

## *Introduction*

### *Two rival versions of pragmatism*

Against rationalism as a pretension and a method, pragmatism is fully armed and militant. But at the outset, at least, it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. As the young Italian pragmatist Papini has well said, it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body's properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.

William James, *Pragmatism* (1907)

Pragmatism, as Richard Rorty once observed, is “a vague, ambiguous, and overworked word.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as the history of pragmatism shows – and as the above quote by William James attests – the word does not so much refer to a single view as it does to a family of related views that can differ remarkably in their philosophical aims and assumptions.<sup>2</sup> This philosophical diversity is no less apparent in the case of pragmatist views on religion, which are the special subject of this book. In order to focus my efforts, I have chosen to frame this study around two fundamentally different stances that pragmatists have taken toward the matter of religious commitment: an atheist stance that weds pragmatism to naturalism and a religious stance that resolutely rejects any such marriage. “Naturalism,” of course,

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> James himself believed that the pragmatists of his day shared a common commitment to what he termed *the pragmatic method*, which is the “corridor” that he alludes to in the passage just quoted. It is doubtful, however, that all contemporary pragmatists share a common philosophical methodology. Indeed, James’s view was controversial even then, as his old friend Charles Sanders Peirce – the originator of pragmatism – was deeply critical of his conception and application of the pragmatic method.

is another vague, ambiguous, and overworked word. As I will use it, naturalism is the view that nothing of a supernatural kind exists: supernatural beings such as God, supernatural realities or places such as heaven, supernatural entities or properties of entities such as souls, and so on. Naturalism in this sense means *ontological naturalism*, then, or an anti-supernaturalist view about the nature of reality. When we frame the views of pragmatists in terms of their acceptance or rejection of naturalism, we find that the major “classical” pragmatists – Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey – held opposing views, with Peirce and James adopting an anti-naturalist stance (despite their complex and occasionally inconsistent views about *methodological naturalism*, or naturalism for the purposes of inquiry, which I discuss in Chapters 1, 2, and 3) and Dewey adopting a resolutely naturalistic stance. It is widely acknowledged that there are deep and important differences between Peirce’s version of pragmatism and those of James and Dewey, and many specialists in American philosophy tend to see Dewey’s pragmatism as largely continuous with (and perhaps as a more refined version of) James’s pragmatism. But matters look quite different on the naturalism versus anti-naturalism issue, and here Dewey’s views represent a substantial break with those of his predecessors.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing this disagreement within the pragmatist tradition has a number of important consequences, but one of the most salient of these is that it challenges the widely held view among contemporary philosophers (including many contemporary pragmatists) that pragmatism somehow entails a commitment to naturalism and, accordingly, that pragmatism is variously unfriendly to or incompatible with traditional forms of religious commitment.

These different stances toward naturalism in the pragmatist tradition are not of merely historical significance, however, for they continue to find expression in various contemporary forms of pragmatism today. Of the two, the naturalistic stance has arguably been the most dominant and influential since at least the 1920s, when Dewey’s naturalistic version of pragmatism was at the height of its influence.<sup>4</sup> And most of the leading pragmatists after

<sup>3</sup> In claiming this, I do not mean to suggest that Peirce and James held the same or even generally similar religious views (they did not) or that Peirce’s and James’s philosophical views were in general opposed to Dewey’s (which misleadingly supposes that Peirce and James held largely the same philosophical views). Nor do I mean to deny that there are important similarities between James’s and Dewey’s philosophical views on other matters, such as their conceptions of pragmatism, the proper aims of philosophy, and the nature of concepts, or that those views do not differ significantly from Peirce’s.

<sup>4</sup> For a frank and revealing examination of how Dewey appropriated and subsequently naturalized various aspects of James’s philosophy, see Richard M. Gale, “John Dewey’s Naturalization of William James,” in Ruth Anna Putnam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 49–68.

