

IT'S NOT PERSONAL: MODERNIST REMEDICATIONS OF WILLIAM JAMES'S "PERSONAL RELIGION"

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This essay examines how James's distinction between "personal" and "institutional" religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* informs modernist literature. Specifically, it points to the inescapably social dimensions of "personal" forms of religious experience, demonstrating how modernists such as E.J. Pratt – once Canada's leading poet – extended James's notion of personal religion in relation to his pragmatic philosophy. I place James in conversation with modernists such as Pratt to challenge scholars to consider anew not only the nature of James's literary influence, but the many forms of religious expression that shaped the cultural landscape of the twentieth century.



While most readers of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* are familiar with his unequivocally stated preference for "personal" over "institutional" forms of religion, the apparent antagonism between the private and the public in James's immensely popular text is all too often re-circulated as a kind of précis of his entire book—and understandably so: in order to limit the scope of his study, he announces early on that he would like "to ignore the institutional branch entirely, [. . .] to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple."¹ But to distill James's notion of personal religion down to an anti-institutional, solipsistic essence is to risk misunderstanding the seldom-discussed social implications of his philosophy of religion. Even the words "as far as I can" in the passage above foreshadow both James's awareness of the arbitrariness of his separation of "the religious field" into the equally arbitrary categories of the personal and the institutional, and his inevitable failure to confine himself "to personal religion pure and simple."² Indeed, as Ulf Zackariasson posits in a 2016 essay on the public dimensions of belief as discussed by notable James scholars such as Richard Rorty, "the private/public-distinction seems much more porous than Rorty seems to think."³ In the essay that follows, I echo Zackariasson's call for renewed critical consideration of this distinction; however, unlike Zackariasson, I am interested primarily in *Varieties*. More specifically, I am interested in examining how the tension between personal and institutional religion is operative in modernist texts, and how modernists familiar with James's writings might have nuanced or extended his notion of personal religions in relation to his pragmatic philosophy. I address both of these questions below with reference to E.J. Pratt, the ordained Methodist minister and lecturer in psychology who would go on to become "Canada's most influential modern poet."⁴

For good reason, James's influence in literary and particularly modernist circles is frequently summed up with reference to stream of consciousness narration and the shining stars of the Anglo-American modernist firmament.⁵ This essay takes James in a new

direction altogether: it places modernist texts in conversation with aspects of *Varieties* – namely its notion of personal religions, and its related concerns about the difficulties of communicating one’s personal religion – that have received little attention in literary circles.⁶ But this essay also crosses borders, illustrating how James’s book caused waves in Canada, and thus pushes the margins of a “New Modernist Studies” whose theoretical expansion in “temporal, spatial, and vertical directions” has not prevented critics from continuing to privilege certain Anglo-American figures and narratives in practice.⁷

Although the following pages focus on Pratt’s relation to James, it should be noted that other Canadian modernists – who, in turn, inspired subsequent generations of writers in Canada and beyond – were influenced by *Varieties* long after it was first published: Anne Wilkinson’s journal records her run-in with *Varieties* in the summer of 1950,⁸ P.K. Page read James alongside Carl Jung, George Gurdjieff, and Idries Shah in the 1960s, and Margaret Avison tells of how her 1963 conversion to Christianity was preceded by her encounter with *Varieties*, which “got her going back to church.”⁹ Nevertheless, Pratt’s illustrious poetic career, which spanned most of the first half of the twentieth century, serves as a more natural – and perhaps more productive – entry point into discussions of James’s influence on Canadian literature for at least two key reasons: first, Pratt writes explicitly, at various points, and in greater detail than most Canadian authors, about James’s influence on his life and poetry; and second, while Pratt’s own anti-institutional religious tendencies appear at times to support the so-called “secularization hypothesis” – according to which modernization inevitably results in secularization – the Christ-centric nature of his personal religious beliefs intimates that modernity and secularity are in fact synonymous only if one adopts a rather limited notion of religion and what religion or religious expression might have looked like, for modernists such as Pratt, in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Although Pratt’s poetry articulates its non-dogmatic and unorthodox affirmations outside of, and occasionally against, more recognizable institutional forms

of religious expression, it is precisely in this respect that it most powerfully anticipates documented shifts in religion in the West – such as religion's accelerated privatization in the years following the Second World War,¹¹ or the concomitant movement in literature and culture towards non-doctrinal spiritualities and the expression of what Amy Hungerford refers to as a generalized "faith in faith."¹² In other words, Pratt's poetry, which enacts James's distinction between personal and institutional religion, simultaneously adumbrates the complex, plural varieties of personal religious experience that collectively counter dominant narratives of modernity or of literary modernism in which secularity is narrowly defined with recourse only to institutionally informed metrics of religious beliefs and practices.

