

WILLIAM JAMES AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND VEDANTA/YOGA IN AMERICA

NORRIS FREDERICK

ABSTRACT

William James was known to his colleagues as being remarkably open to new ideas and an amazing variety of people. One of those persons to whom he was drawn, Swami Vivekananda, had come from India to the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 to educate the West about his religion. James met him twice and called him "the paragon of Vedantist missionaries." Like James, Vivekananda had studied Western philosophy, logic, and science; saw great strength in multiple approaches to religion; and had in some ways a pragmatic approach. However, James described Vivekananda's Vedantist philosophy as a monistic view of reality, while writing that his pragmatism "must obviously range upon the pluralistic side." While Vivekananda's clearly had mystical experiences, James wrote that "my own constitution shuts me out from their [mystical experiences] enjoyment almost entirely, and I can only speak of them only at second hand." For reasons of both philosophy and temperament James ultimately rejects key tenets of Vivekananda's philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1893 two people who would prove extremely important to the discussion and practice of religion arrived at their destinations in the United States: Swami

Vivekananda via the Pacific Ocean, and William James via the Atlantic. James, a professor of philosophy and psychology at Harvard, was returning from a year's sabbatical in Europe. Vivekananda – born Narendranath Datta to a well-to-do family from Calcutta, India – came to Chicago to the World Parliament of Religions in order to spread to America the doctrine of Vedanta, the universal truth found in the Vedas of Hinduism.

James's fame was beginning to grow in America, thanks to the success of his 1890 publication of *The Principles of Psychology* (the "James") and the 1892 publication of *Psychology: Briefer Course* (the "Jimmy.") Although he had been publishing philosophical articles since at least 1878, he was known to the public primarily as a psychologist and had yet to write what would be recognized as his great works on religion and philosophy.

Vivekananda -- and Hinduism of any sort -- was virtually unknown in the United States. But from the moment that Vivekananda spoke on September 11, 1893, he received enthusiastic standing applause from his audience¹ and widespread newspaper coverage in the many cities in which he spoke and taught before he returned to India in late 1896. Many educated people, quite a number of them women, became his disciples. As Louise Bardach has written, Vivekananda was in effect "the first missionary from the East to the West."²

James had the opportunity to meet him in 1894 and then again in 1896 when Vivekananda lectured at Harvard, first on the religions of India and then on comparative religions. In addition, some of James's colleagues at Harvard and his neighbors in Cambridge were powerfully attracted to Vivekananda. James found Vivekananda and his thought fascinating, and included long quotations from Vivekananda in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James's 1902 work which immediately gained a level of readership and admiration that continues until the present time. James called him "the paragon of Vedantist missionaries."³ For his part, Vivekananda is reported to have said after his first meeting with James "A very nice man! A very nice man!", and James called his new friend "an honor to humanity"⁴ and "master."⁵

Vivekananda's followers have recounted these statements of James numerous times, and they do indeed capture James's interest in him. However, his followers do not discuss the context of these utterances, nor the differences that James had with Vivekananda's philosophy.

For reasons of both philosophy and temperament, James ultimately rejects key tenets of Vivekananda's philosophy.

JAMES'S ENTHUSIASM FOR VIVEKANANDA: EXPERIENCE, SCIENCE, AND PRAGMATISM

Vivekananda was only 29 at the time of his address in 1893. His biographer Swami Nikhilananda writes that Vivekananda had completed a university education in India, had studied Western philosophy, logic, and science, and saw the benefit of all these lines of thinking. However, unlike some of his university colleagues who wanted to leave religion behind, Vivekananda felt dissatisfied until he met the man who was to become his master, Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna was not formally educated, but he possessed a Vedantic wisdom and charisma which drew to him many disciples. Vivekananda took Ramakrishna's Vedantic truths to heart, felt he had been enlightened, and tried to live the reclusive life of a monk. But in the monastic life too Vivekananda felt something missing, and as he looked around his native India he saw an impoverished nation that needed a revival of the truths of its religion, not to continue the stultifying rigidity of the caste system but to give energy to its people. India also needed technology and science to lift it out of its poverty. Over time his mission became clear to him: to bring the truths of the Vedas to the Western world, where he would win converts, and to bring back to India Western knowledge and science.⁶

Thus he was the perfect person to speak to the World Parliament of Religions: impeccably and deeply educated, sympathetic to many Western ways, and a handsome and powerful orator who knew exactly how to simplify Vedantic thought for his audience while keeping its power and universal appeal.

