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The Polytheism of William James

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There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

—*Hamlet*

WILLIAM JAMES REPORTS that on a hike in the Adirondacks “it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life,” suggesting that this would give “quite a hitch ahead” to his Gifford Lectures, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Henry James, *Letters* 2: 78–79). This proved true since there the nature gods and moral gods meet again, but this time disputatiously as a conflict between polytheism and monotheism, which is analogous to a tension between pluralism and monism.

Now I had long thought that polytheism was an atavistic belief belonging to the primitive and cruder stages in the evolution of religion and was thus properly regarded as pagan or heathen. I had always associated it with the prerational mythologies of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Scandinavians. So I was surprised to learn from *Varieties* of James’s sympathy with and entertainment of polytheism, which makes him an exceptional figure in the history of philosophy. According to Amos Funkenstein, “Except for William James (and perhaps Nietzsche), no other modern Western philosopher that I know of dared to defend a patently polytheistic creed” (99). Here I want to take seriously what James says about it.

James’s pluralism is well known since it is made explicit throughout his writings. As might be expected, his polytheism, which is cognate with his pluralism, seems not so well known. There appear to be but two references to James’s polytheism in the secondary literature: one in the editor’s introduction to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the third volume of the Harvard edition of James’s complete works, and the other in Jacques Barzun’s *A Stroll with William James*. Interestingly, Barzun himself, a fellow traveler with James, confesses to being “naturally polytheistic” (4). Moreover, there is just one

article in the secondary literature on James that addresses his polytheism, namely, Funkensteen's "The Polytheism of William James."¹

In this paper I show how his wrestling with the problem of evil and his broad survey of the varieties of religious experience led James both to his conception of a finite God and to his pluralism and how both these things opened the way to his seriously entertaining polytheism as a plausible hypothesis. I go on to discuss the nature of James's polytheism and its relation to his pluralism. I then indicate how James's pluralism (and polytheism) is apparently at odds with his conceiving and extolling mystical experience as the very paradigm of religious experience and the essence of personal religion, for which he is an unapologetic apologist. As a coda to my paper, I discuss the polytheism of Benjamin Franklin, a forerunner of James in this regard. I close with mentioning two contemporary polytheists and briefly reviewing the merits of polytheism.

I shall begin with two reasons James came to adopt metaphysical pluralism and so came to entertain the possibility of polytheism. One is the old chestnut, the perennial problem of evil, of which pluralism is a solution. The other reason is the varieties of religious experience themselves, which provide evidence for the manifoldness of the divine milieu which constitutes their object. But I turn now to the conundrum of evil.

For all his own buoyant optimism, James faces manfully the terrible fact of evil. "The evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones," he owns (*Varieties* 184). If so, then according to metaphysical monism these evil facts are also ineradicable parts of nature because they are integral to it since without them the world system would cease to be what it is. For monism, according to James, "the world appears as one flawless unit of fact. Such a unit is an *Individual*, and in it the worst parts must be as essential as the best, must be as necessary to make the individual what he is; since if any part whatever in an individual were to vanish or alter, it would no longer be *that* individual at all" (*Varieties* 149). Monism, then, in James's words, "creates a speculative puzzle, the so-called mystery of evil and of error" (James, *Universe* 686). This raises what I shall call, for want of a better term, the "moral" problem of evil in distinction from the theological problem. Within such a monistic worldview there is no room for free will, for real progress in eliminating evil, and for improvement of the human condition. It is as though we were trapped in the claustrophobic world of a Greek tragedy whose protagonists are condemned from the start to meet their appointed fates. Monism is a metaphysics set in an unrelentingly minor key.

The only escape from such a monistic worldview within which evil remains forever intact, together with the pessimism and hopelessness attendant upon it, is, as James says,

to cut loose from the monistic assumption altogether and to allow the world to have existed from its origin in pluralistic form, as an aggregate or collection of higher and lower things and principles, rather than an absolute unitary fact. For then evil would not need to be essential; it might be, and may always have been, an independent portion that had no rational or absolute right to live with the rest, and which we might conceivably hope to see got rid of at last. (*Varieties* 149)

Pluralism does not so much solve the moral problem of evil as dissolve it. Thus, unlike the case of a monistic metaphysics, “in any pluralistic metaphysics, the problems that evil presents are practical, not speculative. Not why evil should exist at all, but how we can lessen the actual amount of it, is the sole question we need there consider” (James, *Universe* 686). A pluralistic ontology, according to which evil, though tenacious, is in principle a detachable element that might eventually be ejected from the world, allows for free will, meliorism, and optimism—all key elements of James’s creed.