Like James, Pratt was wary of institutional religion's fixed doctrines and codified rituals. However, Pratt's emphasis in his poetry on personal forms of religious expression did not prevent him from repeatedly acknowledging some of the unavoidably social dimensions of private religious experiences, which I examine throughout this essay. In particular, I provide examples of two ways in which personal religions might be deemed "social." First, drawing on scholars of religion such as Ann Taves and Wayne Proudfoot, I claim that religious experiences are necessarily social insofar as our responses to, and articulations of, these experiences are socialized responses and articulations. Second, I consider personal religion to be social to the extent that private religious experiences or convictions, when translated into words or deeds, have social repercussions – and I suggest a number of ways in which this process of articulation, of communicating one's spiritual insights, may pose linguistic, philosophical, or moral challenges.

As we will see, Pratt shares with James this understanding of the necessarily socialized and socially-oriented nature of genuinely held religious beliefs. Accordingly, after delineating James's influence on Pratt, I turn to Pratt's poetry, arguing that poems such as *Brébeuf and His Brethren* and "The Truant" place James's pragmatic and religious philosophies in tension by dramatizing the

necessity of moving beyond sequestered forms of religious experience and expression in order to effect social and historical change.

In 1923, Pratt, already in his forties, officially launched his poetry career with *Newfoundland Verse*. But it was only after publishing several narrative long poems, including *Titans* and *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe*, that Pratt gained a widespread following. These action-oriented narratives were read internationally and lauded by critics in his own time, quickly securing him a place in the pantheon of modern Canadian poetry; ironically, though, these long poems also seem to have been the reason that, after his death in 1964, many critics have ignored or actively marginalized Pratt – in part because his epic narratives routinely foreground a now-unfashionable fascination with “grand themes,” such as bravery in war, sacrifice, and death.¹³

From 1907 until 1917, Pratt maintained his childhood interest in these grand themes as he continued with his formal education in philosophy, theology, and psychology at Victoria College in Toronto. His father had been a Methodist minister in Newfoundland, where Pratt was born and raised, but once Pratt moved to Toronto – after attending Newfoundland’s Methodist College and serving as a candidate for the Methodist ministry – he gradually left the pulpit in order to pursue other personal and professional interests, such as poetry and psychology. Although he would remain a lifelong member of the Methodist and later United Church of Canada, he was also deeply curious about spiritualism, attending multiple séances with his wife Viola from 1928 on. Nevertheless, Pratt provided few religious testimonials of the sort that James analyzes in *Varieties*. As a result of his forced participation in “testimony meetings” from the age of ten, Pratt acquired what one biographer calls an “almost neurotic dread of public performance and display,” so it is hardly surprising that Pratt later chose to express his beliefs – when he expressed them at all – in writing rather than in front of a congregation.¹⁴ And yet, while the religious sentiments scattered throughout Pratt’s poetry typically lack the directness, didactic quality, or hortatory zeal of

his father's fire-and-brimstone sermons, this body of work serves as a textual record of a profound faith, and its publication speaks to Pratt's deeply felt need to give public utterance to that faith on his own terms.

Many of the shifts and apparently contradictory elements of Pratt's personal religion – including his covert interest in spiritualism – can be explained with reference to the writings of one man: William James. Pratt had likely first encountered James during his formative years at Victoria College. Long before Pratt received his doctorate and privately published his first long poem in 1917, James was already a dominant figure in each of Pratt's three areas of study, but perhaps especially in the nascent discipline of psychology, the subject in which Pratt was a lecturer from 1913 to 1920. Many years later, in a letter to John Sutherland, Pratt would explicitly acknowledge his poetry's indebtedness to James: "It is only now in retrospect," he writes, "that I can feel the influence of two works which had to be thoroughly studied – The 'Principles of Psychology' by Wm James, and 'Immediate Experience' by [Wilhelm] Wundt. And I might add a third – James' 'Varieties of Religious Experience' [*sic*]." ¹⁵ Although *Varieties* is listed here as if an afterthought, a subsequent letter to Sutherland of 11 August 1952 provides confirmation of that particular book's impact on Pratt's own thinking and poetry. Furthermore, the frequent echoes of James's philosophy in Pratt's *oeuvre* suggest that James's influence was more than retrospective. In letters to Desmond Pacey dated 29 October 1954 and 11 November 1954, Pratt would cite both James and Wundt as two of the intellectuals "that most impressed [him] in undergraduate days." ¹⁶