In his opening address, Vivekananda set the tone for his speeches that would follow, establishing both the authority and universal appeal of his religion: "I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.... I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." He quoted a familiar Hindu thought: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through

different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.” Vivekananda did not identify the Vedas with the common meaning of the great later works of Hinduism: “By the Vedas,” he says, “no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times.”⁷

His brief speech came to a powerful ending, “The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: ‘Whosoever comes to Me, in whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.’ I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”⁸

The talk was brilliant. It was unifying, it talked about past hindrances of religious bigotry, and it acknowledged progress, which was after all the overarching theme of the Columbian exposition. In thanking his audience in the “name of the mother of religions,” he subtly declared the legitimacy of his view.

He received overwhelming applause and an enthusiastic audience for each of his subsequent speeches in the remaining two weeks of the Parliament. His popularity then gave him an opportunity to talk in a number of cities, including Iowa City, Des Moines, Memphis, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Detroit, Buffalo, Hartford, Boston and Cambridge, New York, Baltimore, and Washington.⁹ His call for unity was both appealing to many in his audience and also gave him the intellectual base from which to be sharply critical of those Americans who sent missionaries to India to convert the “heathens” practicing their false religion:

You train and educate and clothe and pay men to do what? — to come over to my country and curse and abuse all my forefathers, my religion, my everything. They walk near a temple and say, 'You idolaters, you will go to hell.' But the Hindu is mild; he smiles and passes on, saying, 'Let the fools talk.' And then you who train men to abuse and criticize, if I just touch you with the least bit of criticism, but with the kindest purpose, you shrink and cry: 'Do not touch us! We are

Americans; we criticize, curse, and abuse all the heathens of the world, but do not touch us, we are sensitive plants.¹⁰

No doubt such comments offended those who believed that the only path to salvation was through Christianity, but those people were not potential converts, anyway. And to people drawn to Vivekananda and his Vedantism, those statements would be seen as evidence of his honesty and courage.

While still in American in 1895, Vivekananda wrote his *Raja-Yoga*, which focused on union with God by way of the methods of meditation. Swami Nikhilananda (later to be the teacher of Joseph Campbell) wrote that *Raja-Yoga* “attracted the attention of the Harvard philosopher William James.”¹¹ The book translated the aphorisms of the 2nd century BCE Patanjali, to which Vivekananda added his explanations and introductory chapters. Nikhilananda writes that Vivekananda held “that religious experiences could stand on the same footing as scientific truths, being based on experimentation, observation, and verification. Therefore genuine spiritual experiences must not be dogmatically discarded as lacking rational evidence.”¹²

There was so much in Vivekananda to appeal to James. Like Vivekananda, James had a mission that involved religion. While Vivekananda’s mission is explicit toward gaining converts and spreading the truth of his Vedantism, James’s mission is more implicit but can be seen in his famous 1896 essay, “The Will to Believe,” which is an examination and justification of religious belief, an attempt to show that at least certain types of religious belief are rational.

In addition, Vivekananda stated that religious experiences should be judged pragmatically. His argument that Vivekananda’s argument that religious experiences, like scientific truths, are based on “experimentation, observation, and verification,” must have appealed greatly to James. Vivekananda’s description in *Raja-Yoga* of a method of meditation whose practice should be judged by how well it works is consistent with James’s claim in *The Varieties* that religion is to be judged not by its roots (its origins), but by its fruits (its consequences).

Finally, Vivekananda’s statements seem to fit well with James’s insistence both that religion is primarily based on first-hand experience, rather than on the teaching of religious institutions, and also that an analysis of those experiences shows that the truths of religion must be pluralistic. James’s temperament and philosophy was not to reject any idea without

investigation; much of *The Varieties* is a brilliant account of first hand experiences (culminating in the chapters on mysticism), which James steadfastly refuses to judge until the last chapters of the book.

