RELIGIOUS TRUTH AND PLURALISM: PRAGMATIST REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores religious pluralism from a pragmatist point of view. The question concerning the truth-aptness of religious discourse is first discussed. It is argued that a strongly realist account of religious truth entails an exclusivist conception according to which at most one religion can be true. It is further suggested that, because in multicultural societies we have an ethical and political duty to promote religious pluralism instead of exclusivism, we should try replacing the standard realistic notion of truth by a pragmatist notion drawn primarily from William James. In this context, James's individualism is compared to Hannah Arendt's conception of natality (human beings' distinctive capacity of beginning things anew), and the Jamesian pragmatic conception of truth is further analyzed in terms of Morton White's holistic pragmatism. It is only by integrating the ethical dimension of truthfulness in the pragmatist understanding of truth that pragmatism can adequately deal with the challenge of maintaining both religious pluralism and a genuine commitment to the pursuit of truth.

KEYWORDS: Truth; pragmatism; pluralism; religious exclusivism; James W.; Arendt H.; White M.

Introduction: natality and diversity

In the first chapter of *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt introduced one of her key concepts, *natality*, arguing that plurality and diversity are conditions of all human activity – of what she called *vita activa* – in the sense that we humans are similar by being different from each other. Our being born as unique individuals indicates a capacity of beginning something new. This is why natality, our having been born, is for Arendt the most central category of political thought (see Arendt 1958, ch. 1). With human beings, the very idea of *initiation* – of bringing about something unprecedented – was brought to the world (ibid., ch. 24). The "newcomer" is able "to begin something

anew, that is, acting" (ibid., p. 9); moreover, as unique individuals, people are singularly capable of acting in a *diversity* of ways and of thus creating unpredictable novelties into the world they share with each other. As Richard Bernstein (2018, p. 88) summarizes Arendt's point, *plurality* here means that "each of us has a distinctive perspective on the world".

According to Arendt's (1976 [1951], p. 457) famous analysis of totalitarianism, it is precisely human individuality, "anything indeed that distinguishes one man from another", that is "intolerable" from the totalitarian standpoint, because as long as human beings have not been rendered "superfluous" as individuals, there will be no total domination over them (see ibid., ch. 12). Totalitarianism seeks to destroy the individuality manifested in the concept of natality, or even its very possibility. When people are stored like cattle in concentration camps, they will no longer be able to initiate novelties, to begin anything new – nor, therefore, will they be able to continue to be really human in any ethical and political sense of the word.

Arendt (2003, p. 119) writes: "Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other." It is from this pursuit of total domination, the "experiment of eliminating […] spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not", that concentration camps emerge (ibid.). Moreover, it is not merely individuality or spontaneity as such but even individual death as *one's own* death that a totalitarian regime like Nazism eliminates, thereby murdering the "moral person in man":

> The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense they took away the individual's own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed. (Ibid., p. 133)

Totalitarianism hence abolishes human individuality, and by destroying individuality it destroys "spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events" (ibid., p. 135). At the same time, "spontaneity as such, with its incalculability, is the greatest of all obstacles to total domination over man" (ibid., p. 137).[1]

It may sound exaggerating to begin an investigation of *pragmatist* resources for dealing with religious pluralism and diversity from these well-known remarks by Arendt (who was certainly no pragmatist), summarizing her analysis of totalitarianism and its attempts to overcome human diversity. However, Arendt herself noted (perhaps exaggerating herself) that "[p]olitical, social, and economic events

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[1] For a lucid discussion of this analysis, see Bernstein 2018, pp. 31-34.

everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous" (ibid., p. 140). It seems to me that *religious exclusivism* should be included in this analysis. Indeed, it is, arguably, one of the silent conspirators and should be firmly resisted by anyone appreciating the kind of permissive spirit of both intellectual and ethical "inner tolerance" that William James's pragmatism, in particular, emphasizes (cf. Axtell 2019, pp. 233-234).

I am not, in this essay, going to *argue* against religious exclusivism. Rather, its rejection is one of my *premises* in this discussion. In my view, responsible thinkers in philosophy and theology today ought to abandon religious exclusivism – in both its propositional and soteriological or "salvific" forms (i.e., regarding doctrinal truth and salvation, respectively) – as firmly as they reject, say, racism or totalitarianism. I will examine *how* it should be resisted (that is, how a plausible form of pluralism ought to be developed), and I will find my main philosophical resources for this examination in Jamesian pragmatism. However, I will also emphasize that the pragmatist crucially needs to deal with the concept of *truth* in their critique of exclusivism and articulations of pluralism. One of the most promising ways of doing so is by interpreting and further developing James's pragmatic account of truth as an interplay between "old stock" and "new opinion" in terms of "holistic pragmatism", as developed by Morton White (a somewhat forgotten pragmatist); indeed, this way of conceptualizing pragmatist views on truth adds an explicit link to Arendtian discussions of novelty. I will only be able to very briefly comment on this idea toward the end of the essay, though.