As well as taking a metaphysical form, monism takes a theological form as monotheism. In a study of William James, Edward Carter Moore succinctly characterizes the theological form of monism as follows:

God, being omniscient, knew everything, therefore everything was “one,” was related at a minimum, by being known by one knower, God. God not only knew everything present, but he knew the past and the future as well. He had created everything, therefore it was one in having been created by him. He had created it for a purpose of his, and it was therefore one through a unity of purpose. The entire scheme of things was connected through God, the ultimate principle and ground of all things. (137–138)

However, such a monistic scheme raises the specter of the theological problem of evil, a specter that haunted James’s theologian father, Henry James Sr., no less than William James himself. His father formulated the problem this way: “What people in general wish to know, is, not how God may justly condemn evil, but how the opportunity either for condemning or pardoning it arises under his perfect administration” (Henry James [Sr.], *Evil* 51).² The problem of evil is especially acute for Calvinistic monotheism, against which Henry Sr. rebelled, because in uncompromisingly affirming the absolute sovereignty of God it thereby makes God himself the ultimate source of all evil in the world, moral as well as natural. As William says, “But on the

monistic or pantheistic view, evil, like everything else, must have its foundation in God; and the difficulty is to see how this can possibly be the case if God be absolutely good" (*Varieties* 149).³

Now just as pluralism is James's solution to the moral problem of evil bedeviling monism, so too the idea of a finite god, one who is limited in his knowledge and power (though perhaps unlimited in his attributes of benevolence and justice), is James's solution to the theological problem of evil. God would prevent evil if he could, but he cannot. James suggests the idea of a god who is not all-powerful in a letter to Glendower Evans: "Evil is evil and pain is pain; and in bearing them valiantly I think the only thing we can do is to believe that the good power of the world does not appoint them of its own free will, but works under some dark and inscrutable limitations, and that we by our patience and good will, can somehow strengthen his hands" (James, *Atlantic* 375).⁴ Given the enormity of human (and animal, for that matter) suffering, James believes that God's goodness can be salvaged only if he is conceived of as limited in his natural powers. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James boldly confesses, "I believe that the only God worthy of the name *must* be finite" (687).

According to James, a finite god is suggested not only by the fact of evil in the world but also by the testimonies of those who undergo religious experiences. James notes they all testify that during those experiences they feel themselves connected to an "ideal power" or, more conventionally, God. However, though infinitude is typically attributed to this power or God, the experiences themselves do not warrant that attribution. All that they warrant is the belief that this being is larger than the person who experiences it. "I feel bound to say," admits James, "that religious experience, as we have studied it, cannot be cited as unequivocally supporting the infinitist belief. The only thing that it unequivocally testifies to is that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find out greatest peace" (*Varieties* 570).

Furthermore, for James, the very possibility of human communion with the divine presupposes a finite God. Communion means reciprocation; it means that God can influence us and we him. But an utterly transcendent God, classically conceived of as omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, unchangeable, and self-sufficient, would be too remote and "foreign" for us to have any intimate dealings with. On the other hand, a finite deity "having an environment, being in time, and working out a history just like ourselves, he [God] escapes from the foreignness from all that is human, of the static timeless perfect absolute" (James, *Universe* 775). An absolute God, moreover,

would certainly have no need for us, and since he authors or permits all the evil in a rigidly deterministic world, then what point is there in our trying to influence him by asking for relief from our suffering or cooperation with us in our projects? "We see indeed that certain evils minister to ulterior goods," remarks James in a stinging attack on a facile Leibnizian theodicy,

We can vaguely generalize this into the doctrine that all the evil in the universe is but instrumental to its greater perfection. But the scale of the evil actually in sight defies all human tolerance; . . . A God who can relish such superfluities of horror is no god for human beings *to appeal to*. His animal spirits are too high. In other words the "Absolute" with his one purpose, is not the man-like God of common people. (*Pragmatism* 97–98; italics mine)

James's replacement of an all-powerful God with a less powerful god destroys the divine hegemony. There is no longer just one omnipotent God displacing all others. The door is now open to the possibility of there being many finite gods. James speculates further as to the plurality of divine beings, however conceived. This larger power, the object of religious experience, "need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized in it all. Thus would a sort of polytheism return upon us" (*Varieties* 570).

