is the temptation to quote him endlessly. As engaging as a writer as he is a thinker, James effectively puts to words what many intellectually sensitive and self-aware readers feel in their breast—the current author included. It is James, after all, who teaches us that beneath the most rarefied and carefully argued metaphysical visions lie a personality, a pre-conceptual and pre-philosophical view of the universe.[19] And as he also suggests, it is this pre-conceptual hold on things that is one of our most primal forms of access to truth.

And yet not all of our fundamental intuitions, including those worth listening to, are positive. It was during an exploration of the classic problem of *theodicy*—the defense of a belief in an all-loving and all-powerful deity in the face of evil—that the quiet student seated in the center-back of my class finally spoke. After confessing to the entire room that she is wrestling with a dire form of cancer, she proceeded to engage in a little spontaneous theologizing of her own. "I can't help but feel that if there is a God," she exclaimed, the distress in her face and voice palpable for the class to see, "he lost control somewhere." Immediately, a few of her peers proceeded to harshly "correct" her—for God, they explained, is not truly God if he lacks omnipotence. And so a long conversation began.

13 James, *The Will to Believe*, 86.
14 Ibid., 82-84.
15 Ibid., 114.
16 In a striking passage in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (pp. 169-171), James describes the body as the "storm-centre" of meaning. This is a strong anticipation of the philosophies of embodiment which have gained so much currency in recent years.
17 James, *The Will to Believe*, 82.
18 Ibid., 61.
19 Ibid., 92.

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But what if these more conventionally pious students were less callous in tone? What if their reply to an afflicted class-mate was one of consolation rather than criticism, a reassurance that everything, somehow, is okay—even if in ways that are not perceivable? I do not think the young woman would have been placated. The feeling that something is broken and amiss at the very heart of things is sensed by her at a place where all suggestions to the contrary will not easily penetrate.

Whenever I recall this episode I think of a contrast outlined by James in a brief chapter toward the end of *The Meaning of Truth*. This is between the belief "that the world is still in process of making with the belief that there is an 'eternal' edition of it ready-made and complete."[20] By the latter James has in mind primarily the monism and idealism of predominant in his time, but it makes little difference if the One were replaced with the planning of of an all-powerful creator deity. Although reaffirming his commitment to the former side of the contrast, James admits that such a cosmos will not provide the ecstasy and sense of spiritual security for those without the fortitude to face an unfinished and precarious universe. Basking placidly within the eternal grants us real "moral holidays," he explains, a reprieve from worldly engagements and responsibilities. The consequence for his own position are different: "If, as pluralists, we grant ourselves moral holidays, they can only be provisional breathing-spells, intended to refresh us for the morrow's fight."[21]

A world that is not presently optimal and yet open to human influence is one of the very conditions of the moral life for James: "If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will."[22] To accept that everything is as it should or must be does not galvanize us enough to address life with *all* of our capacities—our actions as well as our thoughts and intuitions. There is unquestionably something a little unsettling in having this lack of assurance thrust upon ourselves. But there is something invigorating as well, for the idea of an incomplete universe and a deity requiring our assistance "makes the world's salvation depend upon the energizing of its several parts, among which we are."[23] If enhancing our motivation for personal and moral exertion is accepted as a viable standard for erecting a worldview or philosophy of life, then we are granted in our possession yet another means of deciding between alternative metaphysical and theological frameworks. Here we may discern a resounding "no" at the core of life, a negation vividly sensed as welling up within ourselves at the prospect of any ontology which would allow too long a moral holiday, or an excuse to shirk off the active role we need to play in the world's improvement.

In "Reflex Action and Theism," James does not argue for God's existence, but only aims to elucidate the version of the deity most appropriate for the entire sensing, thinking and acting human being. In place of the identification of our essential self with the One—the aim of what he refers to as the "gnostic" sort of religion—he advocates belief in a transcendent and personal deity with which we may *work* with: "To co-operate with his creation by the best and rightest response seems all he wants of us. In such co-operation with his purposes, not in any chimerical speculative conquest of him, not in any theoretic drinking of him up, must lie the real meaning of our destiny."[24]

It is for this reason that James articulates a *finite* god. This entity is at once a greater consciousness in which our own minds are ensconced, and yet it is one force among many in the vast cosmos—possibly even other deities. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, partly a continuation of his "over-beliefs" or theological preferences described at the end of *The Variety of Religious Experience,* James distinguishes between a *pluralistic* and a *monistic* pantheism.[25] While the latter is the conventional notion of pantheism in which the deity is identified with the universe in its entirety, as the "All," the former is one in which the cosmos is an infinite *many*, a variety continually exceeding and defying any perceived unity or totality. Though located *within* the cosmos, James's god faces an "external environment" and is "working out a history just

20 James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*, 289.
21 Ibid., 290.
22 James, *The Will to Believe*, 61.
23 James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*, 289.
24 James, *The Will to Believe*, 138-141.
25 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 391-7, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 31-40.