Vivekananda closes his preface to *Raja-Yoga* with principles for those who practice meditation. Each of us can find the divine within us, and thus we can control our nature and at least some events. The closing two principles speak loudly to what will be James's themes in the *Varieties*: “[1] Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy — by one, or more, or all of these — and be free. [2] This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.”¹³ The first principle is Vivekananda's version of a truth that is found in the Bhagavad-Gita: any of the four disciplines (*yogas*) can lead one from delusion to enlightenment, and different people are temperamentally suited for different paths. The paths that individuals follow -- work (*karma yoga*), worship (*bhakti yoga*), psychic control or meditation (*raja yoga*), or knowledge (*jnana yoga*) – are the ones that work best for their natures, and the paths are equally good for the goal of becoming enlightened.¹⁴ This surely must have resonated with James's chronicles in the *Varieties* of the many forms of religious experience. Even the content (if not the tone) of Vivekananda's outbursts about America's religious ethnocentrism would have appealed to James, later to be a founder of the Anti-Imperialist League.

The second principle, that “Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details” could as well be a quote from James in the *Varieties* as from Vivekananda.

James knew something of Hinduism at least by the 1870's. As Robert Richardson has written, religion first became real for James with the religious experience and struggle of his dying dear friend Minnie Temple, and as James struggled to understand and deal with her death in 1870, he wrote in his journal a line from the Upanishads, *tat tvam asi*, “that thou art,” expressing the idea that individual and Being are the same¹⁵ As the year went on, James read more of Buddhism and Hinduism.¹⁶ So James certainly knew of Hinduism before he met Vivekananda, but Vivekananda's presence and words beginning from their first meeting in 1894 may have influenced James's thoughts as he prepared for the 1901-1902 Gifford Lectures which were published as the *Varieties*.

James was so impressed by Vivekananda that he even agreed to write the introduction for the publication of *Raja-Yoga*. But an impatient Vivekananda, who by 1896 was in London, wrote to Mrs. Sara Chapman Thorp Bull (a Cambridge neighbor of James), “What are we to do? Is the book going to be published or not? Prof. [William] James’s introduction is of no use in England. So why wait so long for that; and what use are those long explanations about him?”¹⁷

James never did write that introduction. That seems odd for a man who was unbelievably prolific, whose correspondence alone comes to twelve volumes. Perhaps he did not write the introduction because despite the ways in which he agreed with Vivekananda’s approach and some of his ideas about religion, James had strong philosophical and temperamental differences with Vivekananda.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JAMES AND VIVEKANANDA

Not only Nikhilananda’s biography, but many current websites have Nikhilananda’s quotation that “William James of Harvard ... referred to him [Vivekananda] in *Varieties of Religious Experience* as the ‘paragon of Vedantists.’”¹⁸ But Nikhilananda is in error: that quotation is not from *The Varieties*, but in the later book *Pragmatism* (1907), where the full quotation is “The paragon of all monistic systems is the Vedanta philosophy of Hindostan, and the paragon of Vedantist missionaries was the late Swami Vivekananda who visited our shores some years ago.”¹⁹ When viewed in context, James uses Vedanta and Vivekananda as “the very best example” (the meaning of “paragon”) of a philosophical conception which James strongly opposes. Vivekananda’s views ultimately don’t fly with James, for several reasons, including James’s pragmatism and pluralism.

James’s pragmatism is a philosophy which maintains that ideas are to be judged by their consequences. James writes that, “Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life?"²⁰ Ideas are tools. True ideas are states of mind that provide “a leading [back to experience] that is worth while.”²¹ Ideas are inspired by experiences, and true ideas are those that guide us back into the “Particulars of experience again and make advantageous connexion with them.”²²

There are a multitude of ways in which ideas can connect beneficially with experiences. Thus for James conceptions of the universe are radically pluralistic, a view that can be seen in the entire historical span of his published writings: “A single explanation of a fact only explains

it from a single point of view” (1878, “The Sentiment of Rationality”)²³; “There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear as an absolutely single fact”(1896, *The Will To Believe*)²⁴; and “For the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter....it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos” (1907, *Pragmatism*)²⁵.