In the "Postscript" to *Varieties*, the source of this quotation, James refers the reader to his Ingersoll Lecture, "Human Immortality," of 1899 where he further describes the polytheism he has in mind. There he supposes "that the whole universe of material things" might be "a mere surface-veil of phenomena, hiding and keeping back the world of genuine realities" (James, "Immortality" 15). Our brains belong to the phenomenal world, but the genuine realities in back of it are mental or spiritual. James further supposes that our individual brains might not produce consciousness but instead transmit it from a vast sea of consciousness that lies beyond the physical world. Suppose, says James,

that *our brains* are such thin and half-transparent places in the veil [such that] the genuine matter of reality, the life of souls as it is in its fullness, will break through our several brains into this world in all sorts of restricted forms, and with all the imperfections and queernesses that characterize our finite individualities here below. . . . And when

finally a brain stops acting altogether, or decays, that special stream of consciousness which it subserved will vanish entirely from this natural world. But the sphere of being that supplied the consciousness would still be intact; and in that more real world with which, even whilst here, it was continuous, the consciousness might, in ways unknown to us, continue still. ("Immortality" 16–18)

Thus our "larger and more godlike self," in being transmitted by the brain, is somehow "mutilated" and so becomes our "present self"—much as Plato's soul suffers amnesia by being incarnated in a human body; but at death our earthly self is freed from the mutilating brain so as to become its true self again. There is also a suggestion here, interestingly, of Plato's doctrine of the pre-existence of souls; for James, it seems, the soul is immortal prenatally as well as posthumously. According to James's conception of polytheism, then, the gods are nothing other than our more capacious and perfected selves. As Funkenstein puts it, for James a god is "an extension, or projection, of the self; since there are many selves, it befits them to have many deities adjusted to their various tempers" (104–05).⁵

Religious experience, then, bears witness to a variegated divine milieu made up of a plurality of finite gods, to polytheism—or, to put it metaphysically, to a pluralistic ontology. "The experiences which we have been studying during this hour," says James, "plainly show the universe to be a more many-sided affair than any sect, even the scientific sect, allows for" (*Varieties* 137). James further argues that the *varieties* of religious experience necessitate and justify religious pluralism, the coexistence and flourishing of a multiplicity of faiths. Toward the opening of his *Varieties*, James states that "the very fact that they [religions] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name" (*Varieties* 31). Moreover, the different types of human personality demands, no less, religious pluralism. Because each of us is subtly different in so many ways with respect to our psychology and circumstances, it would be absurd to think that there is just one kind of religion suitable for all—in the case of religion, one size most definitely does not fit all. For example, says James, "If we are peevish and jealous, destruction of the self must be an element of our religion; why need it be one if we are good and sympathetic from the outset? If we are sick souls, we require a religion of deliverance; but why think so much of deliverance, if we are healthy-minded? . . . for each man to stay in his own experience, whate'er it be, is surely best" (*Varieties* 531). Moreover, a variegated divine milieu requires different personalities to do it justice:

If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer. The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature's total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely. (*Varieties* 530)

I want now to address the following three questions: (1) What is the relation between James's pluralism, a metaphysical theory, and his polytheism, a theological doctrine? (2) Does James's commitment to pluralism conflict with his esteem and espousal of mysticism as the very paradigm and purest expression of religion? (3) How seriously, in fact, did James himself take polytheism?