Despite Pratt's self-proclaimed familiarity with and appreciation of James's writings, few critics have elucidated the connections between *Varieties* and Pratt's poetry. ¹⁷ This oversight reflects a need for new directions not only in Pratt studies, but in studies of James and his influence on literature produced outside of Great Britain, Ireland, and the United States. James's preference for personal over institutional religions usefully provides an

intellectual context in which the non-doctrinal, unorthodox, yet distinctly religious poetry of modernists such as W.B. Yeats, H.D., or Pratt might be viewed as representative of certain twentieth-century attitudes towards *organized* religion, rather than symptomatic of any kind of definitive shift away from religious belief altogether. Still, James was aware that religion, even personal religion, cannot remain cloistered; it is never a “personal” matter entirely. Writing of “the ascetic impulse,” for example, he opines that “[t]he practical course of action for us, as religious men,” is “to discover some outlet for it of which the fruits in the way of privation and hardship might be objectively useful.”¹⁸ That is, if the kinds of religious convictions that inform this “impulse” are to be “objectively useful,” they must be communicated or acted upon; they must become what James elsewhere labels the “positive content of religious experience.”¹⁹ Consequently, he could also conclude that mysticism “is too private (and also too various) in its utterances to be able to claim a universal authority.”²⁰

But James’s separation of the personal and the institutional is deliberately over-emphasized in *Varieties* for several reasons, and even his apparent dismissal of institutional religion in this book does not seem to have been representative, in any definitive sense, of his overall attitude about religion’s social significance. Of the distinction between private and public religious experiences, for instance, Jeremy Carrette observes that James:

plays down (rather than ignores) the social dimension of religious emotion [. . .], although it is intriguing to note that, a few years later, when James fills in [J.B.] Pratt’s questionnaire on religious belief, James is more affirmative of a social reading of religion. He responded to the question about whether religion is understood as “an emotional experience” by writing, somewhat surprisingly: “Not powerfully so, yet a social reality.”²¹

In this same questionnaire, James's answer to the question "Why do you believe in God?" is "Only for the social reasons," and he defines religion's importance in terms of its "social appeal" as well as its corresponding ability to offer "corroboration, consolation, etc. when things are going wrong with my causes."²² Significantly, these kinds of responses force readers to reconsider his attitude towards such social dimensions of personal religion and to grapple with the problem of how private religious experiences can be communicated or can yield pragmatic results in the public sphere.

To these reminders of the importance of the social dimensions of religious experiences that have been articulated or acted upon, one could also add that societies do not merely corroborate personal beliefs; they also mold them. While Pratt's personal beliefs shaped his written responses to and against the Methodist Church, theological modernism, and the Christian-inflected spiritualism with which he experimented in the 1920s and 1930s, these institutions and movements obviously shaped him, too. Indeed, there is no such thing as an unmediated personal experience or text, since individuals—and the narratives they create—are socially constituted and conditioned.²³ Just as James notes of some conversion narratives that "[t]he particular form which they affect is the result of suggestion and imitation,"²⁴ Pratt seems to realize even in his MA thesis that the inevitable socialization of individuals affects how subjectivities are embodied in written texts: he writes, "[w]ith each Evangelist writing from his own point of view, it would be the most surprising anomaly in the history of human literature, if some transfiguration of the acts and sayings of Christ had not in all sincerity crept in."²⁵

What is more, James, who "does not leave religion merely in the hearts of individuals,"²⁶ and who would, in "The Pragmatic Method," define religion as "a living practical affair,"²⁷ seems to have inspired Pratt's views regarding the need to communicate one's personal religion in order to effect social and historical change. However, whereas in *Varieties* James eventually turns to philosophy as a means of shifting the focus of religion from the

self onto society, Pratt in his later writing would turn to a socially-oriented personal religion focused not on philosophy, nor on dogma, but on Christ, who (to Christians such as Pratt) models perfectly how selfless deeds can serve as the ultimate expressions of one's inner spiritual convictions. It is clear that neither James nor Pratt fails to see the socially transformative potential of private religious experiences as they begin to move beyond what Charles Taylor refers to as a "religion of the heart."²⁸

Pratt believed in the pragmatic social applications of poetry as well: poetry should not be stripped, as he thought it was in "schools like Dadaism and Surrealism," "of all social value and social function."²⁹ "It is very hard," he argues, "to see the value of any artistic medium which is utterly contemptuous of communication."³⁰ But Pratt's poetry also evinces his belief in the pragmatic social applications of religion, and it is in this respect that James's influence on Pratt's poetic practice might be seen most clearly. To effect change in society, personal religious experiences and convictions must be communicated verbally or translated into action – hence Pratt, taking his cue from James's lecture on "Philosophy" in *Varieties*, disdains forms of religion that do not account for others, just as he critiques certain kinds of asceticism in part because he feels that they result in what James calls "unwholesome privacy."³¹ By contrast, Pratt's poetic heroes, such as Jean de Brébeuf, perform remarkable acts of bravery and self-sacrifice, and they are responsible for single-handedly "raising the moral temperature of the community"³² through their example: "There isn't one person among us," Pratt declares, "who, having witnessed a fine sacrificial action, hasn't felt like hoisting a flag to the masthead bearing the signal – 'Let no one do a mean deed today.'"³³ In this, Pratt again echoes James. In *Varieties*, James maintains that the self-sacrifice of any heroic figure "consecrates him forever."³⁴ The Christ-like sacrifice of oneself can ensure immortality in a secular as well as a religious sense.