My use of the concept of exclusivism requires some nuancing, however.[2] I am, of course, primarily rejecting what may be called "self-righteous" forms of exclusivism, that is, the views of those exclusivists maintaining that *their own* religion is true (or salvific). Such exclusivisms are the primary "conspirators" with totalitarianism. However, I am afraid that the risk of (in Arendtian terms) silent conspiracy extends to considerably less aggressive exclusivists admitting that their own religion may very well be false (because only God would, presumably, know which religion is ultimately true) while genuinely committed to claiming it to be exclusively true. The real problem is the conceptual space reserved here for a conception of religious truth (and, *mutatis mutandis*, salvation) according to which one might contingently end up living within, and believing in the truth of, a religious outlook that just happens to be true (and/or salvific) in contrast to all other such outlooks that would (thus) happen to be false.[3] As soon as one admits that this might possibly be the case – that is, that religious exclusivism is so much as a "genuine option" in James's sense, something that might be true and something we might rightfully believe in – one has taken a step on a slippery slope down to a view that might, in some contingent circumstances, lead to more aggressive, less benign exclusivisms.

I am aware of the fact that such a rejection of even moderate forms of religious exclusivism may sound like a radical view in contemporary philosophy of religion. However, I also believe that it is important to critically reflect on the ways in which even relatively plausible (or plausible-sounding) positions might have problematic

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[2] I am here responding to a very important comment by an anonymous reviewer.
[3] See Axtell's (2019) carefully argued critical discussion of exclusivism and the problem of "religious luck".

consequences. This, it seems to me, is an important element of a pragmatist (self-) critique of our ways of thinking.

Pragmatist individualism and religious diversity

It seems to me that the relatively radical form of religious *individualism* that William James defended as a crucial element of his pragmatist philosophy of religion is readily comparable to Arendt's notion of natality. For James as much as for Arendt, each person is a distinct individual with a unique life-history and lifegoal or project. This is nowhere else as obvious as it is in James's explorations of the varieties of religious experience – to the extent that his individualism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1958 [1902]) has often, admittedly with some justification, been considered too extreme, ignoring the strong communal aspects of religion (see, e.g., Taylor 2002).[4]

A radical and profound form of individualism is at work when James defines, in Lecture II of the *Varieties*, what he ("arbitrarily", as he says) means by "religion": "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men* [sic] *in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (James 1958 [1902], p. 42; original italics). However, this individualism does not encourage us to remain confined in our own uniqueness but on the contrary to open our eyes as wide as we can in encountering a diversity of others in *their* unique individuality. This is what James himself seeks to do in exploring the varieties of *others'* religious experiences in his *magnum opus*.

Moreover, in an opening comment to a famous 1899 lecture, James notes: "Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves." (James 1962 [1899], p. 113.)[5] James shares with us his personal experience, which I am here quoting at considerable length in order to illustrate the phenomenological richness of his description:[6]

> Some years ago, while journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, I passed by a large number of 'coves,' as they call them there, or heads of small valleys between the hills, which had been newly cleared and planted. The impression on my mind was one of unmitigated squalor. The settler had in every case cut down the more manageable trees, and left their charred stumps standing. The larger trees he had girdled and killed, in order that their foliage should not cast a shade. He had then built a log cabin, plastering its chinks with clay, and had set up a tall zigzag rail fence around the scene of his havoc, to keep the pigs and cattle out. Finally, he had irregularly planted the intervals between the

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[4] For an excellent interpretation of individualism as a thoroughgoing feature of James's thought not only in the philosophy of religion but more broadly, see Bush 2017.

[5] In addition to the authoritative version published in the critical Harvard edition, I have used James 1962 [1899]; my page references are to this edition.

[6] I also deal with these passages in the introduction to Pihlström 2020.

stumps and trees with Indian corn, which grew among the chips; and there he dwelt with his wife and babes […].

The forest had been destroyed; and what had 'improved' it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature's beauty. Ugly, indeed, seemed the life of the squatter […]. Talk about going back to nature! I said to myself, oppressed by the dreariness, as I drove by. […] No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation. (Ibid, pp. 114-115.)

However, gradually recovering from this aesthetic and ethical (as well as, in some sense, existential) shock, James continues:

Then I said to the mountaineer who was driving me, "What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?" "All of us," he replied. "Why, we ain't happy here, unless we are getting one of these coves under cultivation." I instantly felt that *I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation.* Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But, when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, and the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward. The cabin was a warrant of safety for self and wife and babes. In short, the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very pæan of duty, struggle, and success.

I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge. Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant. (Ibid., p. 115; first and last emphasis added.)

James then concludes by answering his own question in a memorable passage affirming the (at least potential) inner meaningfulness of a rich variety of different forms of life:

And now what is the result of all these considerations and quotations? It is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any

single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of
insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. (Ibid., p. 129.)

