

God Works in Strange Ways, or

How William James's Pragmatism Led This Philosopher into the Catholic Church

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This essay is unapologetically personal, at least in the sense that both William James and John Dewey advised us that all philosophy ought to be personal, namely, the expression of and response to some living, existential concern: it is a public expression of my personal efforts to reconcile, as much as possible, my Catholicism with my pragmatism, which comes more from James than from Dewey. I assume you to be a sympathetic audience, since I assume that we are drawn together, in the title of this session, by a common interest: can two traditions that historically have been viewed by each as antagonistic, be reconciled? What might be exceptional in my own case, though, is that I am a convert to Catholicism. Stanley Harrison has suggested that one way of putting the question regarding the compatibility of pragmatism and Catholicism is: could particular pragmatists (Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead) have found their way into the Catholic Church?¹ At first it might appear that in the case of James the answer is a decided "no," but the fact is, ironically, that for this Jamesian pragmatist the answer was "yes." While initially James's voice was a definite source of hesitation in my decision to enter the Church, ironically, in the end, it was a major part of my conversion decision: in my initial exploration of the Church I mainly wanted to know if someone with Jamesian beliefs, such as myself, might be welcomed into the club, but it ultimately was James's pragmatism that enabled me to realize that I was asking the wrong question and thereby opened the door for my entry.

I wish to present here four specific places where my Jamesian pragmatism informs my

¹ "Peircean Catholicism," presented in the session "Pragmatist Catholicisms," sponsored by the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, at the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Granville, Ohio, October 28, 2006.

Catholicism. The first pertains directly to why the question I initially asked was the wrong one.

The Subordination of Doctrinal Orthodoxy to Eucharistic Orthopraxis

One of the great blessings of my graduate education at DePaul University was the opportunity to supplement my philosophy study with courses from DePaul's Department of Theology and Religious Studies, whose faculty included two extraordinary scholars: John MacKenzie, who had taught at Notre Dame University for most of his career and whose works, perhaps more than any other theologian of the time, defined Catholic orthodoxy in the 1950's and into the '70's and were perhaps the most widely used in seminary training, and the then young, radical, ex-Benedictine priest, John Dominic Crossan, whose works on the "historical Jesus" would revolutionize New Testament scholarship. Indeed, it was in Crossan's courses that I would first read both Wittgenstein and Heidegger. While my study with MacKenzie delayed my entry into the Church, it was my study with Crossan that would eventually help enable me to choose it. From the time I first took interest in the Catholic faith, in the 1970's, until my decision to convert, in the 1990's, much of my consternation revolved around the extent to which I might square my personal beliefs, many of them cultivated through my study of philosophy, including pragmatism, with what I took, largely through my studies with MacKenzie, to be central doctrines of the Church, and I found myself performing various mental acrobatics whereby I would constantly ask myself, "In what way might I say that I believe this or that teaching of the Church?" It was Crossan's influence, coupled with a better understanding of James, that allowed me to see that I was asking the wrong questions. Crossan taught me that the power of Jesus's ministry stemmed not so much from the doctrines that he espoused, as important as they were and continue to be, as from his extraordinary ability, manifest especially in his parables, to dissolve the preconceptions that fractured the human community and kept

people apart and especially his constant gestures of hospitality, which overcame divisiveness, his practice of the open table to which all were welcomed, whether Jew, Gentile, Sumerian, Roman, Pharisee, prostitute, or tax collector--a radicalization of traditional Jewish practices of hospitality. Ideas Jesus put forward, say in the Sermon on the Mount, would have fallen impotently to the ground had they not been manifest in living flesh and practice. Indeed, Crossan holds (highly controversially) that the Last Supper was not an historical event but a distilled, concentrated expression of what had been Jesus's practices throughout his ministry,² namely, an invitation to partake in the body and blood that was at work in building the Kingdom wherein God's justice would reign.