*Introduction*

3

Dewey have tended to be naturalists in the sense discussed above, including such well-known proponents of pragmatism as Sidney Hook and Richard Rorty. What I hope to show in this book is that the anti-naturalist stance remains a viable option and that the Peircean and Jamesean strands of the pragmatist tradition can be a valuable philosophical resource for those who hold traditional, supernatural religious commitments. At the same time, I also hope to show that it is not pragmatism itself that entails naturalism but rather the conjunction of pragmatism with naturalism. That atheist pragmatists such as Dewey, Hook, Rorty, and, more recently, Philip Kitcher have linked their pragmatism to their disbelief in the supernatural is hardly surprising but by itself should not be taken as evidence of any supposedly necessary connection between these philosophical views.

There is now a fairly substantial body of literature on the religious views of individual pragmatists such as Peirce and James, yet surprisingly little work has been done on what might be called “pragmatist philosophy of religion,” understood as the attempt to provide a broader view and assessment of how pragmatists have thought about and continue to think about such matters as religious belief, experience, and practice.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, one of my other aims in writing this book has been to make a small contribution to this still relatively undeveloped field of study. I have not aimed to offer a comprehensive survey of what pragmatists have said on issues in the philosophy of religion, however, and my choice of particular figures and topics reflects not only my own philosophical interests, but also my judgment of which ideas, positions, and arguments are most relevant for contemporary discussions in this field. Much of my focus is weighted toward the views of the classical pragmatists, not only because these are especially rich and historically important, but also because they have tended to shape the views of later pragmatists in fairly extensive ways. I have already discussed certain aspects of James’s philosophy of religion at length in other writings, including his will-to-believe doctrine and his views on the relationship between religion and morality and, accordingly, do not treat those topics here.<sup>6</sup> On account of James’s stature in the fields of philosophy of religion and the psychology of religion, though, I have devoted two chapters to his views on religion. I have also devoted a chapter each to Peirce and Dewey, in each case focusing on a particular text

<sup>5</sup> Two notable works on pragmatist philosophy of religion are Sami Pihlström’s recent book, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), and Chapter 6 of John E. Smith’s *Purpose and Thought: The Meaning of Pragmatism* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1978).

<sup>6</sup> See especially my *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

that I take to be of considerable philosophical importance and which also bears directly on the current state of debate in the philosophy of religion. In Peirce's case this is his famous essay, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (1908), and in Dewey's it is his most comprehensive, considered, and influential statement of his views on religion, *A Common Faith* (1934).

My decision about which contemporary pragmatists to discuss was guided mainly by two criteria: my interest in tracing the influence of Dewey's account of religion on later pragmatists who are also accomplished and influential philosophers in their own right and my desire to discuss the views of pragmatist philosophers who have gained (or soon will gain) notoriety for their views on religion. I chose Richard Rorty and Philip Kitcher and elected not to discuss such figures as Sidney Hook, Hilary Putnam, Cornel West, or Jeffrey Stout because they did not seem to me to satisfy both of these criteria.<sup>7</sup> Others might well have made different choices, and I would be delighted if my omissions in this book were to prompt them to explore the religious views of these and other pragmatists in more detail.

Whereas the first five chapters are largely historical and interpretative in nature, the last two are primarily constructive and aim, respectively, to demonstrate the compatibility of pragmatism with supposedly "anti-pragmatist" metaphysical views such as theism and metaphysical realism and to show the value of pragmatism as a resource for addressing a number of contemporary issues in the philosophy of religion. Much of the support for these later chapters comes in the earlier ones, however, and in many respects the constructive chapters represent extensions of certain lines of argument that I develop in my readings of James, Peirce, and Dewey. Taken together, the last two chapters represent an attempt to show not only that pragmatism can support traditional forms of religious commitment but also