In view of this example, we should observe how fundamentally important pluralism, tolerance, and the recognition of otherness are for James. These are all intimately related to individual uniqueness, manifested in both enjoyment and suffering, and in the truly diverse ways in which life can seem meaningful – or meaningless – to different people in different situations. We are, James advises us, "absolutely" forbidden to judge others' lives to be meaningless only because they seem meaningless to us. Yet, conversely, we might say that it is also wrong to attribute to them forms of meaningfulness that is unavailable from the others' own perspectives.[7] Furthermore, James, on my reading, here employs not only the *pragmatic method* (cf. James 1975 [1907], Lecture II) but also something like the *phenomenological method* by showing us how easy it is to dismiss others' experiential perspectives on reality. Simultaneously, he shows us how such blindness (or, analogously, deafness to what he elsewhere called the "cries of the wounded")[8] is detrimental to the ethically challenging and fundamentally serious attitude to life that his pragmatism urges us to adopt. This also emphasizes a close link between the epistemic project of knowing reality and the ethico-existential one of acknowledging others as individuals with their distinctive points of view.[9]

Religious (as well as, more generally, existential) individualism and pluralism in the Jamesian style can, accordingly, be seen as being based on something like the Arendtian appreciation of natality. This may seem rather obvious, but only few scholars have explicitly compared Arendt's views to James's.[10] One of the few who have seriously investigated both James and Arendt is Richard Bernstein, but even Bernstein makes no mention of Arendt in his major pragmatism book, *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010). He does examine, however, the ethical character of James's pluralism – in a manner not very different from his insightful reflections on Arendt, truth, and critical thinking. Having cited James's (above-discussed) criticism of our inability to perceive the inner significance of others' points of view, and of human diversity in its richness, Bernstein writes:

> [James] does *not* mean that when we make a serious effort to
> understand other points of view we will simply accept them or suspend
> our critical judgment. James's pluralism is not flabby or sentimental. It
> calls for a critical engagement with other points of view and with other

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[7] This is precisely what goes wrong in "theodicist" claims that in the end suffering plays some functional role or serves some purpose hidden to the sufferer (see Kivistö & Pihlström 2016; Pihlström 2020).

[8] For James's use of the phrase, "the cries of the wounded", see the 1891 essay, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life", in James 1979 [1897].

[9] Several essays in Goodson 2018 discuss James's metaphors of "blindness" and the "cries of the wounded".

[10] For example, there is no mention of Arendt in Pawelski's (2007) otherwise useful book despite its focus on James's "dynamic individualism". Nor do the contributors to Goodson 2018 bring Arendt into any comparison with James's ethical views. Even Bush's (2017) very helpful treatment of James's individualism ignores Arendt.

visions. It is an engaged pluralism. Contrary to the picture of relativism that speaks of incommensurable frameworks and paradigms, James's pluralism demands that we reach out to the points of contact where we can critically engage with each other. (Ibid., p. 62.)

Bernstein concludes, plausibly in my view, that recent discussions of multiculturalism and identity politics still have a lot to learn from James's pragmatic pluralism, which also criticizes the idea that group identities are fixed, emphasizing the historical change, development, and mutation of identities (ibid., p. 69). James, Bernstein reminds us, "was never sentimental about blindly celebrating differences" – that, indeed, would be a kind of blindness, too – but was "as concerned with searching for commonalities that can bind us together" (ibid.).[11] The rejection of exclusivism must also be based on this willingness to learn critically from others' viewpoints. Endorsing diversity and celebrating individual or cultural differences must never be conflated with the uncritical acceptance of all points of view as equally true or valuable. Exclusivism must not be replaced by naïve relativism but by a critically engaging pluralism, as Bernstein maintains. To a considerable degree, the entire pragmatist tradition is, arguably, centered around the philosophical project of integrating the appreciation of individual differences with rigorous pursuit of objective truth. While perhaps emerging from individuals' pursuit of truth, truth itself even in the full-fledged pragmatist sense remains (humanly speaking) objective – or so one should try to argue even when developing Jamesian individualist pragmatism.

Both Arendt and James were strongly opposed to any (Hegelian, totalizing, metaphysically realist) grand narratives that tend to subordinate the individual's unique perspective to some overall super-perspective, and thus also against what may be called "theodicist" grand narratives claiming evil and suffering to be necessary from a "God's-Eye View".[12] As Bernstein (ibid., p. 118) explains, Arendt rejected "both reckless optimism and reckless despair", i.e., all appeals to historical necessity, precisely because we can, due to our natality, our "capacity to initiate", always "begin something new". This comes very close to the *meliorism* defended by James (e.g., 1975 [1907], Lecture VIII) as a middle path between optimism and pessimism, a view also firmly grounded in the distinctive kind of individualism his pragmatism emphasizes. This individualism, however, must never be uncritical; hence, there is all the more reason to examine and further develop Jamesian pragmatism through Arendtian spectacles of deep political concern.