Noting that “The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments,”²⁶ James discusses at the beginning of *Pragmatism* two types of temperament, the tender-minded and the tough-minded. Among the traits of the tender-minded are Rationalist, Idealistic, Optimistic, Religious and Monistic, while the corresponding traits of the tough-minded are Empiricist, Materialistic, Pessimistic, Irreligious and Pluralistic.²⁷ James conceived of his philosophy of pragmatism as a mediating philosophy between the two temperaments of tender-minded and tough-minded; pragmatism incorporates some of the traits of either side, sometimes by giving what James takes to be a middle way between the two opposing traits. In terms of monism versus pluralism, James writes that his pragmatism “must obviously range upon the pluralistic side.”²⁸

James argues that Vivekananda’s views are clearly monistic. James writes, “Mystical states of mind in every degree are shown by history, usually tho not always, to make for the monistic view....The method of Vedantism is the mystical method. You do not reason, but after going through a certain discipline *you see*, and having seen, you can report the truth.”²⁹ James goes on to quote at length from a lecture in which Vivekananda describes the truth seen by the person who has achieved *samadhi*, enlightenment:

Where is any more misery for him who sees this Oneness in the Universe...this Oneness of life, Oneness of everything? ...This separation between man and man, man and woman, man and child, nation from nation...is the cause really of all the misery, and the Vedanta says this separation does not exist, it is not real. It is merely apparent, on the surface. In the heart of things there is Unity still.Where is any more delusion for him? What can delude him? He knows the reality of everything, the secret of everything. Where is there any more misery for him? What does he desire? He has traced the reality of everything unto the Lord,

that centre, that Unity of everything, and that is Eternal Bliss, Eternal Knowledge, Eternal Existence. Neither death nor disease, nor sorrow nor misery, nor discontent is there ... in the centre, the reality, there is no one to be mourned for, no one to be sorry for.³⁰

Vivekananda's account of the One opposes James's pluralism, in which no point of view has absolute priority over other points of view: "A single explanation of a fact [or the totality of facts] only explains it from a single point of view." In his opening remarks at the Parliament, Vivekananda appeared to be a pluralist in saying "all religions are true." But he says this from his perspective that the Vedantic monism expressed in the quotation above is *the* true understanding of all religions. However, it follows that those who have a different understanding of their religion must have a false view of religion. For example, if I am a Christian who thinks that God's sacredness lies in God being totally other than humans, then according to Vivekananda, my belief is false. James, on the other hand, in keeping with his pluralism believes that many different views of religion may be true in the pragmatic sense that they make advantageous connections with experience for different people. Vivekananda's understanding of truth seems to be both rationalistic and ultimately mystical, while James's understanding of truth is empiricist and pragmatic.

James also rejects Vivekananda's monism on pragmatic grounds. He notes that the monist must resort to a timeless reality:

The mutable in experience must be founded on immutability....The negatives that haunt our ideals here below must be themselves negated in the absolutely Real. This alone makes the universe solid.... *This is Vivekananda's mystical One of which I read to you. This is Reality with the big R, reality that makes the timeless claim, reality to which defeat can't happen. This is what the men of principles, and in general all the men whom I called tender-minded in my first lecture, think themselves obliged to postulate.*³¹ [emphasis mine]

James points out that in this timeless reality, all evil disappears, again quoting Vivekananda:

When man has seen himself as one with the infinite Being of the universe, when all separateness has ceased, when all men, all women, all angels, all gods, all animals, all plants, the whole universe has been melted into that oneness, then all fear disappears. Whom to fear? Can I hurt myself? Can I kill myself? Can I injure myself? Do you fear yourself? Then will all sorrow disappear.³²

James comments on this monistic view, "...surely we have here a religion which, emotionally considered, has a high pragmatic value; it imparts a perfect sumptuousness of security."³³ James's word choice indicates that this sense of security is indeed sumptuous (lavish), far beyond what the experiences of evil and tragedy allow. For James, ideas are guides to experience, and nothing that is directly experienced must be excluded in formulating adequate ideas. However, the monism of Vivekananda *does exclude* experiences that are both central to humans and also have the consequences of leading us to want to make the world better. The feeling of struggle, that there is a real fight in which one is engaged in this world of good and evil, of better and worse, and the experience of tragedy are not explained by Vivekananda's philosophy that holds, "Neither death nor disease, nor sorrow nor misery, nor discontent is there ... in the centre, the reality, there is no one to be mourned for, no one to be sorry for." James writes, "The peace and rest, the security desiderated at such moments is security against the bewildering accidents of so much finite experience. Nirvana means safety from this everlasting round of adventures of which the world of sense consists. The hindoo and the buddhist, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life."³⁴

While the tender-minded monist offers an unwarranted optimism, and the tough-minded pluralist offers an unsustaining pessimism, James's pragmatism offers what he calls "meliorism," the view that the world *may* ("may," not "will") become better, and that it becomes so through our will and efforts.

