EDITOR’S PREFACE

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You don’t often go to a conference and get to hear four first-rate papers one right after another in a single session, but the March 2012 meeting of the Nineteenth Century Studies Association produced just such a fine harvest on Saturday, March 24 in its section VIII-D on “The Religion of William James: Mind and Body.”

Lynn Bridgers drew a deft and lucid comparison between James and Evelyn Underhill on mystical states, concluding that even though Underhill disagreed with and meant to discredit James’s ideas about mystical experience, she ended up sharing broad areas of agreement with James. Underhill’s book on mysticism is still standard, but so is James’s description of the same subject in The Varieties of Religious Experience, and there are still people—and people for whom religion is real—who will prefer James. (James is hard to refute. A noted theologian at Duke delivered a set of Gifford Lectures a few years ago arguing that James was wrong about religion because he had failed to start his discussion by assuming the truth of Trinitarian Christianity. The same writer also delivered an attack on the entire Gifford Lecture project—natural theology—by claiming that the only possible natural theology, that is the only one that gives us the world as it is, is that same Trinitarian Christianity. Many, perhaps most students of William James will not consider his work demolished by such arguments.)

Norris Frederick’s paper on James and Vivekanada brings out a clear distinction between the two men. Frederick shows persuasively how Vivekanada simply denied the existence of evil, calling it just an illusion. James gives us a fuller, richer world; he acknowledges the felt presence of evil and noted that whether it really exists or not, we feel it to exist and our life feels like a fight against it.

Richard Hall’s careful, detailed, and extensive paper compares William James with Jonathan Edwards; it is the best such discussion I know of. James read Edwards carefully and early and grappled actively with Edwards’ ideas. Hall’s fine analysis concludes that James, like Edwards, focused on religious experience, on the emotional quality of such experience, and on
the fruits rather than the roots of religious life. Perhaps students of American thought should consider moving on from the “Edwards to Emerson” argument given us by Perry Miller to concentrate a bit more on the Edwards to William James connection.

The last paper in this exemplary set is Paul Croce’s intricate and thoughtful exploration of what he calls “spilt mysticism.” Croce takes considerable pains to show how William James’s ideas about religious experience do not privilege some elite group of certified religious figures, but instead provide a broad, democratic endorsement of the religious experience of the individual—that is of every individual.

The four papers so briefly summarized here constitute a rousing endorsement of James’s treatment of religion, a vote—four votes really—that Jamesian religious experience is still very much a live option, a practical choice for ordinary people outside as well as inside our religious institutions. There may or may not be a universal or perennial religion—as there is a perennial philosophy—and there may or may not be even a generally accepted taxonomy of religious experience. But we are free to believe and to act as if such a thing exists, and William James’s work shows the first firm step in that direction. That step is to accept as real the religious experience of the individual and that means accepting as real the religious experience of each individual.