Pragmatism and truth

Arendt not only offered us an analysis of totalitarianism of lasting relevance and an equally compelling account of human spontaneity in its ethical and political dimensions but also an ever more timely treatment of the significance of the concept of *truth*. In "Truth and Politics", an essay originally published in 1967, she carefully

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[11] For an illuminating discussion of Bernstein's reading of James's pluralism, see Green 2014.
[12] On James as an antitheodicist ethical thinker, see Kivistö & Pihlström 2016, ch. 5; Pihlström 2020; 2021.

examines the often antagonistic relation between truthfulness and political action, drawing attention to deliberate lying as a political force – and one may argue that her views are, for well-known reasons, presumably even more relevant today than they were in the 1960s (see also Bernstein 2018, pp. 67-83). She reminds us that while truth itself is "powerless", it is also irreplaceable; political force, persuasion, or violence cannot substitute it, and "[t]o look upon politics from the perspective of truth […] means to take one's stand outside the political realm", from "the standpoint of the truthteller" (Arendt 2003, p. 570). This kind of critical distance necessary for an adequate understanding of the relation between truth and politics requires the age-old project of "disinterested pursuit of truth" (ibid., p. 573). In short, truth is an irreducible and irreplaceable concept; no serious human practice – e.g., politics, ethics, or religion – can do without it.

Now, we may ask whether the kind of disinterestedness Arendt spoke about is available in pragmatism. Isn't pragmatism, especially the Jamesian version of pragmatism we are preoccupied with here,[13] strongly interest-driven, and does its individualism therefore open the doors for political manipulation and disrespect for truth? Why, more generally, *is* the concept of truth important for the religious pluralism and diversity discussion in the first place, and why exactly should we aim at a pragmatist articulation of this concept? Let me try to illuminate these questions.[14]

We live amidst diverse religious belief systems as well as diverse theological interpretations of them. Regarding truth, an obvious question to ask is, assuming that religious and/or theological discourses are "truth-apt" (i.e., the concept of truth can be meaningfully applied to them), whether at most one or possibly more than one position can be true within them. At the simplest level, the question is whether more than one religion can be true (assuming that religions can be meaningfully interpreted as sets of truth-claims).[15] If (at most) only one religion can be true, then, insofar as there are many religious belief systems conflicting with each other, all the others except the true one must be false (speaking, again, of religions as sets of beliefs, or propositional statements believed to be true). Alternatively, all of them may be false. This is, roughly, the view known as exclusivism. The truth of any particular religion would exclude any conflicting religion being true. At the level of individual beliefs or doctrines, the truth of any such belief would exclude the truth of all that are logically incompatible with it.

It might seem obvious, from a traditional theological (e.g., Christian) point of view, that exclusivism must hold, and many religious groups even today exclusivistically maintain that they only are among the selected few to be saved by their true beliefs.[16]

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[13] In a more comprehensive study, it would be possible to examine the issues of diversity and pluralism in pragmatist philosophy of religion more broadly by also taking into consideration Peirce's and Dewey's, as well as leading neopragmatists' like Hilary Putnam's, views. See also, e.g., Pihlström 2013.

[14] See also the discussions in Pihlström 2019; 2021.

[15] It is, of course, controversial whether religions *can* be interpreted as sets of truth-claims. If religions were mere rituals and practices without truth-aptness, then we would not have the problem addressed here at all, at least not as a problem relating to truth. For some critical meta-level reflections on truth-aptness, see Pihlström 2021, ch. 6.

[16] This would amount to the "self-righteous" version of exclusivism discussed above. I won't dwell on the differences between propositional and soteriological exclusivism here, though the distinction is

Leading theistic philosophers of religion like Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, and William Lane Craig hold exclusivist views (not to be studied here in any detail).[17] As mentioned earlier, I am not arguing against exclusivism here but rather trying to articulate a way of steering clear from it within a generally pragmatist approach. In particular, I find the rejection of self-righteous religious exclusivism so fundamental for any serious thinker that it is difficult to imagine an independent argument for it, other than the general requirement of sincerely recognizing other human beings' perspectives on reality – that is, something like the avoidance of the kind of "blindness" that we saw James criticize.

Religious *pluralism*, firmly rejecting exclusivism, claims that more than one religion can be true – at least in some soteriologically or existentially relevant (and thus, perhaps, "pragmatic") sense.[18] In our multicultural days taking religious diversity seriously, it might be regarded as an ethical duty to try to make sense of religious pluralism, and this requires that we draw attention to the way the concept of truth functions here. In short, exclusivism may seem to lead to discrimination or even violence, whereas pluralism at least in principle supports the peaceful coexistence of different religious outlooks, while recognizing that this cannot be done by simply giving up the objective concept of truth presupposed by exclusivism. The ethical and political needs of religious toleration and mutual recognition of religious groups may – at least ethically and politically but presumably also epistemologically and even metaphysically – require that we aim at pluralism (or, more precisely, what Bernstein calls engaged pluralism), seeking to genuinely recognize (and not merely tolerate) others' religious perspectives, even when we cannot ourselves join in accepting them.[19] Hence, there are strong ethical and political reasons for preferring pluralism to exclusivism.