Despite his emphasis on personal religion, James's pragmatism extends beyond the individual to the society in which the individual is embedded; he has no use for those forms of self-

abnegation that are really about the appearance of saintliness. Heroism is what redeems asceticism for James and Pratt, but only heroism such as Christ's – that is, a heroism that is authentic, vital, and "objectively useful."³⁵ James clearly understands the power of Christ's sacrifice, and of the metonymic symbols associated with that act: he writes, "The folly of the cross, so inexplicable by the intellect, has yet its indestructible vital meaning."³⁶ Nevertheless, both James and Pratt are wary of certain forms of self-abnegation or self-mortification – whether associated with institutional or personal forms of religion – that merely serve the self. In *Varieties*, for instance, James issues a call for "religious men" "to discover some outlet for [asceticism] of which the fruits in the way of privation and hardship might be objectively useful. The older monastic asceticism occupied itself with pathetic futilities, or terminated in the mere egotism of the individual, increasing his own perfection."³⁷ Like the Jesus of Matthew 23:25-29 or Luke 16:14-15, Pratt's poetry consistently excoriates figures who fail to live up to this standard, such as "priests put on parade / Before stone altar-steps"³⁸ or the "Self-pinched, self-punished anchorite, / Who credits up against his dying / His boasted hours of mortifying."³⁹ In *Brébeuf and His Brethren* too, Pratt's vital, self-sacrificing hero serves as a conspicuous character foil to the hermetic mystics and "whited sepulchres" of Matthew 23:27 who fail to translate their putative religious beliefs into morally responsible and socially transformative deeds.

In the wake of the First World War, and against the backdrop of Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Pratt would also deploy James's pragmatic philosophy and their shared disdain for religious hypocrisy as part of a trenchant critique of the notion of human "civilization" or "progress." In several key poems from the 1930s, Pratt berates society as a whole – rather than individuals or individual groups – for continually failing to live up to Christ's standard. For example, the emphasis in "The Highway" and "From Stone to Steel" is on a processual theology – a progressivist, evolutionary journey halted by what Robert Burns called "Man's inhumanity to man."⁴⁰ Humanity collectively disrupts the teleology

of Christ's sacrifice: in "The Highway," it steps off "the road" that leads to Christ and therefore seemingly outside of the Christian eschatological scheme, yet it is still within reach of God's "hand,"⁴¹ frozen in space and time, a liminal site of latent possibility and choice that Pratt, using a compound noun, succinctly refers to as "our so brief a span."⁴² Similarly, "From Stone to Steel" concludes with the image of Gethsemane,⁴³ which Pratt frequently invokes as a symbol of Jamesian free will but also of religious indeterminacy.⁴⁴ Pratt writes, "Between the temple and the cave / The boundary lies tissue thin" – but neither the cave nor the temple are appealing destinations: the cave is associated here with an atavistic "snarl Neanderthal," and the temple's civilized façade is stripped away to reveal personified "altars [that] crave" bloody sacrifices, "As satisfaction for a sin."⁴⁵ To a limited extent, such references might be said to collectively indict D.H. Lawrence's or other modernists' embrace of an idealized, primitive past as a means of addressing the ills and alienations of modern society. But while Pacey generalizes from this poem that the "ever-seeking pilgrim" of Pratt's poetry is on a quest "from the barbaric cave" towards the utopia of a "divine temple,"⁴⁶ such an idealized temple should not be conflated with the flawed structure figured here, nor should the sacrifices that its altars crave be confused with Christ's sacrifice: this is a rationalized bloodlust divorced from soteriology, and thus, like many of Pratt's poems, "From Stone to Steel" could be said to perform a moral critique of the human perversion of reason. Further, the dissolution of the "boundary" separating "the temple and the cave" means the dissolution of the idea of progress and civilization upon which Christendom has been built. However, Christ and Christ's ability to navigate Gethsemane seem to offer a way out of the plight, even if the salvation promised by such symbols is deferred within the context of the poem.