The problem with Vivekananda's monistic Vedanta, writes James, is that "it is indeed not a scientific use, for we can make no particular deductions from it. It is emotional and spiritual altogether."³⁵ James means, I think, monism only gives the *feeling* of security, but calls for no sort of *action* at all.

TEMPERAMENTAL DIFFERENCES FROM VIVEKANANDA

Since James opened *Pragmatism* with an account of temperament, it surely would not be out of place to include thinking about his own temperament as a complementary explanation of his differences with Vivekananda.

First, James – as fascinated as he was with religious experience and as important as he saw religion to be – remained somewhat outside of those experiences. While Vivekananda's life clearly included the reality of mystical experiences (including meditative trances so deep that he supposedly in advance told his disciples words that would bring him out of the trance), James himself claimed that “my own constitution shuts me out from their [mystical experiences] enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand.”³⁶

A letter from James to a correspondent librarian Henry Rankin captures well how James saw his role, “I envy you the completeness of your Christian faith, and the concreteness of association between your abstract theism and the Christian symbols. Historic Christianity, with its ecclesiasticism and whatnot, stands between me and the imperishable strength and freshness of the original books. For you they fuse (more or less) into a harmonious whole. I shall work out my destiny; and possibly as a mediator between scientific agnosticism and the religious view of the world (Christian or not) I may be more useful than if I were myself a positive Christian.”³⁷

James's temperament was decidedly pluralistic, and led him away from any one view of reality, any one intellectual or religious resting place. The world James apprehended from the beginning of his inquiring life included both the reality of the physical world and also the real effects of ideas on our lives. As an artist, James tried to draw and paint that world. His account of his depression in his late 20s and his escape from that depression is that it came from reading about an idea, an idea which had the effect of lifting him from that depression and guiding him to a better relation with experience. As a medical student and physiologist and psychologist, he investigated the connections between the physical world and ideas. The first sentence of his *Principles of Psychology* is that “Psychology is the science of mental life, both of its phenomena and their conditions.”³⁸ Both the immediate phenomena of experience and the conditions that lead up to and are connected with them are real. No single fact can ever be a complete explanation, nor can any viewpoint explain all. James is a pluralist to the bone. That pluralist temperament may have been a factor in keeping him from mystical experiences.

Second, as open-minded and experimental as James was, he was also temperamentally resistant to “mind-cure.” Throughout his life, James suffered from depression, nervous conditions, and a host of physical ailments. He was open to a wide variety of treatments, including mind-cure, electrotherapy, lymph-compound injections, and chloral hydrate.³⁹ Despite having tried these treatments, James described himself as someone who was not a suitable subject for things like meditative enlightenment. In a 1900 letter from Paris, where he was at the home of the Leggetts (New Yorkers who had become disciples of Vivekananda), where James may have seen Vivekananda again, James mentions twice that he is not “suggestible enough to be a good subject for any wonder-cure whatever.”

A year later, James writes from Edinburgh, where he is giving the Gifford lectures, that he happened to meet on the train his Cambridge neighbor, Sara Chapman Thorp Bull, who was accompanied by Margaret Elizabeth Nobel, an English woman who had become a follower of Vivekananda. (She later took the name of Sister Nivedita, and she has a prominent position in Nikhilananda’s biography of Vivekananda.⁴⁰) Describing her as “an extraordinarily fine character and mind,” James states that she has been

converted by Vivekananda to his philosophy and lives now for the hindu people. *These free individuals who live there [sic] own life, no matter what domestic prejudices have to be snapped, are on the whole a refreshing sight to me, who can do nothing of the kind myself.* And Miss Noble is a most deliberate and balanced person – no frothy enthusiast in point of character, though I believe her philosophy to be more or less false. Perhaps no more than any one else’s!⁴¹
[emphasis mine]

A large part of James would love to be free like Miss Noble, not only to be able to escape “domestic prejudices,” but I think also to be able to have a conversion experience that would bring him to a resting place as she has done. She has been converted and yet still is “deliberate and balanced,” as James would like to be had he had such an experience.