However, if we construe truth in the traditional metaphysically realistic correspondence sense, we easily, or perhaps inevitably, end up in exclusivism. Thus, one way of maintaining a critical distance from the morally and politically arrogant exclusivism manifested by apologetic Christian philosophers is by construing truth

important. Generally, we might say that it is the truth of the relevant religious belief system that is taken to play a crucial salvific role by (and for) those subscribing to the system. Cf. Grube & Van Herck 2017; Jonkers & Wiertz 2019.

[17] See, e.g., Plantinga 2000. For an excellent substantial criticism of exclusivism based on an insightful investigation of "religious luck" from a broadly pragmatist perspective, see again Axtell 2019. (I won't hide my very critical attitude to all apologetic forms of philosophy of religion, which tend to harbor a tendency not only to excluding others but also to a kind of fundamentalism not genuinely open to criticism from the outside.)

[18] In order to avoid further complexities, it is more plausible to contrast exclusivism with pluralism than with inclusivism here, because inclusivism (as generally understood) may itself embody problematic assumptions regarding the objective (realistic) truth of one's own religion, even when maintaining that other religious outlooks could be included in that truth. For more details on the differences of these positions, see again, e.g., Jonkers & Wiertz 2019.

[19] On the central importance of the concept of recognition in religion, theology, and the study of religion, see Saarinen 2016 as well as Kahlos et al. 2019. Intuitively, recognition in this context means something stronger than mere tolerance (though something weaker than full endorsement), because we may, and do, also tolerate various religious, political and other outlooks in which we do not find much, or any, positive value. On the debates between religious inclusivism and exclusivism, see also, e.g., Griffiths 2001.

pragmatically. But how exactly should this be done? In pursuing this task, we are maneuvering on an Arendtian territory; we have to both appreciate the individual spontaneity highlighted by the concept of natality (that is, our occupying our distinctive perspectives on the world in virtue of being the unique individuals we are) and continue to be committed to the critical pursuit of truth presupposing criteria transcending any contingent individual perspective – in science, politics, and religion alike.[20]

The obvious problem we need to deal with is that developing pluralism, accommodating the attitudes of tolerance and recognition, might require us to sacrifice our notion of objective, mind-independent truth, at least in the domain of religion but possibly more generally as well. Different (mutually conflicting) religions can hardly be true in a straightforward objective sense of corresponding with the way the world is, if there is, realistically speaking, only one way the world (mind-independently) is.[21] Therefore, it seems that a standard conception of religious or theological discourse as truth-apt in a realistic sense entails exclusivism. Only if religious belief-systems can be genuinely false can any of them be claimed to be (objectively, realistically) true – or so the exclusivist argues.

Now, it may be suggested that a pragmatist conception of truth inherited from James might offer a way forward by reconciling religious pluralism, according to which religious truth is not exclusively "one", with a (moderately, pragmatically) objective truth enabling us to make sense of the idea that religious beliefs and theological doctrines purport to represent reality instead of being merely language-internal, completely perspectival constructions with no anchoring to any extra-human standard of truth. It might even be suggested that *only* a pragmatist account of realism and truth may enable us to achieve such a reconciliatory meta-level position in the debate over religious plurality and diversity. This pragmatist move requires, however, that we understand the notion of truth itself not merely propositionally but also "existentially" as involving what may be called ethical *truthfulness* (cf. Williams 2002). Thus understood, our pragmatic conception of truth should also be well equipped to be employed in the Arendtian sense emphasizing the political relevance of truth.

One might argue that we can be full-blown realists about reality and truth while being pluralists or inclusivists (only) about religious *epistemology*, denying that realism entails exclusivism here. A plausible option for religious and theological realists would then be to stick to realism in ontology (and semantics, regarding truth) while admitting that there could be more than one epistemically justified sets of beliefs. This is a possible position for those who have no problem in drawing a sharp distinction between ontology and epistemology.[22] For philosophers (of religion) following, say, Kant, Wittgenstein, or the pragmatists, however, such dichotomies are themselves

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[20] In this context, a more general criticism of conservative religious exclusivism would emphasize that such a position does not encourage engaging in truly critical inquiry at all but, rather, in apologetics in which (in contrast to genuine inquiry) the "truth" is already known prior to the investigation. This would be a potentially harmful consequence of even relatively moderate forms of exclusivism (cf. above).

[21] This essay, of course, cannot deal with the problem of realism in the philosophy of religion in any comprehensive way. See, e.g., Pihlström 2020, ch. 1, for further discussion.

[22] For interesting perspectives on these issues, see the essays in Grube & Van Herck 2017.

problematic. In this sense, the above-sketched worry that realism about truth entails exclusivism is internal to a broadly speaking post-Kantian approach to the philosophy of religion (which I find plausible for independent reasons). Not only Kantians but also pragmatists, for instance, integrate ontology and epistemology (see, e.g., Pihlström 2013; 2021), and therefore the exclusivist conclusions one may end up with at the ontological level of truth may be problematic at the epistemological level of justification, too – as well as the ethical (and, theologically speaking, soteriological) level.