Prior to encountering this idea from Crossan I had been largely clueless regarding the meaning of Eucharistic practice, especially regarding Jesus's real presence within it. Following my Protestant upbringing I had wrongly focused upon Catholic orthodoxy and had seen Eucharistic practices as merely symbolic. What Crossan enabled me to see was that Catholic community was not constituted by uniformity of beliefs but rather by common practices, out of which a certain consensus of beliefs has emerged: people are not all "Catholic" because they all hold identical beliefs, but rather they have developed a certain commonality of beliefs out of the experience of having come regularly to the table of the Lord. So, while Catholics do express a common faith when they gather, that orthodoxy is overshadowed by Eucharistic orthopraxis, and the Eucharist continues for me to be that magical moment in which all the differences in beliefs that might divide from one another, and even make us enemies--philosophical, political, and even religious--are suspended: all that matters is that we are gathered at the table of our Lord, partaking in the body and blood of Christ, so that they might nourish us as we do His work.

² *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

My pragmatist sensibilities favorably disposed me to this principle of the primacy of *orthopraxis* over orthodoxy, the idea that Catholic community is constituted more by common Eucharistic practices than by monolithic belief. Furthermore, this principle enables the Catholic Church to embrace enormous diversity in beliefs and often huge differences in the interpretations of its dogmas and teachings: it provides for considerable plurality. By contrast, Protestant communities historically have been based almost entirely on commonality of belief, based in the assumption that each individual enjoys a direct relationship to God, unmediated by community, and thus all “true Christians” will arrive at the same beliefs. Thus, differences among beliefs have been much more problematic among Protestants, and whenever doctrinal differences would emerge, a new church would have to be formed, resulting in the endless splintering that has been Protestantism’s history. Thus, Catholicism is, for me, first and foremost a commitment to the ideal of universal human community, the way to whose realization Jesus showed us through his living example, ministry, and death. The irony here is that while pragmatism caused me initial hesitation in entering the faith, in the end it enabled me to grasp the central insight, from Crossan, that allowed me to enter.

Functional Immortality³

As part of his general interest in the scientific study of matters supernatural, James was especially interested in the possibility of life after death. After having conducted several experiments into the supernatural with his dear friend Frederic Myers, James had lost heart that he and Myers would ever find the empirical evidence they sought, but he made a “solemn pact” with Myers “that whichever of them was to die first should send a message to the other as he

³ I am thankful to my dear colleague Larry Hickman, Director of the Center for Dewey Studies, here at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. He suggested the term in the context of a very interesting dissertation presently being written by Charles Hobbs, “Consequences of Beliefs about Death: A Pragmatic Examination,” which I am directing and on whose committee Hickman serves.

passed over into the unknown.” In 1901 James was present as Myers lay dying, and the attending physician, Alex Munthe, recounted, some years later, how James, although too grief-stricken to enter Myers’s room, loyally awaited outside the promised message: “When I went away [after Myer expired] William James was still leaning back in his chair, his hands over his face, his open note-book still on his knees. The page was blank.”⁴

I find great irony in the above story: William James, the great champion of the will and the right to believe, had lost faith that he would ever find evidence of human immortality, but he continued to believe in and to remain loyal to his dear friend even as that friend departed him. Was the “evidence” that James sought—indeed, the very evidence that he, on the basis of his own pragmatic principles, ought to have accepted had he seen it—right there under his very nose?

Let me illustrate the irony further with another example from James’s own life. William James loved his father, Henry James, Sr., enormously, and much of William’s intellectual development can be understood, I believe, as an ongoing effort on the part of one who was educated in medicine in an age where science was seen as pushing religion aside, to understand his father, especially his Swedenborgian mysticism. James recounted on several occasions how, in times of stress and confusion and when he was having to make difficult decisions, he imagined himself sitting with his father, telling him his troubles, hearing his wise advice, and being rescued from foolish mistakes by his father’s words, from beyond the grave.

To be or to exist, for pragmatist such as James, means nothing other than to have real effects in the world—this world. By James’s own pragmatism, therefore, his friend, Myers, and his father manifest real existence, real being, though their bodies rotted in the ground. This is

⁴ Alex Munthe, *The Story of San Michelle* (New York: Dutton, 1931), pp. 372-73.

what I understand by functional immortality: continuing to exert influences—hopefully positive—upon this world. The irony, then, is that, according to his very own pragmatic metaphysics, James’s friend and father continued to *be* with him in a very pragmatically real sort of way.