In 1905 letters to a correspondent who reported a great improvement in his health by practicing Hatha Yoga,⁴² James writes

Your Yoga discipline and its effects are interesting, I have read Vivekananda's...book⁴³ and looked through the Hatha Yoga.⁴⁴ But my temperament seems rebellious to all these disciplines, and I fear I shall have to die unsaved. At least I could only be saved by a very laborious process, and under a Guru with first-rate paedagogic powers⁴⁵ I knew Vivekananda, when he was here, have read both his book and the one on Hatha Yoga, and did then try (some 6 or 7 years ago) to practice some of the breathing exercises. But I am a bad subject for such things, critical and indocile, so it soon stopped.⁴⁶

It is most interesting that James mentions both that his temperament is “rebellious,” “critical,” and “indocile,” and that he could be “saved” only by a Guru who was an excellent teacher. Surely James would have remembered what Vivekananda wrote in his preface to *Raja-Yoga*: “With few exceptions, Raja-Yoga can be safely learnt only by direct contact with a teacher.”⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

For reasons of pluralism and pragmatism, as well as temperament, James ultimately rejects Vivekananda's philosophy. Although his *Raja-Yoga* had the initial appeal of saying that there are many paths to enlightenment, Vivekananda ultimately takes his own over-beliefs to be the only true expression of reality, and James as a pluralist and pragmatist cannot go there with him.

James could have examined other forms of Hinduism which argue not for monism but for distinct realities for God, individual souls, and the physical world.⁴⁸ Whether a close examination of dualistic Hinduism would escape James's criticism remains to be seen. However, in a sense those other interpretations are beside the point for James, who in *Pragmatism* is looking for a genuine religious and philosophical view that can clearly be identified with the tender-minded type which is rationalistic, monistic, and optimistic: Vivekananda's philosophy and statements perfectly fit the bill. If what Vivekananda says is true, James argues, the experiences of sorrow, regret, evil and tragedy make no sense; we should be tough-minded enough to not accept a philosophy that denies the reality of such experiences.

In *Pragmatism*'s last chapter, "Pragmatism and Religion," James writes "On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it definitely does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it, so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths."⁴⁹ James makes it clear that he does not believe "that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe."⁵⁰ Thus he rejects the extreme tough-minded view (which is irreligious) just as he rejected the extreme tender-minded view (which is religious, but monistic). Pragmatism seeks to account for all human experiences (including religious experiences) and is pluralistic and melioristic.

Ultimately, having argued strongly against the tender-minded view exemplified by Vivekananda, James returns to his pluralism and his consideration of temperament. In the end, he tells his audience, the form of religion "is a question that only you yourself can decide."⁵¹

"Pragmatism has to postpone dogmatic answer, for we do not yet know certainly which type of religion is going to work best in the long run."⁵² The totally tough-minded person may need no religion at all; the radically tender-minded may choose a monistic religion; the person who is mixed in temperament may find "the pragmatic or melioristic type of theism"⁵³ what they need.

This conclusion may be very unsatisfactory for someone who wants *the* answer. However, James's answer is consistent with his pluralism. Having examined religious experience and truths, analyzed the way those truths fit with other working truths⁵⁴, and argued vigorously for his views, James then backs off enough to leave room for other views and other arguments, as we search to see what view of religion will work best in the long run.

We're now over a century past James's writing of *Pragmatism*, and it may not be any clearer at all which religious view is going to work best in the long run. Two trends are of interest to our current topic. First, a growing number of Americans practice more than one religion: an increasing number of people are religious pluralists. Using polling from 2009, The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life reports that about a quarter of Americans hold Eastern or New Age beliefs, and a quarter "believe in yoga not just as exercise but as a spiritual practice."⁵⁵ Roughly a fifth of Christians also believe in yoga as a spiritual practice. The pluralism in this trend would appeal to James, while the growing practice of yoga

as a spiritual practice would appeal to Vivekananda (although he saw the physical exercise of yoga as a rather unimportant preliminary to its spiritual practice). At the same time, however, fundamentalist religion – with a loathing of pluralism -- is strong among many in the U.S. and world.