Far from leading to radical relativism or political opportunism, James's pragmatism functions as a (quasi-Arendtian) link between the crucial relevance of the concept of truth and the emphasis on individual diversity, plurality, and spontaneity. It is through Jamesian pragmatism that we can reconnect the notion of truth itself with a philosophical analysis of plurality and unique human individuality. This requires, however, reconceptualizing the concept of truth itself from a Jamesian pragmatist perspective. Pragmatic pluralism insists that individual perspectives and commitments to truth-seeking matter. This is clear in James: truth is always truth-for-someone-in-particular, an individual person pursuing truth amidst their existential or religious concerns, not abstract truth-in-general. Therefore, pragmatism is perhaps uniquely equipped to deal with the relation between religious pluralism or diversity and the problem of truth.

The pragmatist theory of truth is far from uncontroversial, of course. We might, however, approach it by referring to the distinction between truth and truthfulness (as analyzed, e.g., in Williams 2002). These are clearly different notions. One may pursue truthfulness without thereby having true beliefs; one can be truthful also when one is mistaken, insofar as one sincerely seeks to believe truths and avoid falsehoods, and also honestly seeks to tell the truth whenever possible (and whenever the truth to be told is relevant). Clearly, whatever one's theory of truth is, one should in some way distinguish between truth and truthfulness. On the other hand, the pragmatist conception of truth may be more promising than its rivals precisely in making sense of the intimate relation between truth and truthfulness. We might say that this distinction is "softened" in James's conception of truth, which turns truth into a *value* to be pursued in one's (individual and social) life, as distinguished from mere propositional truth corresponding to facts that are independently "there" no matter how we as truth-seekers (or truth-tellers) relate ourselves to them. Truth(fulness) in the Jamesian sense is, hence, richer and broader than mere propositional truth. It is a *normative* property of our thoughts and inquiries in a wide sense, not simply a semantic property of statements. Its normativity is, moreover, both epistemic and ethical. Jamesian pragmatic truth hence incorporates the concept of truthfulness, as truth belongs to the ethically structured practice of inter-human relations of mutual dependence and acknowledgment in a shared world in which the irreducibility of human individuality – that is, Arendtian natality – needs to be recognized. It also incorporates an acknowledgment of the "inner truth" of others' experiences, especially experiences of suffering (cf. Kivistö & Pihlström 2016, ch. 5; Pihlström 2020). It is therefore an account of truth suited for our need to live in a situation of religious diversity, given the ethical duty to avoid exclusivism.

Jamesian pragmatic truth is also inextricably entangled with our existential concerns; thus, it is indistinguishable from James's general individualism. Religious diversity, for James, starts at the individual level. Individuals' responses to their existential life-challenges having religious dimensions vary considerably, and any existentially or religiously relevant conception of truth must appreciate this "temperamental" variation – without succumbing to the temptations of uncritical subjectivism or relativism, though. If we, for ethical reasons, do wish to take seriously the Jamesian approach to individual diversity, we must pay attention to what he says about the "plasticity" of truth and about truth being a "species of good":

> Truth independent; truth that we *find* merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly—or is supposed to exist by rationalistically minded thinkers; but then it means only the dead heart of the living tree, and its being there means only that truth also has its paleontology and its 'prescription,' and may grow stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men's regard by sheer antiquity. But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are has been vividly shown in our day by the transformation of logical and mathematical ideas, a transformation which seems even to be invading physics. (James 1975 [1907], p. 37.)

> … truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons*. (Ibid., p. 42.)

True beliefs are, as James says, "good to live by"; when maintaining any belief, we are responsible for its functions in our lives. The pragmatic conception of truth invokes not only the individually satisfactory consequences of true beliefs but also ethical dimensions of truth-seeking, such as recognition of otherness, in terms of which the overall functionality of our beliefs ought to be assessed. Therefore, truth (in a pragmatic sense), truthfulness, and acknowledgment are conceptually tied to each other. One cannot genuinely pursue truth in the Jamesian sense unless one truthfully seeks to acknowledge others' perspectives on reality – and, hence, Arendtian natality, the uniqueness of individual perspectives, and their potentiality of opening up genuine novelties.

Therefore, something like Jamesian pragmatic truth is what developing religious pluralism requires. It must, however, incorporate both epistemic and ethical responsibility: both objective inquiry and personal existential pursuit of truth – truth about the world as one uniquely responds to it given one's natality, and thus also truth about who one truly is. In the remainder of this essay, I will try to cash out (recalling Bernstein's phrase quoted above) "critical engagement" with others' perspectives (and one's own) by further interpreting James's ideas in terms of what Morton White (e.g., 2002) calls holistic pragmatism. It is (only) by appreciating the holistic character of our

pragmatic world-engagement that we can both acknowledge the diversity of others' perspectives in a way necessary for pluralism and remain committed to the critical pursuit of truth, understood as a constant holistic incorporation of "new" ideas into our already existing stock of beliefs.