<sup>7</sup> A bit more explanation is perhaps in order. While Hook was a well-known proponent of a naturalistic version of pragmatism, he did not particularly approve of Dewey's aim to "reconstruct" religious faith along secular and moral democratic lines espoused a militant version of atheism that Dewey rejected. Putnam, in turn, has only recently begun to address the topic of religion in his writings, and works such as *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein* (Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008) are mostly exegetical in nature and barely touch upon his personal religious standpoint, which he unhelpfully describes as "somewhere between John Dewey in *A Common Faith* and Martin Buber" (p. 100). (This is a bit like saying that one lives somewhere between Chicago and Berlin.) West describes himself as "a Chekhovian Christian with deep democratic commitments," but his work on religious topics is largely written for a non-philosophical audience. And while Stout has written extensively on pragmatism and religion, his work is not widely read outside the discipline of religious studies and bears more on issues in ethics and political philosophy than in the philosophy of religion proper.

### Introduction

5

that a pluralistic and anti-naturalist version of pragmatism has a number of distinctive features that many theologians and religiously committed philosophers might find attractive.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine aspects of James's religious thought that are of particular relevance for contemporary work in the philosophy of religion and the scientific study of religion. Chapter 1 analyzes James's theory of religion and methodological approach to the study of religion in his major work on the subject, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and aims to clarify some of the misunderstandings surrounding these aspects of his account of religion. At the same time, it also aims to show that James's account has a number of attractive and defensible features, including its rejection of essentialist and *sui generis* views of religion, its principled anti-reductionism, and its attention to the psychological complexity and highly personal nature of religious belief, experience, and practice. Chapter 2, in turn, examines James's various objections to natural theology and argues that while James was indeed critical of the rationalist or intellectualist aims of *classical natural theology*, as I will call it, he did not have a principled objection to attempts to provide rational support or justification for belief in God or other supernatural religious beliefs. It shows how James's objections do not clearly apply to many contemporary approaches to natural theology and how his anti-rationalist or anti-intellectualist views on such topics as natural theology and the epistemology of religious and mystical experience (which I also consider here) might contribute to contemporary work on religious epistemology, while also being corrected or improved upon in certain respects through that encounter.

Chapter 3 explores Peirce's contributions to natural theology by re-examining his "neglected argument" for the existence of God. In addition to offering an interpretation and critical assessment of that argument, it also shows how it relates to a number of contemporary views in the philosophy of religion and how it furthermore supports – and indeed entails – a distinctive version of the teleological argument, one that in my view is not only credible but also highly insightful.

Chapter 4 critically examines Dewey's account of religion in *A Common Faith*, which in addition to being Dewey's most comprehensive and considered statement of his views on religion has also been the inspiration for a number of later pragmatist accounts of religion. It highlights one of the most distinctive features of Dewey's account – its combination of naturalism, secularism, and accommodationism or the accommodation of religious faith to the epistemic norms and ethical values and ideals of a modern democratic and scientific society – and raises objections to some

of its specific claims and assumptions. Additionally, it argues that Dewey's account of religion fails on two basic counts: first, it assumes but fails to show that theism and other supernatural religious views are not rationally justified, and thus does not provide or constitute a defeater for those views, and, second, it has failed, and in all likelihood will continue to fail, in its aim of convincing traditional religious believers to reject their supernatural religious beliefs, practices, and institutions and embrace Dewey's secular and naturalistic "common faith."

Chapter 5 looks beyond the views of the classical pragmatists and examines the views of two contemporary pragmatists, Richard Rorty and Philip Kitcher, who have continued to defend Dewey's account of religion while also modifying it in a number of interesting respects. It shows that some of the failings of Dewey's account also apply to theirs and discusses some of the ways in which they depart from, and in some cases improve upon, Dewey's views.

Chapter 6 explores how both pragmatism and theism can support a commitment to a weak or modest version of metaphysical realism and argues that the widespread view that pragmatism is incompatible with any version of metaphysical realism is mistaken. It shows that this issue has a direct bearing on a number of issues in the philosophy of religion, including the compatibility of pragmatism with traditional forms of theism, which entail a belief in the mind-independent reality of God.