It is worth noting that James distinguishes between a metaphysical "pluralism of principles" and a theistic pluralism of divine persons (polytheism).⁶ He makes this distinction in *Varieties* where he describes "popular or practical theism" as ever having been "more or less frankly pluralistic, not to say polytheistic, and shown itself perfectly well satisfied with a universe composed of many original principles, provided we be only allowed to believe that the divine principle remains supreme, and that the others are subordinate." And in the view of this nonpolytheistic pluralism, evil consists of those "elements of the universe which may make no rational whole in conjunction with the other elements, and which, from the point of view of any system which those other elements make up, can only be considered so much irrelevance and accident—so much 'dirt,' as it were, and matter out of place" (*Varieties* 148–49, 150). In contrast to this pluralism of principles is a pluralism of divine persons (polytheism) which is articulated in his speculation that "the universe might conceivably be a collection of [godlike] selves." Furthermore, Funkenstein makes the point that James's polytheism is independent of his metaphysical pluralism insofar as his "polytheistic stand in general . . . does not follow from his pluralistic position in other domains" (105).

Yet on occasion James blurs the distinction between pluralism and polytheism, as in the paragraph in *Varieties* where he discusses polytheism. He begins by saying, "Upholders of the monistic view will say to such a *polytheism* (which, by the way, has always been the real religion of common people, and is so still to-day)," but toward the end he remarks "that a final philosophy of religion will have to consider the *pluralistic* hypothesis more seriously than it has hitherto been willing to consider it" (*Varieties* 571, 572; italics mine). Moreover, he seems here to override the distinction between pluralism and polytheism

implicit in the earlier passage where he speaks of “popular or practical theism” as being “more or less frankly pluralistic, *not to say polytheistic*.” In the earlier passage, he distinguishes the pluralism of “popular or practical theism” from polytheism, yet in the later one he seems to conflate them when he states that polytheism (note: not pluralism) “has always been the real religion of common people.” What is “the real religion of the common people” if not “popular or practical theism” (*Varieties* 148, italics mine)? It should also be noted that James’s conflation of pluralism with polytheism challenges Funkensteen’s caveat that the two are logically distinct; this may be so, but in James’s mind they are associated. I think it safe to say that polytheism is the theistic form of pluralism as monotheism is the theistic form of monism, though pluralism does not have to take this form.

More critically, though, James’s espousal of pluralism seems to be in tension, if not in conflict, with his sympathy for and high evaluation of mystical states of consciousness and his placing them at the very heart of religious experience. “One may say truly,” affirms James in *Varieties*, “that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.” He goes on, “They tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest. They offer us *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset. The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of life.” So far so good. However, James then notes that mystical states have a “distinct theoretic drift” toward, or carry the metaphysical implication of, monism—the very position he opposes. Thus, “This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness” (*Varieties* 413, 467, 457). Elsewhere, in *Pragmatism*, he supposes “that the authority which absolute monism undoubtedly possesses, . . . draws its strength far less from intellectual than from mystical grounds. To interpret absolute monism worthily, be a mystic. Mystical states of mind in every degree are shown by history, usually tho [*sic*] not always, to make for the monistic view” (*Pragmatism* 102).

James, though, goes some way in reconciling his commitment to pluralism with his enthusiasm for mysticism—its metaphysical tendency toward monism notwithstanding—by qualifying his opinion of mysticism. First, he concedes that mystical insights into the nature of things, such as the monistic one that sees the world as fundamentally a unity, are authoritative only for the mystics themselves who have been privy to them: “Mystics have no right

to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto. The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish a presumption" (*Varieties* 462). Second, James does allow that not all forms of mysticism tend toward monism. One such example is the mystical experiences of Benjamin Paul Blood described in his 1874 pamphlet *The Anaesthetic Revelation*, of which James writes, "it fascinated me so 'weirdly' that I am conscious of its having been one of the stepping-stones of my thinking ever since" (James, "Mystic" 1295). Blood began as a monistic mystic but seems to have metamorphosed into a pluralistic one. James finds satisfaction in this since, being already sympathetic with mysticism but demurring on its monistic tendency, he is now able to reconcile it with pluralism:

His mysticism, which may, if one likes, be understood as monistic in this earlier utterance, develops in the later ones a sort of "left-wing" voice of defiance, and breaks into what to my ear has a radically pluralistic sound. I confess that the existence of this novel brand of mysticism has made my cowering mood depart. I feel now as if my own pluralism were not without the kind of support which mystical corroboration may confer. Monism can no longer claim to be the only beneficiary of whatever right mysticism may possess to lend *prestige*. ("Mystic" 1295)