Individuality and novelty – and truth again

Whenever we set out to examine the Arendtian concept of natality or its Jamesian ramifications, it must be recognized that *novelty* itself (a notion of fundamental importance for both Arendt and James) is a concept with an interesting intellectual history (Kivistö 2018); indeed, it is one of those everyday notions whose historicity and philosophical complexity we easily overlook, also in pragmatism scholarship. Pragmatists have also reflected on novelty in their own distinctive ways: Peirce and Dewey were concerned with experiential novelties in science and experimental inquiry, while James, unsurprisingly, had a broader account of novelty to offer, particularly due to the "will to believe" idea (James 1979 [1897]), as well as his account of truth and more general pragmatic holism, which should again be considered both ethically and religiously relevant.

It seems to me that there are two main *topoi* of novelty in James. The first is related to the pragmatist account of truth, emphasizing the process of adding new experience to old fact (James 1975 [1907], Lecture VI), paving the way for the later pragmatic holisms of W.V. Quine and Morton White.[23] The basic point here is that "old" systems of belief or worldviews are constantly challenged and critically tested in terms of "new" empirical results, data, or experience. As we add novelties to our already existing body of accepted beliefs, our pragmatic "truths" grow. In this dynamic sense, truth, in one of James's memorable phrases, "happens" to our ideas. It is not a static property that propositional beliefs just have or fail to have, but a holistic property we attribute to our (individual and social) world-engagements and inquiries through which we also encounter others with their own perspectival sets of "truths".

Secondly, more generally, novelty in sensations is, according to James, rationalized by concepts (or conceptions); there is a constant interplay between the sensible and conceptual elements of our mental lives, as of course Kant had already maintained more than a century earlier (cf., e.g., James 1977 [1911]). This view amounts to "holistic pragmatism" in a broader sense: our world-engagement, also in its religious and theological dimensions, is a holistic process with both sensible (empirical) and conceptual (rational, normative) elements, and new sensible evidence needs to be constantly adjusted to the already existing conceptualizations we employ within our habits of action. Moreover, we must not overlook the ethical, political, and metaphysical dimensions of novelty – and this is precisely why James can be interestingly linked up with Arendt's notion of natality. There is, in a word, a kind of plurality inherent in novelty for James: novelties matter to us in a diversity of ways.

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[23] Regarding James as a holistic pragmatist, see White's articulations (spanning several decades) of holistic pragmatism with both historical references and systematic elaborations in White 1956; 1981; 2002; 2005.

We cannot here dwell on White's holistic pragmatism in any detail (see, e.g., Pihlström 2021), but we should take a brief look at how he reads James. *The Varieties*, in White's words, examines "corroborative religious feelings harmonized with evidence of the normal senses"; hence, according to James, the "saint" may validly infer "God exists" from, e.g., the feeling of an "objective presence" or an "unseen reality" (White 2002, pp. 14-15). Intellect, will, taste, and passion all holistically operate together in the formation of beliefs – and should, according to James, do so (ibid., p. 19). There are, White notes, unfortunate remnants of "rationalism" in James, and therefore his pragmatism does not go all the way toward full-blown holism. In particular, mathematical and sensible (empirical) truths are, James seems to think, tested in different ways (ibid., p. 21). However, *Pragmatism* espouses a more holistic pragmatism, because according to James we are implicitly evaluating a "stock of opinions" whenever apparently testing only a single belief (ibid.). This is how James formulates the matter in *Pragmatism*:

> The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently.
>
> This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. […] The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing. Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography remain untouched. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.' […] To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic. (James 1975 [1907], pp. 34-35; also quoted in part in White 2002, pp. 21-22.)

This passage is important for my quasi-Arendtian reading of James, because it articulates James's views on both individuality (individual satisfaction) and novelty, thus in a way paralleling Arendt's notions of natality and spontaneity. White elaborates on the passage as follows:

> His point is rather that a whole thinker subjects a heterogeneous stock of opinions to a test in which logical consistency, and conformity to both experience and desire, is to be taken into account – in other words, that a whole thinker balances considerations of intellect, will, taste, and passion in an effort to deal with the challenge that has put the old stock to a strain. And although James recognizes the need to preserve that stock with a minimum of modification, he regards even the oldest truths in the old stock – those of logic and mathematics – as modifiable in the face of a challenge from the experience. (White 2002, p. 22.)

James's point is, White explains, primarily normative: we *ought to* "marry old opinion and novel experience" (White 2005, p. 248). Accordingly, White maintains that James's pragmatic conception of truth should be revised as a doctrine about *how we ought to apply the word "true"* (to be distinguished from any explicit definition of truth): "we ought to apply the word 'true' to a new conjunction or stock of statements which will better accommodate the novel experience than the original conjunction or stock did. Such an expansion would make it clearer that a holistic or corporatistic epistemology does not culminate in a *definition* of truth […]." (Ibid.) When James says our new theory "must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences", this "must" is a "normative 'must' that may be replaced by the phrase 'ought to'" (ibid., p. 251).