Despite James's and Pratt's grounding of religious experience in the heart rather than the head, and despite Pratt's awareness of the human tendency to willfully distort reason, neither James nor Pratt deny intellect or reason their place. Most notably, the

aforementioned section on “Philosophy” in *Varieties* acknowledges the importance of the intellect regarding the problem of communication, since “we must exchange our feelings with one another, and in doing so we have to speak, and to use general and abstract verbal formulas.”⁴⁷ That James understood this problem as it pertained to the translation of religious convictions for personal and institutional causes suggests yet another way in which James’s writings left their mark on the content as well as the form of modernist literature: James examines what could be called a modernist obsession with language’s deformations (think, for example, of T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock complaining, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!”⁴⁸), but he does so in *Varieties* primarily with reference to the theological import of such deformations, rather than the psychological, social, or literary kind (as famously explored in many modernist texts, such as Stein’s “Melanctha”).

For his part, Pratt dramatizes the problem of communication most explicitly in *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, a twelve-part narrative poem about the seventeenth-century martyrdom in New France of the French Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf. The speaker of Pratt’s epic affirms that for Brébeuf and the other priests attempting to convert the Huron people to Christianity, “the first equipment was the speech”;⁴⁹ that is, language is essential to the Jesuits’ civilizing mission.⁵⁰ When introducing the poem to one of his many audiences, Pratt confessed that he found it “rather amusing to find Brébeuf [*sic*] writing home to his general to get permission to alter the *nomine patris* formula. The Hurons could understand it only if it was stated – in the name of our Father, and of his Son, and of their Holy Ghost.”⁵¹ Like Paul, who is described in Pratt’s *Studies in Pauline Eschatology* as having “adopted the customs, modes of thought and phraseology native to the peoples amongst whom he labored,”⁵² Brébeuf adopts and adapts language to achieve a pragmatic, socio-religious end. He realizes that the intellect and speech are necessary to communicate one’s spiritual vision to others, to educate and to proselytize. Inhabiting Brébeuf’s consciousness, the speaker explains that “The efficacious rites /

Were hinged as much on mental apprehensions / As on the disposition of the heart.”⁵³ But as the above reference to “the *nomine patris* formula” illustrates, the translation of doctrine, or of any theological concept, involves transformations that foreground the slippery, polysemic nature of language.

In his final moments, Pratt’s Brébeuf, as he is being tortured by his would-be Iroquois converts, finds strength neither in institutional ceremonies and symbols nor in an entirely inward-looking personal religion, but in Christ, who mediates between and ultimately transcends the two:

They would gash and beribbon those muscles. Was
it the blood?
They would draw it fresh from its fountain. Was it
the heart?
They dug for it, fought for the scraps in the way of
the wolves.
But not in these was the valour or stamina lodged;
Nor in the symbol of Richelieu’s robes or the seals
Of Mazarin’s charters, nor in the stir of the *lilies*
Upon the Imperial folds; nor yet in the words
Loyola wrote on a table of lava-stone
In the cave of Manresa – not in these the source –
But in the sound of invisible trumpets blowing
Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered
By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill.⁵⁴

Like Christ, and like Ignatius of Loyola, who emerged from the mystic’s cave to share his *Spiritual Exercises* and found the Society of Jesus, Brébeuf also moves beyond a cloistered Christianity while avoiding the moral snares and material trappings of institutional religion. Pratt’s fascination with Brébeuf – whose source of strength lies neither in his heart (as the locus of “religious experience”) nor his head, but in what James would call Brébeuf’s “over-belief”⁵⁵ in a Christ whose transcendental nature is connoted here by “the sound of invisible trumpets” – may also

have been rooted in Pratt's knowledge of and respect for Wesley, who shared in common with Brébeuf an "incarnational spirituality" as well as "an ardent attachment to the person of Christ."⁵⁶ The conclusion of this poem may be read, then, as a fairly profound statement of faith on Pratt's part, even if it is couched within the narrative of Brébeuf's martyrdom, which is itself problematically emphasized at the expense of the underlying but largely unaddressed narrative of Canada's colonial past. In *Brébeuf*, as in the oft-anthologized poem "The Truant," the symbol of the cross functions as a metonymic stand-in for Christ. The constant presence of the cross in Pratt's poetry suggests that the cross is the crux upon which Pratt erects his life's philosophy and religion, and the lens through which his poetry's paradoxes begin to come into focus.

If in *Brébeuf* Pratt is concerned primarily with highlighting the Jesuits' faith and their attempts to share that faith with others, "The Truant" is concerned with articulating certain aspects of Pratt's own personal religion. As he told Pacey in 1954, "My own profession of faith was expressed in *The Truant*."⁵⁷ But what is the substance of this faith as it is manifested in Pratt's poem? While some early critics were "greatly puzzled" by this text⁵⁸ – in which the Truant defies the authority of a figure named "the great Panjandrum," who is introduced as a "forcibly acknowledged Lord"⁵⁹ – countless others have since sussed out its general message. Perhaps most concisely, it is, in Pratt's own words, "an indictment of Power by humanity."⁶⁰ It is an anti-materialist and anti-authoritarian anthem, an assertion of human agency in the form of a "rebel will."⁶¹ The poem unfolds in a succession of verbal exchanges: the Panjandrum and his toady, the Master of Revels, bring charges of rebelliousness and pride against the Truant, who responds with an impassioned and stubborn defense of free will and humankind's need to reject all outmoded, oppressive, or deterministic forms of social and intellectual authority. Yet truancy is advocated here not simply as an empowering, secular life philosophy, but as a kind of recalcitrant messianic attitude and

orientation at the heart of Pratt's anti-institutional personal religion.