How seriously, though, does James himself take polytheism? Nowhere does he explicitly state that he himself is a polytheist, despite the fact that he is self-professedly a metaphysical pluralist, and polytheism is the theistic form of pluralism. And at the very point where one might expect him to defend it, he declines: "Thus would a sort of polytheism return upon us—a polytheism which I do not on this occasion defend" (*Varieties* 570). He might have been adverse to defending it since the term "polytheism" carried opprobrium with it. Of the philosophical system of Gustav Fechner, which influenced James and with which he sympathized, he writes that it may be classified as either monotheistic or polytheistic, "but the word 'polytheism' usually gives offense, so perhaps it is better not to use it" (*Universe* 771). However, James is obviously in sympathy with polytheism. He observes parenthetically that polytheism "has always been the real religion of common people, and is so still to-day," and James is certainly an advocate for the religious experiences of common folk. He speaks in overtly polytheistic terms when, in his spirited defense of religion in "The Will to Believe," he affirms that religion requires an act of goodwill or faith on our part, even though we have insufficient evidence for our belief:

One who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the *gods* extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the *gods*' acquaintance. This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are *gods* (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. (28; all italics mine)

Now maybe James is speaking here not literally but colloquially or poetically, as did Goethe when he once remarked that the greatest of the gods' gifts to man is youth. However, James could just as well have used a singular noun to make exactly the same point. And certainly his description of his preternatural experience in the Adirondack wilderness when "it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life" (Henry James, *Letters* 2: 78–79) suggests more than just poetic license. Funkenstein agrees that James's "heart is with it [polytheism], with a Leibnizian monadology of sorts without a monad-in-chief" (104).

I think it fair to say that James takes polytheism very seriously indeed *as a hypothesis* at least as plausible as monotheism—though, unlike monotheism, having empirical justification from the manifold testimony of religious experience. And like any other religious hypothesis, or any scientific hypothesis, it must await the test of practice. In the postscript of his *Varieties*, James tellingly stipulates "that a final philosophy of religion will have to consider the pluralistic hypothesis more seriously than it has hitherto been willing to consider it"—as seriously as it has hitherto considered the monistic hypothesis.

Funkenstein says, "Except for William James (and perhaps Nietzsche), no other modern Western philosopher that I know of dared to defend a patently polytheistic creed" (99). Well, there is another such philosopher, defining that term broadly, who dares to defend a patently polytheistic creed, and that is Benjamin Franklin. To mention Franklin as a forerunner of James with respect to polytheism is natural and appropriate, though apparently Franklin exercised no influence on James in this regard. Both are Americans, and their views on religion are remarkably similar (and they are remarkably similar in many other ways such as their pragmatism, utilitarianism, democratic individualism, and conception of science, but that is another story). Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to regard James as Franklin *redivivus* with respect to religion, though possessing more philosophical sophistication and psy-

chological insight. Franklin stands to James with respect to religion much as Erasmus Darwin stands to his grandson Charles with respect to evolution. Like James, Franklin has little patience with ecclesiasticism, theology, dogma, doctrines, and creeds. And like James, Franklin is an advocate of personal religion and believes that religion is only as good as the good works of charity and justice that it inspires. Faith counts little for Franklin; what counts are practical virtues like benevolence. Both men are religious pluralists who believe that no one religion has a monopoly on the truth, and both advocate religious toleration.

Franklin's confession of polytheism is found in his private paper of 1728 entitled *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion*:

I imagine it great Vanity in me to suppose, that the *Supremely Perfect* does in the least regard such an inconsiderable Nothing as Man. More especially, since it is impossible for me to have any positive clear idea of that which is infinite and incomprehensible, I cannot conceive otherwise than that he *the Infinite Father*, expects or requires no Worship or Praise from us, but that he is even INFINITELY ABOVE IT. . . .

I conceive then, that the INFINITE has created many Beings or Gods, vastly superior to Man, who can better conceive his Perfections than we, and return him a more rational and glorious Praise.