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like ourselves."[26] Such a theology is in line with the motifs permeating James's entire thought: namely to account for our actual experience—with all of its contingencies and its ambiguities—and to encourage a life of moral exertion. The monistic form of pantheism in which the cosmos is the manifestation of a single and underlying ultimate reality, is essentially a denial of the messiness and ambiguity of this life—or at least a relativizing of it—and a license to bask within the infinite and thereby retreat from engaging with the problems of the actual world we live and suffer through.

Such a sentiment is not foreign to my own theological and cultural inheritance. James, to my knowledge, was not informed of the Jewish theosophical tradition, and yet he undoubtedly would have found a great ally in a few concepts and contributions of the sixteenth century figure of Isaac Luria. These include the idea of God's withdrawal from a segment of the universe in order to make a space for creation (the *Tsimtsum* or "contraction"), a primordial error occurring at the inception of that creation (the *Shevirah* or "breaking of the vessels"), and the mission of human beings to assist in the reversal of this mistake (*Tikkun Olam* or the "reparation of the world").[27]

It is worthwhile to note the development of some interpretations of Luria's ideas that retreat from its more radical implications, and which aim at preserving the picture of an omnipotent and omnipresent deity. In these views, an all-encompassing divinity has merely *concealed* itself in order to bring the illusion of a separate and finite cosmos into view. Closely related to this is the idea of God's withdrawal as an event occurring within the psyche of the individual, the forming of an insular ego or "I" which has separated itself from the divine.[28] To these more ecstatic and pantheistic re-workings of the Lurianic vision, those centering around either a mystical flight and return to the supernal One, or the mere disclosure of the godhead through the finite world, I respond with a Jamesean "no."

James is one of the great post-denominational thinkers as well as the author of some vastly influential writing on spirituality and the philosophy of religion. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine *everything* James had to say about the nature of the divine—whether his reasons for accepting theism to begin with, or his promotion of a personal deity who enters into our experience when, for instance, we are at our most desperate. But it is now appropriate to summarize what our perusal through his thought has to offer the endeavor of a transreligious theology. The Jamesean themes I find most important for thinking across and within different theological traditions is, first, the favoring of those perspectives, wherever they are found, which most call upon our ethical passions no less than our yearning for mystical experience. A second theme is the appreciation of a cosmos both amenable to, and inviting of, our moral energies. Likewise, those spiritualities which relegate this complex universe of our common experience into a merely surface level of things, or which fall short of addressing our capacity for action as much as our meditative and intellectual faculties, are to be approached with some skepticism and concern.

Conclusion: A Difficult Place

In *Searching for Guan Yin*, Sarah Truman pursues images and themes pertaining to the beloved buddhist savior as they are found throughout today's China and Tibet. Among the different understandings of the *bodhisattva* expressed in her memoirs are that of an actual supernatural entity incarnating itself and living in China, the "empty" or interconnected nature of the universe, and a peaceful and compassionate way of relating to and perceiving the world. At some point, Sarah recalls a memorable conversation about Guan Yin with a woman named Lily—a stranger who appears, doles out wisdom, and departs as mysteriously as

26 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 311 and 318.

27 A great introduction to the Lurianic Kabbalah is Gershom Scholem's chapter on the subject in his classic and influential *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

28 Scholem writes: "if the *Tsimtsum*—as some later Kabbalists have tried to prove—is only a veil which separates the individual consciousness from God in such a way as to give it the illusion of self-consciousness, in which it knows itself to be different from God, then only an imperceptible change is needed so that the heart may perceive the unity of divine subsistence in all that exists. Such a change would necessarily destroy the conception of *Tsimtsum* as one intended to provide an explanation for the existence of something other than God." Scholem, *Major Trends*, 262.

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the Buddhist deity herself. "I told you she is a vibration," Lily explains to the author. "When you tune into her wave she takes you everywhere, you meet her everywhere—because she *is* everything—in form, in not form."[29]

It should be noted that James's concept of "pure experience" was of some influence upon Nishida Kitaro and the Kyoto school of Buddhist philosophy.[30] As a metaphysics of inter-related phenomena, one which cuts beneath the subject-object divide, it is tempting to associate it with the Buddhist doctrine of the *sunyata* or the Void—the essential interdependence and unity of all things. But James holds that the *disconnections* between experiences are every bit as real as their connections, and he adamantly rejects the "through and through" type of cosmos as yet another form of the totalizing and sterile monisms he spent so much of his authorship fighting against.[31] As we have seen, James's universe is a far messier and difficult place—one open for, even requiring of, a stronger ethics.

I appreciate the stirring image of the divine as a kind of vibration continually gestating all that exists. I also find profound meaning in the idea of our turning away from a self-centered and self-absorbed form of life and toward an outward-directed one of love and assistance to others. A Jamesean perspective would have us mitigate or qualify the first model partly in the interest of intensifying the second—and would go so far as to suggest that God may very well be one of the parties who benefits. If the spiritual truly is some kind of vibration underlying the universe, perhaps we may conceive of it as limited, or as plagued with a gaping rift or hole somewhere. In this manner, it might call not merely for our passive *receptivity*, but for our vigorous efforts toward its advancement and completion.

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29 Truman, *Searching for Guan Yin*, 163.
30 See Kazashi, "From James to Nishida."
31 James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 47 and 266-79.

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