Despite the thematic obsession with the subject of free will in "The Truant," only Clark's "E.J. Pratt and the Will to Believe" traces this obsession back to James. Obviously, the question of free will was a major preoccupation for James, who "interpreted his personal distress in the terms of one of the great intellectual debates of the later nineteenth century, the question of free will versus determinism."⁶² Still, the question of free will was for Pratt primarily a religious question, and the rebellious natures of some of his most treasured heroes – including Brébeuf – can be contained by, and understood within, a general Christian framework. To a certain extent, James and the liberal Protestant theologians of his time were all caught up in a subjective or experiential turn initiated much earlier by Friedrich Schleiermacher and others, but this turn did not spell the end of Christ-centred ethics or theologies.

For Pratt, the right to exercise one's free will is indistinguishable from the right to choose to align one's will with Christ's. Brébeuf, for example, aligns himself with Christianity and therefore falls on what Pratt ostensibly believed to have been the right side of history – with the result that "The Will / And the Cause in their triumph survived."⁶³ But a similar alignment occurs at the end of "The Truant," when the titular character bands together with his fellow human beings and rallies around "the Rood" and the sound of "bugles on the barricades,"⁶⁴ which are symbolic surrogates for Brébeuf's "two slabs of board, right-angled" and its "invisible trumpets."⁶⁵ As in "From Stone to Steel" and the late poem "Cycles," beleaguered humanity finds salvation only in what Pratt's friend and colleague, Northrop Frye, calls "the enduring, resisting, and suffering Christ of *Gethsemane* who is at the centre of Pratt's religion."⁶⁶

For James, the source of Christ's strength, or of the martyr's over-belief in moments of persecution, remains a mystery beyond the scope of reason. He writes, "If you ask *how* religion thus falls on the thorns and faces death, and in the very act annuls

annihilation, I cannot explain the matter, for it is religion's secret."⁶⁷ In "The Truant," however, the answer to this riddle is not a secret; it is provided in the Truant's final assertion of free will, in his oath sworn "by the Rood" against all that the Panjandrum represents.⁶⁸ Like Brébeuf's, the Truant's strength derives from Christ, whose symbol is the cross – though Sutherland would inexplicably remark of "The Truant" that it "concludes with a fervent expression of . . . secular faith."⁶⁹ If one considers a comment Pratt made in a letter to Dorothy Marie Doyle, it seems obvious that Sutherland was mistaken: without equivocation, Pratt asserts that "The *Truant* is a Christian who defies this giant of Might and is willing to prefer pain and death to submission. The poem ends on the Rood, the sublimest symbol of sacrificial love."⁷⁰ That Pratt would don the mask of the truant either in his own life⁷¹ or in his poetic "profession of faith" indicates the importance of free will in his personal religion. But as a student of theology, he would have known that James's valuation of free will was compatible with many Christian traditions, including what he labels "the milder Arminianism" of the Newfoundland Methodism of his childhood⁷² – that is, a tradition in which God's grace empowers human beings to exercise free will and choose salvation in spite of their inherently "fallen," sinful condition.

Finally, it must be noted that "The Truant" – which Pratt says he wrote "at the height of the Nazi regime"⁷³ – employs anti-authoritarian rhetoric not to impugn God, but to reject all human institutions that have become corrupted by what Pratt, explaining the poem to Pacey, refers to as "absolute power."⁷⁴ Only those systems that he rejected – such as materialism in science, fascism in politics, and fundamentalism in religion – are indicted in the poem itself. As Angela T. McAuliffe points out, though, the poem "has often been misinterpreted as an expression of either the poet's distorted notion of God or his complete rejection of the orthodox concept of the Deity."⁷⁵ To this she astutely adds that "[w]hat the Truant rejects is not God, but a god." She writes, "Pratt depicts, not his personal rejection of God, but humankind's general obligation to reject what Pratt knew God is not, and never could be – a source