As, among Men, the Praise of the Ignorant or of Children is not regarded by the ingenious Painter or Architect, who is rather honour'd and pleas'd with the Approbation of Wise Men & Artists. . . .

Howbeit, I conceive that each of these is exceeding wise and good, and very powerful; and that Each has made for himself one glorious Sun, attended with a beautiful and admirable System of Planets.

It is that particular Wise and good God, who is the author and owner of our System, that I propose for the object of my praise and adoration. (163–64)

The parallels between Franklin's polytheism, as found in this excerpt, and James's are instructive. James's God or gods are finite beings, as are Franklin's demigods. Even their rationales for polytheism are similar. For James, an infinite Being is too remote and foreign for us to be in communion with. Franklin considers that the "Supremely Perfect" has scant regard for such insignificant creatures as ourselves and neither "expects nor requires" our worship since he is so much above the need of it. Further, Franklin thinks that we in our finitude are incapable of worshiping an infinite God as he deserves to be worshiped. Finally, both Franklin and James air their theistic ideas as tentative hypotheses to be validated in the spirit of experimental science. Donald H.

Meyer's comments on Franklin's polytheistic creed as contained in his paper of 1728 could apply to James as well: "His tone is clearly hypothetical and conjectural, in line with the tactic of humility set forth in the *Autobiography*, but suggesting as well the tentative, deliberate approach of the experimental inquirer. And his reasoning lies clearly with economy of explanation: given the facts as we know them, what is the simplest, most sensible explanation available to us to account for them?" (157).

Now some commentators sharply disagree over whether Franklin was literally a polytheist (this reflects the issue of whether James was really a polytheist). A. Owen Aldridge believes that he was.⁷ But Kerry S. Walters demurs, saying, "It is an error to presume they [Franklin's references to gods] point to a literal polytheism. Such a conclusion is as philosophically bizarre as it is textually unwarranted" (8, 84–86).⁸ (However, in light of James's discussion, polytheism is hardly "philosophically bizarre.") On the other hand, Walter Isaacson thinks that "Franklin seems to be speaking more figuratively than literally in his 1728 paper." On this interpretation, Franklin's multiple gods simply represent different "perspectives" on the divine. "Read figuratively," continues Isaacson,

Franklin seems to be saying that different denominations and religions each have their own gods; . . . The different gods arise because of differing perspectives (producing what Walters calls Franklin's "theistic perspectivism"). Franklin believed that the idea of a God as Creator and first cause is common to all religions, and thus can be assumed true. But different religions and sects add their own expressions and concepts, none of which we can really know to be true or false, but that lead to the existence of a multiplicity of gods that allow a more personal relationship with their believers. (86, 526–27n39)

Isaacson's figurative reading of Franklin makes Franklin like James in two further respects. Franklin's "theistic perspectivism" parallels James's conception of a god which is, in Funkenstein's words, "an extension, or projection, of the self; since there are many selves, it befits them to have many deities adjusted to their various tempers." And, the idea of "a multiplicity of gods that allow a more personal relationship with their believers," which Isaacson attributes to Franklin, is similar to James's idea that God, "having an environment, being in time, and working out a history just like ourselves, he escapes from the foreignness from all that is human, of the static timeless perfect absolute" (*Universe* 775). Franklin and James both insist that there be an intimate communion established between human beings and their divinities, and this is possible (for James) only if the gods are finite and (for Franklin) only if they are multiple.

Whatever the nature of Franklin's polytheism, whether he meant it literally or figuratively, it is emblematic of his religious pluralism and tolerance—virtues not widely endorsed and practiced in his era, nor ours for that matter. Despite the great religious divide between them, Franklin befriended George Whitefield, the itinerant evangelist and instigator of the Great Awakening. Franklin printed from his press Whitefield's sermons and journals. Concerned that Whitefield and other "enthusiasts" were being denied pulpits to preach from by disapproving clergy, Franklin arranged to have a special building erected in Philadelphia as a forum where all and sundry, whatever their sect or religion, might have opportunity to speak. "The design in building," explains Franklin, "not being to accommodate any particular sect, but the inhabitants in general, so that even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mahometanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his service" (*Autobiography* 97).