James's "organicism" or "corporatism" (as White calls it) amounts, then, to holistic pragmatism in White's sense – or, conversely, such holism is "Jamesian in spirit" (ibid., p. 250). James is, White tells us, right to maintain that "our view of what ought to be may sometimes legitimately determine our view of what is the case" (ibid., p. 249) – and this, of course, is a key idea of the "will to believe" (not to be analyzed here). Moreover, it is precisely in this sense and for this reason that I have suggested that James's account of truth involves individual and/or existential truthfulness. Integrating Jamesian and Arendtian ideas, we might say that a sincere commitment to truthfulness at an individual level is a condition for the possibility of our ethically, politically, and even religiously relevant pursuit of objective truth transcending any given individuals.

According to White, James is a major precursor of pragmatic holism and holistic epistemology, also leading the way toward holistic pragmatism applicable to ethics, which is White's own specific contribution to holism, crucially expanding Quinean holism. He also encourages us to reject sharp dichotomies between mathematics, science, morality, and religion. (White 2002, pp. 22-23.) Still, some dualisms remain in all the classical pragmatists, White believes; none of them took holistic pragmatism all

the way to where White himself proposes to take it, to the view that "*all* statements that are commonly said to express knowledge may be justified by the techniques commonly associated with empirical science" (ibid., p. 53). While we may, according to White, perceive an indirect influence of James on Quine's famous 1951 paper, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (ibid., p. 155), and hence on White's own holism, it is a problem for James that he stops short in his pragmatic holism by exempting *theological* statements from the totality of empirically testable conceptualizations of reality, treating them differently due to his mysticism (ibid., p. 53). Furthermore, James (following Hume) occasionally distinguishes sharply between truths about "matters of fact" and those about "relations among ideas" (ibid., p. 59).

Perhaps, then, James did not embrace holism – viz., the holistic conception of accommodating novelties into our old stock of truth and experience – exactly in White's sense, because he would have found it problematic to reduce all testing of hypotheses (however broadly conceived) to empirical science, even if "science" includes ethics along the lines suggested by White. It might be proposed that one of the main points of James's pragmatism is that we should avoid *that* kind of reductive or even scientistic holism and develop a different kind of pragmatic holism recognizing the irreducible diversity of legitimate ways of evaluating our beliefs and hypotheses in the total context of an individual subject's life. This has tremendous relevance to the way we conceive of religious diversity and pluralism in a Jamesian framework.

White, however, does acknowledge the *reflexivity* at work in James's holism regarding the need to (re)consider and adjust the epistemic status of the principles we both employ and simultaneously test, such as the conservation of energy in physics, which is in this regard analogous to holistic pragmatism itself. (Cf. also White 2005, p. 253.) James's normative epistemology of science and morals hence also reflexively contains an epistemology of epistemology. This makes sense for a pragmatist: our account of the pragmatic method, both in its Jamesian and Whitean incarnations, is an account of how we ought to inquire, and this suggests that pragmatism is, ultimately, an inquiry into the nature of inquiry. Even more importantly, Jamesian pragmatist epistemology of inquiry as truth-seeking always also includes an ethical and existential dimension. This makes it directly applicable to the epistemology of religious pluralism and diversity – an epistemology that can never be detached from ethics, as I have tried to suggest in this paper. Here we cannot end up with any conclusive interpretation of James's views in terms of White's approach (or Arendtian natality), but the complex interplay of pluralism, pragmatism, and holism ought to be appreciated. When the philosophical discussion of religious diversity takes place in the context of this kind of holism emphasizing our ethical acknowledgment of others' perspectives, the kind of exclusivism advanced by apologetic philosophers is not even a serious candidate to be considered. Both exclusivism and apologetics thus cease to be "live options" in a Jamesian sense.

Conclusion

We have seen how James develops a pragmatist view of individuality – of natality in Arendt's sense – and how this view can be holistically employed in accounting for the ethical need to develop pluralism in the multicultural world we live in. We might say that Jamesian pragmatism needs to be taken seriously in this discussion for (quasi-) Arendtian reasons, and this can be done by elaborating on his ideas in terms of White's holistic pragmatism. The struggle with truth – epistemologically, ethically, politically, existentially, and religiously – is an essential part of any serious appropriation of Jamesian pragmatism in this context. Moreover, the reconstruction of James's views on truth in the framework of White's holism enables the Jamesian pragmatist to develop a philosophical account of novelty that incorporates the crucial Arendtian idea of distinctively individual human beings constantly facing, as well as initiating, novel realities in a shared world of ethical and political concerns that function as experimental tests for our system of beliefs, religious beliefs included. It is in this complex way that we should, in my view, entangle the sincerity of one's individual pursuit of truth with the acknowledgment of standards of truth transcending any individual perspective.

Our ethical task today is to resist the intolerance of religious exclusivism as decisively as we must resist the intolerance of totalitarianism. This must be done in such a way that the rejection of the arrogance of claiming to possess the one and only truth (an arrogance to which even more moderate forms of exclusivism could in some contingent situations take us) does not make us slide down the slippery slope of relativism into the disappearance of truth altogether. It is for this task that we need, pragmatically need, pragmatism.

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