of blind, impersonal power, either existing intrinsic to, or operating within, the confines of the universe.”⁷⁶ In a letter to Margaret Furness MacLeod, Pratt, offering his own explanation of the kind of “god” the Panjandrum represents, further cites “Hitler’s God or the Teutonic Creation.”⁷⁷ Whatever the case, those critics who argue that the poem eschews God in favor of the individual⁷⁸ are surely mistaken: while it celebrates the individual and free will, these are rooted in Christ and in all that he represents as a transcendental rather than merely human figure. To be sure, Pratt was well aware what happens when we sing ourselves too much: in “A Prayer-Medley,” a poem which prefigures “The Truant” in its praise of “unpredictable wills,” Pratt had already painted a satirical portrait of those who pray, “Lord, how wonderful is the power of man; how great his knowledge!”⁷⁹ Such narcissism belies the fact that, in reality, human beings “have found no remedy for the deep *malaise* in the communal heart of the world.”⁸⁰ By contrast, “The Truant” exhibits not just a stubborn faith in this flawed humanity, but a faith in God that actuates and enhances the former.

Pratt echoes James by focusing on Christ, Christian martyrs such as Brébeuf, and strong-willed figures such as the Truant, but ultimately strives to occupy the middle ground between the temple of institutional religion and the cave of personal religion, combining the strengths and rejecting the weaknesses of each. For Pratt, again, the point is that the “boundary” separating “the temple and the cave,” or institutional and personal religion, “lies tissue thin.”⁸¹ Personal religion is never entirely personal, yet it is also true that, for James as well as Pratt, adherence to an established religious tradition does not necessarily preclude the possibility of private religious experiences. In poems such as *Brébeuf* and “The Truant,” Pratt’s attempts to move beyond the mystic’s or ascetic’s cave, beyond sequestered forms of personal religion, remain well within the Jamesian tradition, as do his poetic and epistolary nods to Christ and those figures whose Christ-like sacrifices impact others and thus resonate throughout history. Given Pratt’s sustained poetic engagement with James’s pragmatic and religious philosophies, then, it seems unreasonable to dismiss Pratt – as

some critics have done – “for not adequately expressing his world.”⁸² Indeed, Pratt’s poetry squarely aligns his writing with that of James, whose finger remained firmly on the pulse of the psychological, philosophical, and religious debates of his time. But scholars both of James and of literary modernism would do well to move beyond a consideration of how such poetry captures its own intellectual or social world; we must also consider how, long after the publication of *Varieties*, modernist literature bolsters James’s prescient observations about the persistence of complex, contingent, and plural forms of personal religion. While phrases such as “the secular age”⁸³ may usefully summarize certain present-day political and socio-religious realities, the extent to which the process of secularization shaped literary modernism – in Canada and elsewhere – must be carefully weighed in light of James’s impact on modernists such as Pratt, and on the many varieties of religious experience and expression that continued to shape the cultural landscape of the twentieth century.

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NOTES

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1. James, *Varieties*, 32.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Zackariasson, "Justification and Critique," 32.
4. Djwa and Moyles, Introduction, xi.
5. One thinks immediately of James's one-time student, Gertrude Stein, as well as James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. Yet studies such as Frank Lentricchia's "On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism, 1890-1913: The Example of William James," Patricia Rae's *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens*, and David H. Evans's 2017 edited collection, *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism*, make clear James's literary-critical significance in other respects, and to other writers of the period.
6. There are exceptions, including Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Erik Tonning's *Modernism and Christianity*, and Jamie Callison's "Not for Me the Ultimate

Vision': T.S. Eliot's Ariel Poems and Religious Experience," but even in Topping and Callison, the focus is predominantly on James's views regarding mysticism or on contemporary debates about "religious experience," rather than on the notion of personal religions or on the tension between personal and institutional religion.

7. Mao and Walkowitz, "New Modernist Studies," 737.

8. Wilkinson, *Tightrope Walker*, 74.

9. Avison, "Margaret Avison," 3.

10. The secularization thesis has now been challenged by literary critics and sociologists alike. See, for example, Lewis, *Religious Experience*.

11. For further information about the sources and effects of the privatization of institutional religion in the West, see, for example: Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy* (regarding this shift in American religion); Bibby, *Fragmented Gods* (on similar shifts in Canada); and Stolz et al., *(Un)Believing in Modern Society* (for a recent European perspective).

12. Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 3.

13. Kamboureli, *On the Edge of Genre*, 30.

14. Pitt, *Truant*, 31.

15. E.J. Pratt to Sutherland, 25 Feb. 1952.

16. E.J. Pratt to Pacey, 11 Nov. 1954.

17. Notable exceptions include Sutherland, who first advanced the idea that James had influenced Pratt's poetry ("E.J. Pratt," 37-40), and Clark, whose "E.J. Pratt and the Will to Believe" is the first and only protracted study of its kind—and therefore likely one of the first extended reflections on James's influence on Canadian literature. Aside from Sutherland and Clark, only Pitt, MacDonald, and McAuliffe identify a connection between James and Pratt, though none of these latter critics develop that connection at any length.