What, however, would an intellectually respectable and philosophically informed polytheism look like today—one shorn of the rampant anthropomorphism and superstition clinging, say, to the Greek pantheon? An answer is provided by the distinguished cultural historian and James enthusiast Jacques Barzun. He found within himself (after passing through the crucible of the Great War and a suicidal wish) "the germ of an affinity with a multiple, unorganized transcendence. I am to this extent a Nietzsche-Shaw-James kind of believer; that is, persuaded of the manifold divine. I feel myself obedient to 'spirit,' knowing that from it alone come the things that justify life—things, in Nietzsche's words, 'transfiguring, exquisite, mad, and divine.'" Further, Barzun brings down a very Jamesian indictment of monotheism. In contrast to this polytheistic conception, says Barzun, "the single, all-powerful God, founder and efficient executive of the universe, has for me the thinness of abstraction. And when its faint outline is partly filled with liturgy and prayer, it seems to me the mirror-image of monarchy, calling for servility and praise too fulsome to be sincere" (250). On a more whimsical note, Salman Rushdie, during an address in the Memorial Church at Harvard Yard, spoke of his preference for polytheism over monotheism.

Speaking in purely fictional terms, I much prefer the polytheistic gods to the solo gods. Because the great thing about the pantheons, whether the Greek gods or the Roman gods or the Norse gods or the Hindu gods is that they don't behave well. They're kind of mean spirited and vengeful. And what's even better about them is that they don't ask you to do as they do. They don't set themselves up as moral exemplars. They're simply ourselves writ large. (21)

Rushdie clearly prefers James's "Gods of all the nature-mythologies" to "the moral Gods of the inner life." He agrees with James's conception of the gods as being projections or extensions of ourselves, our wider selves. However, unlike James's gods, the gods of the pantheons are not ones that we could commune with or even wish to, and, unlike Franklin's demigods, they are hardly worthy of our worship.

Let me conclude by sounding some virtues of James's (and others') polytheism. Polytheism is empirically grounded in religious experience. It fully honors individual persons and embraces their unique perspectives on the divine milieu. Polytheism is a truly democratic theism in contrast to monarchical monotheism—a point, incidentally, Barzun makes above when he brands monotheism "the mirror-image of monarchy." And finally, and perhaps most urgently, polytheism fosters religious pluralism and tolerance of others' gods and belief systems. If James's gods are to be taken as extensions or projections of human selves, then, says Funkenstein, "The very circumstance that man creates his god(s) in his image is the sole guarantee for the objectivity of the divine. This being the case, it behooves different tempers to objectivize different gods. The examination of religious experience thus contributes to tolerance towards different, even incompatible images of the religious reality" (110). This is no small merit in an age where Christian and Muslim fundamentalists are waging a religious war in the name of a totalitarian, uncompromising, and cruel monotheism.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Robert Lane for bringing this article to my attention since I did not know of it when I wrote the initial draft of this paper.

2. As cited in Moore, *William James* 21. Moore's citation is taken from the 1920 edition of the letters edited by Henry James.

3. I hazard to add here parenthetically that the problem of evil was James's central concern—as it was for his colleague, Josiah Royce. I do not think it an exaggeration to characterize James's philosophy—and Royce's too for that matter—as a disguised theodicy.

4. As cited *ibid.*

5. Funkenstein detects an ambiguity in James's polytheism: "Did James only favor different divinities for different selves, or was he also inclined to admit a plurality of gods for each person?" In a footnote to this question, Funkenstein explains,

The weaker construction would accord with the exalted claims James makes for the 'extended self' to the point of grounding upon it our hopes for afterlife. The stronger sense of polytheism may find some faint corroboration in the answer he gave to a questionnaire in 1904: 'God, to me, is not the only spiritual reality to believe in. Religion means primarily a universe of spiritual relations surrounding the earthly practical ones, not merely relations of "value," but agencies and their activities.' (105n25)

The source of Funkenstein's quotation is the 1920 edition of the letters edited by Henry James (2: 213).

6. I am indebted to Robert Lane for pointing out this distinction to me and so prompting this line of inquiry.

7. See Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin*.

8. As cited in Isaacson 86.

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