Such a notion of immortality seems thin and unsatisfying in the modern age, following Luther and Descartes, wherein personal identity is largely thought in terms of an individualized self or soul, rather than as an event, or phase, in the ongoing story of humanity. What we moderns tend to want from any notion of immortality is that we will be preserved in our unique singularity, preserved in another world, since such preservation does not seem to occur in this one.

Functional immortality, however, has enjoyed a long and distinguished history. The shadowy existence of the dead who had migrated to the other world of Hades, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, is depicted as empty of meaning: what those dwelling there want to know from Odysseus is, are they remembered and honored in the world they departed? Among all the deceased heroes whom Odysseus encounters, Achilles is the most blunt, describing Hades as “home of shades of faded men, the helpless dead.” Homer presents preservation in this world, through honor, as the only sort of immortality for which it might be worth striving: continued existence in another, shadowy world is empty of meaning.⁵ Socrates, in the *Symposium*, too, by contrast to his description of death and the afterlife in the *Phaedo*, claims to agree with Diotima that love is the longing for immortality, understood as reproduction of oneself in this world, and hence preservation, in this world, that is, through one’s offspring or one’s teachings. Indeed, speaking of Homer and Hesiod, Socrates claims, “Who would not envy them their immortal

⁵ Ch. XI.

progeny, their claim upon the admiration of posterity?"⁶ Moreover, the idea of immortality as preservation in this world through the effects of one's deeds is the traditional Jewish notion of the afterlife, and "Heaven" is understood not as some "other world," disconnected from this one, except at death, but as this world transformed into a kingdom where God's justice reigns. Crossan has noted, however, that the notion of immortality as a transmigration of the soul to another world, as depicted in Plato's *Phaedo*, grew among Jews as Roman oppression intensified, for example, in Rome's crushing of the rebellion at Masada.⁷ Gregory Baum, in his history of early Christianity, notes how these (what I am terming) "functionalist" notions of immortality and "heaven" were prevalent among early Christians until the fourteenth century, with. For the early Church, Baum notes,

This kingdom was no "otherworldly reality"; it was God's reign, promised from the beginning, anticipated in the covenanted people and the sacramental church, and finally coming upon history as judgment and new creation. This kingdom was not conceived as a realm parallel to history; it was not a heavenly dominion above the realms of the earth; the kingdom was, rather, the divine reign that emerged in history as the longing of the cosmos and fulfillment of the people's hopes. The kingdom was preached as the new age.⁸

The preservation of one's individuality in death was not a central concern of early Christian views of the afterlife: "The question of personal survival after death was not in the foreground." Rather, the Kingdom of Heaven was principally about the ultimate triumph of God's justice. John XXII was the last Pope to express such views,⁹ and Henri de Lubac's classic study,

⁶ *Symposium* 211d.

⁷ Crossan, "Our Own Faces in Deep Wells: A Future for Historical Jesus Research," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 299-300.

⁸ Baum, "Social Conceptions of Death," in Gail M. Presbey, Karsten J. Struhl, and Richard E. Olsen (eds.), *The Philosophical Quest: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (McGraw-Hill, 2000), pp. 545-46, reprinted from Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (Paulist Press, 1975).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 546.

Catholicism, is perhaps the most recent significant effort to renew the earlier understanding of eternal life and “the Kingdom of Heaven.”¹⁰

Functional immortality thus means that the “real presence” of Jesus resides in the community’s reaffirming, through Eucharistic practice, its continuation of Jesus’s life work, its becoming his body and blood. Moreover, belief in immortality thus means, functionally, the belief that our own efforts to bring God’s peace and justice into this world will not have been in vain: insofar as we work the transformation of this world into the Kingdom of Heaven, a place will be secured for us in the world to come. This last point leads well in the next point of convergence of Jamesian pragmatism with Catholic theology in this philosopher’s thinking: the meaning of “work.”