The second trend is that a growing number of Americans say they have had a religious or mystical experience. Half of Americans reported having had a religious or mystical experience, more than double the amount who reported this in 1962.⁵⁶ This trend supports the position of both James and Vivekananda on the centrality of first-hand experience for religion.

James would be most interested in both these trends, and would want to inquire into the *fruitfulness* of the beliefs and practices in the lives of their practitioners, in order to seek the forms of religion which are going to work best in the long run.

Queens University of Charlotte
frederin@queens.edu

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NOTES

¹ Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography*, 133.

² Ann Louise Bardach, "How Yoga Won the West," New York Times.

³ Nikhilananda, 212. I first learned of this quotation and the connection between Vivekananda and James from Philip Goldberg's *American Veda*, 79.

⁴ Bardach.

⁵ Nikhilananda, 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113 – 114.

⁷ Swami Vivekananda, "Response to Welcome at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago," *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.I, http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_1/vol_1_frame.htm.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Nikhilananda, 140.

¹⁰ Vivekananda, quoted in Nikhilananda, 141.

¹¹ Nikhilananda, 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 171 - 172

¹³ Swami Vivekananda, "Preface," *Raja-Yoga*.

¹⁴ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, 28.

¹⁵ Robert Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, 113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁷ Swami Vivekananda to Sara Chapman Thorp Bull, May 8, 1896, in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Appendices, http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/appendices/appendices_frame.htm.

¹⁸ Nikhilananda, 212.

¹⁹ William James, *Pragmatism*, 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² *Ibid.*, 99.

²³ James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *Essays in Philosophy*, 52.

²⁴ James, *The Will to Believe*, 6.

²⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁰ Vivekananda, quoted in James, *Pragmatism*, 74 -75. The editorial notes in *Pragmatism, The Works of William James*, 167, attribute the quote to “God in Everything,” in *Speeches and Writings of Swami Vivekananda*, 3rd edition, (Madras: G. A. Natesan, n.d., 336 – 337) and also state that “A somewhat different version of the same lecture can be found in Vivekananda’s *Jnana Yoga*, (New York: The Vedanta Society, 1902), 154-155.

³¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 126.

³² Vivekananda, quoted in James, *Pragmatism*, 75. The editorial notes in *Pragmatism, The Works of William James*, 167, attribute the quotation to Vivekananda, *On “The Atman”* (n.p., circa 1896), p.13.

³³ James, *Pragmatism*, 75.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 301.

³⁷ William James to Henry William Rankin, June 21, 1896, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 8, 155.

³⁸ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 15.

³⁹ Richardson, 420.

⁴⁰ Nikhilananda, 198: “But the Swami's greatest acquisition in London was Miss Margaret E. Noble, who later became his disciple, consecrating her life to women's education in India. She also espoused the cause of India's political freedom and inspired many of its leaders with her written and spoken words.”

⁴¹ William James to Frances Rollins Morse, May 15, 1901, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 9, 483.

⁴² James quotes the account of the correspondent Wincenty Lutoslawski in the “The Energies of Men,” *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 137-39.

⁴³ Vivekanda’s book referenced here is *Yoga Philosophy*, 1896, according to editors Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 105.

⁴⁴ The book referenced here may be Yogi Ramacharaka, *Hatha Yoga: or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being* (Chicago, 1904), according to editors Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 106.

⁴⁵ William James to Wincenty Lutoslawki, Oct. 25, 1905, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 105.

⁴⁶ William James to Wincenty Lutoslawki, Nov. 24, 1905, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 114.

⁴⁷ Vivekananda, *Raja-Yoga*, 5.

⁴⁸ Smith, p. 69.

⁴⁹ James, *Pragmatism*, 143.

⁵⁰ James, *Pragmatism*, 143.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁵ Pew Research Center, “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths,” The Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life, December 9, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/Many-Americans-Mix-Multiple-Faiths.aspx>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*