18. James, *Varieties*, 290. More than a century later, Taves would re-hash this complaint in relation to ongoing debates about

religious experience, noting that “any experience for which anyone wants to make claims [. . .] has to be represented publicly” (86).

19. *Ibid.*, 405.

20. James, *Varieties*, 340.

21. Carrette, “Passionate Belief,” 89.

22. James, “Answers,” 1184, 1183.

23. I am alluding here to contemporary debates about religious experience, particularly the “constructivist” (as opposed to “perennialist” or “*sui generis*”) position represented by critics such as Wayne Proudfoot and Taves. As Stephen S. Bush explains, in the constructivist view, “religious experiences are determined by the experiencer’s culture” (101). For more general commentaries on social contexts or conditioning and James, see also Carrette, 81; Pawelski, 20-21; and Taylor, 23-24, 27-28.

24. James, *Varieties*, 165.

25. Pratt, “Demonology,” 22.

26. Pawelski, *Dynamic Individualism*, 21.

27. James, “Pragmatic Method,” 132.

28. Taylor, *Varieties*, 18.

29. Pratt, “Meaning,” 252-53.

30. *Ibid.*, 262.

31. James, *Varieties*, 341.

32. Pratt, “Memories,” 8.

33. Pratt, “Highlights,” 4.

34. James, *Varieties*, 290.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 290-91.

38. Pratt, “Inexpressible,” 369.

39. Pratt, “The Depression Ends,” 265.

40. Burns, “Man Was Made to Mourn,” 186.

41. Pratt, “The Highway,” 257.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Pratt, “From Stone to Steel,” 20.

44. See, for example, "Cycles," 196, and "The Truant," 131.

45. Pratt, "From Stone to Steel," 260-61.

46. Pacey, *Creative Writing*, 134.

47. James, *Varieties*, 342.

48. Eliot, "Prufrock," 6.

49. Pratt, *Brébeuf*, 53.

50. Although a discussion of race and Pratt's depiction of the Hurons and Iroquois in *Brébeuf* falls outside of the scope of this essay, it is an important issue that has been taken up by Smaro Kamboureli, Gwendolyn Guth, and many others. As well, Pratt himself provides relevant – if sometimes fawning and credulous – commentary on the Jesuits' activity in New France in texts such as "*Brébeuf and His Brethren*." Similarly, James tends to celebrate rather than censure the Jesuit's civilizing mission: in *Varieties*, he claims that the "early Jesuits, especially the missionaries among them, the Xaviers, Brébeufs, Jogues, were objective minds, and fought in their way for the world's welfare; so their lives to-day inspire us" (283).

51. Pratt, "*Brébeuf*," 125.

52. Pratt, *Studies*, 115.

53. Pratt, *Brébeuf*, 53.

54. Ibid.

55. In *Varieties*, James defines over-beliefs as "buildings-out performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint" (341).

56. McAuliffe, *Between the Temple and the Cave*, 187.

57. E.J. Pratt to Pacey, 29 Oct. 1954.

58. E.J. Pratt to A.J.M. Smith, 28 Jan. 1944.

59. Pratt, "The Truant," 125.

60. E.J. Pratt to Smith, 28 Jan. 1944.

61. Pratt, "The Truant," 128.

62. Evans, "Chains," 173.

63. Pratt, *Brébeuf*, 109.

64. Pratt, "The Truant," 131.

65. Pratt, *Brébeuf*, 108.
66. Frye, "Silence," 393.
67. James, *Varieties*, 48.
68. Pratt, "The Truant," 131.
69. Sutherland, *Poetry*, 20.
70. Quoted in McAuliffe, *Between the Temple and the Cave*, 180.
71. In *The Truant Years*, Pitt refers on multiple occasions to Pratt's truancy as a "mask" he used to fit in (19ff.), as part of a "need to compensate" (46), or as a "restless, even restive, truant spirit which seems to have overtaken him" (50).
72. E.J. Pratt to Sutherland, 21 May 1954.
73. E.J. Pratt to Pacey, 29 Oct. 1954.
74. *Ibid.*
75. McAuliffe, *Between the Temple and the Cave*, 62.
76. *Ibid.*, 64.
77. E.J. Pratt to Margaret Furness MacLeod, 25 Jan. 1944.
78. For proponents of this argument in its various forms, see, for example, Clark, 115; Horwood, 203; and Sharman, 31-32.
79. Pratt, "Prayer-Medley," 295, 293.
80. *Ibid.*, 297.
81. Pratt, "From Stone to Steel," 261.
82. Djwa, "Pratt's Modernism," 68.
83. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 89.