Finally, Chapter 7 sketches the outlines of a contemporary pragmatist defense of the legitimacy of religious faith or, more specifically, of supernatural religious beliefs and practices. Building upon certain lines of argument from the first five chapters, it considers the relationship between pragmatism and naturalism and argues not only that there is no essential connection between these philosophical views but also that there are compelling pragmatic reasons for rejecting naturalism, understood as the denial of the existence of supernatural beings or realities. It also discusses evidentialist challenges to religious belief and the status of theistic arguments, and defends pragmatist views on each of these issues that are friendly to traditional forms of religious faith. Much more could be said on each of these topics than I say here, and thus this concluding chapter should be understood as largely programmatic in nature, indicating and touching upon further work that remains to be done.

It is my hope that this book will help to stimulate new interest in pragmatist views in the philosophy of religion, not only among specialists in pragmatism, who seldom work in this area of philosophy and more often than not do not engage seriously with the work of "mainstream"

*Introduction*

7

philosophers of religion, but also among specialists in philosophy of religion, who seldom engage in any serious way with pragmatism. If it also sheds new light on certain features of the pragmatist tradition and helps us to better appreciate its inherent diversity, I will judge it to have been at least a partial success.

## CHAPTER I

*Reconsidering James's account of religion*

William James is widely and appropriately regarded as a seminal figure in the academic study of religion, and his most extensive work on the subject, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (hereafter, *Varieties*), is almost universally regarded as one of the canonical works in the field.<sup>1</sup> In the words of the eminent historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, *Varieties* is “the only book by an American-born author that has attained the status of a classic in the study of religion.”<sup>2</sup> At a time when the scientific study of religion was still in its infancy, James developed an empirical and inductive approach to religion which drew upon the methods of science and the best psychology of his day but which also eschewed any commitment to materialism, scientific positivism, or the assumption that the study of religion should be (or could be) value-free. Prioritizing the detailed description and interpretation of personal religious experiences and attitudes over the attempt to explain them, and the pragmatic evaluation of a wide range of religious phenomena (including religious experiences, attitudes, character-types, practices, and beliefs) over questions concerning their causal origins, James sought to use science in the service of religious interests but in a way that was not beholden to any particular religious tradition or community. His approach to religion was and remains a highly personal and distinctive one: it reflects the idiosyncratic genius of a man who straddled two academic disciplines and sought to reconcile various religious ways of viewing the world with a scientific view of knowledge.

And yet despite James's stature – and perhaps partly because of it – his views on the nature of religion and his approach to studying it have come

<sup>1</sup> *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* [1902] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). Unless otherwise noted, all references to James's works are to *The Works of William James*, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975–88). Following the convention established in the Harvard edition of James's works, I will abbreviate *Varieties* parenthetically as “VRE.”

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 161.

*Reconsidering James's account of religion*

9

under heavy criticism by many contemporary scholars of religion. Indeed, his views are frequently held up today as examples of how *not* to think about religion, as precisely the sort of views that need to be rejected if progress toward a more accurate and scientific understanding of religion is to be achieved. While I am sympathetic to some of these criticisms, I also think that there is much of value in James's theory of and approach to the study of religion (hereafter, James's account of religion) and that some of the criticisms that have been levied against his views are either mistaken in their assumptions or too hastily drawn.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, what I want to do in this chapter is to reconsider James's account of religion, with a particular focus on *Varieties* and with the aim of highlighting and defending what I take to be some of the more valuable but seldom appreciated aspects of that classic work. In the process, I also hope to show that some of the more widespread criticisms of his account of religion do not constitute defeaters to his views, either because they are based on misreadings or oversimplifications of his views or because they are insufficiently supported. In any case, my larger aim will be to shed new light on some neglected or poorly understood features of James's views on religion.<sup>4</sup>

Before discussing what I take to be some of the distinctive merits of James's account of religion, however, I should begin by making clear what I take to be some of the major shortcomings of his account.