Human Persons as Co-Creators

In his second encyclical, *On Human Labor*, Pope John Paul II presented a theology of work that contrasts with the more popular theology, especially in Protestantism, that emphasizes human depravity and accordingly views labor as part of the punishment for Original Sin. Authentically human labor is not mere drudgery, John Paul II suggested, but God’s invitation to become a co-participant in the ongoing act of Creation, and he quoted the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: men and women “can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator’s work, consulting the advantages of their brothers and sisters, and contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan.”¹¹ Such a distinction bears a certain resemblance to Karl Marx’s distinction between alienated and non-alienated labor, but it also seems consistent with James own view of a world not already completed but in the

¹⁰ Lubac, *Catholicism*, trans. L. C. Sheppard (London: Burns & Oats, 1962), pp. 49-62.

¹¹ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 34: AAS 58 (1966), pp. 1052-53, as quoted by John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, Vatican translation (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, n.d.), p. 58.

making, at least in part through our very own acts:

Does our act then *create* the world's salvation so far as it makes room for itself, so far as it leaps into the gap? Does it create, not the whole world's salvation of course, but just so much of this as itself covers of the world's extent?

Here I take the bull by the horns, and in spite of the whole crew of rationalists and monists, of whatever brand they be, I ask *why not?* Our acts, our turning-places, where we seem to ourselves to make ourselves and grow, are the parts of the world to which we are closest, the parts of which our knowledge is the most intimate and complete. Why should we not take them at their face-value? Why may they not be the actual turning-places and growing places which they seem to be, of the world—why not the workshop of being, where we catch fact in the making, so that nowhere may the world grow in any other kind of way than this?¹²

What James seems to have seen so much more clearly, though, than did John Paul II, is that, if we grant humans a real role in the creation and salvation of this world, then that salvation is precarious at best and never guaranteed. James, of course, placed great weight upon the role of temperament in philosophy: it was, for him, an irreducible fact that, for whatever reasons, we simple each need different things from our philosophies, and some people, such as his dear friend Josiah Royce, simply needed absolute assurance in advance that their efforts will not be in vain, that salvation is already secured, and that all of life, every sin and every suffering, will be redeemed. James had no quarrel with such people: for himself, though, he asks not for a guaranty but simply for a “fighting chance” to redeem not all of human suffering and evil necessarily, as idealists such as his dear friend Josiah Royce would want it, but only to redeem enough so that we might be able to say, at the end of the ride of human history, that it was worth it:

I am willing that there should be real loses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is. ... When the cup is poured off, the dregs are left behind for ever, but the possibility of what is poured off is sweet enough to

¹² “Pragmatism and Religion,” in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 467. Emphases in the original.

accept.¹³

This leads me to my fourth and concluding point.

James's Vision of Catholic Community

Cornel West, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, was quite correct in placing James in an Emersonian genealogy: like Emerson, James saw the individual as a constant wellspring of creative, heroic energies. This view, in turn, was a continuation, in more secular terms, of a general Protestant, and especially Lutheran, notion of conscience, which places each (saved) individual in a direct relationship to God, unmediated by the community: "all of us who are Christian are also priests," claimed Luther.¹⁴ A right relationship to Truth, that is, to God, thus took in Protestant thought priority over community, by contrast to Catholic teachings, which has emphasized how we are related to God through community, and especially the praxis of communion. Insofar as James continues, in other, more secular language, this fundamentally Protestant view, namely, that locates creativity and the disclosure of Truth in the heroic individual and valorizes the righteous individual over the community, I think James is wrong, and I side with Catholic teachings against him. There are, however, in James's corpus powerful exceptions. Take this example from *Pragmatism*:

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best.' I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. *It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust your self and trust the other agents*

¹³ Ibid., p. 470.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), trans. Bertram Lee Woolf, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 345.

enough to face the risk?¹⁵

Saying “yes” to James’s questions here was precisely how I understood my decision to enter the Catholic Church. It is thus ironic, again, that I have found in these words of the supposed rugged individualist William James one of the clearest and most powerful expressions of my own Catholic faith. The Holy Spirit does indeed work in strange ways!

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¹⁵ “Pragmatism and Religion,” p. 468. Emphasis added.