First, I think that one of the most frequently encountered criticisms of his account of religion, that it has a pronounced Protestant bias, is

<sup>3</sup> It is not widely acknowledged that James developed a theory of religion, even among specialists on James. Notable exceptions to this rule include John E. Smith, Henry S. Levinson, Eugene Taylor, and Ann Taves. In what follows I will characterize James's theory as a *pragmatic-psychological theory of religion*: pragmatic in terms of its therapeutic view of the primary function of religion and psychological insofar as it assumes that religion has its basis in human psychology. Since James's pragmatic-psychological theory of religion and his psychological method of studying religion are closely interrelated matters, and since the phrase "James's theory of and approach to the study of religion" is a bit cumbersome, I will frequently refer to both collectively as James's account of religion.

<sup>4</sup> The literature dealing with James's religious views is simply too extensive to list here. Some of the most important studies that examine James's account religion include Henry S. Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Chapter 7 of Ann Taves's *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 261–307, especially pp. 269–91. For two wide-ranging collections of recent essays on *Varieties*, see Wayne Proudfoot (ed.), *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *William James and The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Centenary Celebration* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).

difficult to dispute.<sup>5</sup> Although James was not a Christian in any traditional sense, much less a Protestant in any traditional sense, his thinking about religion was shaped in important ways by the predominantly Protestant culture and society of his time. This bias manifests in a number of different ways, including James's generally dim view of Catholicism, the disproportionately large number of Protestant sources that he examines, the central roles that personal religious experience and conversion play in his account of religion, and his view that one of the universal and basic features of religion is the feeling of having been saved by a higher power.<sup>6</sup> While this is indeed a shortcoming of his account of religion, it is not clear to me that stronger versions of this criticism are well founded – for example, that this fact alone somehow invalidates James's conclusions or that Protestant-derived categories such as “religious experience” cannot be accurately or usefully applied to the study of non-Protestant religions or religious phenomena.

Second, I am sympathetic to a general line of criticism which holds that there are problems facing James's views on the role of interpretation and explanation in religious and mystical experience.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary scholars of religion are probably most familiar with Wayne Proudfoot's version of this critique, but this line of criticism stretches back to contemporaries of James's such as the psychologist George A. Coe and includes a number of prominent interpreters of James such as Richard Gale. While James thought that religious and mystical experiences are subject to interpretation and explanation, whether by the individuals who have them or by others (e.g., other members of the individual's religious community, scientists, etc.), he also thought that (1) interpretations and explanations of such

<sup>5</sup> For several representative versions of this criticism, see Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 22–3; David A. Hollinger, “‘Damned for God's Glory’: William James and the Scientific Vindication of Protestant Culture,” in Proudfoot, *Science of Religions*, pp. 9–30; and Wayne Proudfoot, “Pragmatism and ‘an Unseen Order’ in *Varieties*,” in Proudfoot, *Science of Religions*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> In support of this last claim, see especially VRE 46–9 and 399–401.

<sup>7</sup> These criticisms vary considerably in strength. At one end of the spectrum, for example, there is John E. Smith's friendly complaint that James failed “to develop a consistent theory of the nature and role of concepts” and that in his more unguarded moments he risks committing himself to a “second-hand” view of concepts that “if pushed consistently, would militate against James's own analyses in *Varieties* itself.” See Smith's Introduction to the Harvard edition of *Varieties*, op. cit., xxviii. At the other end of the spectrum there are stronger and potentially more damaging critiques, such as Wayne Proudfoot's claim that James's account of religious experience in *Varieties* relies upon “an erroneous theory of perception” (p. 164) and his argument that the experiences that James describes as direct sensations of an unseen order instead have the epistemic status of hypotheses that necessarily involve acts of interpretation and explanation. See Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1985), especially pp. 156–79.